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Teaching Trump: How political professors will balance the election during fall semester



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Aug 25, 2016

Next week, Stephen Medvic will start his 15th year at Franklin & Marshall College with a problem unlike anything he's experienced as a professor of political science.

Should he tell his students — in an environment where open discussion and objectivity are crucial — whether or not he thinks Donald Trump poses a threat to democracy in America?

“The way he's run his campaign raises a lot of concerns,” Medvic said, referring to a multitude of ways the political outsider has dodged conventional campaign wisdom in his pursuit of the White House.

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From Trump's decision to shutout journalists from media outlets that are critical of him, to his repeated claims that the presidential election will be “rigged” if he loses, the Republican nominee is taking steps that could undermine the democratic process, Medvic said.

“And that's the dilemma: Do I tell students I'm really worried about some of this?”

It's a question that Medvic and three of his colleagues met to discuss earlier this week, and it's one he says political scientists are considering across the country.

Crossing the line?

Charles Greenawalt, a Millersville University professor and former policy director for Republicans in the Pennsylvania Senate, said he disagrees with the notion that the stakes are high enough this year to allow professors to cross the objectivity line.

"The stakes have always been high," said Greenawalt, who believes Trump is correct in his prediction of a "rigged" election — in part because of what he claims to be widescale voter fraud among Philadelphia Democrats and a lack of voter ID laws to prevent it.

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"I've been teaching since 1981," he said. "This is just another election."

Greenawalt said at the start of his classes he reveals his background of working for Republican officials, and students know him as the adviser to the school's College Republicans, but he would never reveal his political leaning or who he'd vote for.

"I'm not doing it any differently this year," Greenawalt said.

Meanwhile, at nearby Elizabethtown College, a pair of professors across the political aisle from each other are walking similar tight-ropes.

One, a self-described "pragmatic liberal" who advises the College Democrats; the other, an adviser to the College Republicans who serves as an elected committeeman with the Republican Committee of Lancaster County.

"I have concerns," said E. Fletcher McClellan, the registered Democrat who has taught politics at Elizabethtown since 1982. "I'm very concerned when someone three months before the election says the outcome has already been determined," that it might be "rigged."

Trump's voter fraud claim, McClellan said, could lead to a situation where the public believes the next president — either Clinton or Trump — has no right to actually govern.

But while McClellan said he finds Trump's potential "threat to democracy" to be "very disturbing," his job as a professor is to present both sides.

He believes that's important, and that it can still be easily done.

"You can argue that he's opening democracy up," McClellan said of Trump's ability to energize a base of the electorate who feel they've been left behind by their government.

Kyle Kopko, McClellan's Republican colleague at Elizabethtown, agrees there is ample room for debate.

And as a member of the county GOP committee that is trying to get Trump elected, Kopko said he also tells his students upfront where he falls on the political spectrum.

"If they were to Google me, they would find out. I don't want them to think I'm trying to hide anything," Kopko said.

In discussing the election issues —no matter how he feels about suggestions that Trump would jeopardize national security or his ability to improve the economy —Kopko said his goal is to foster an environment where everyone's opinions are valued and backed up with evidence.

“He’s generated more interest and curiosity among students,” Kopko said. “He’s also a polarizing figure.”

Keeping it neutral

Medvic said he has his political leanings but, like all professors, hopes to be neutral and objective in the classroom, to get students to think critically and analytically.

That’s partly why he’s a registered Independent.

David O’Connell, a professor of American politics at Dickinson College, takes it even further.

“I personally do not participate in politics. I’m not even registered to vote,” O’Connell said. “I want students to feel comfortable coming into my class knowing as their instructor I don’t have any personal biases.”

When asked if Trump would change any of his plans or discussions this semester, O’Connell said he would talk about the billionaire real estate mogul no different than he would talk about Clinton, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney or anyone else.

“I have a list of things I want to accomplish this semester and Donald Trump running for president doesn’t change that,” he said.

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