



The Unexpected Benefits of Teaching a Course on American Conservatism

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Three years ago, I developed a course for undergraduates at Tufts University on American conservatism. The course leads students through a brief introduction to modern conservative thought, and then it tackles contemporary policy debates. We cover topics on family and religion, capitalism and regulation, the welfare state, guns, crime, affirmative action, and more. I introduce students to these topics by examining ethical, legal, and empirical debates. Running through the semester-long lecture course is an overarching question of what, exactly, it means to be conservative, how conceptions of conservatism conflict with one another, and how to understand contemporary political developments relating to conservatism as a perennial worldview.

Developing this course is one of the best decisions I have ever made, but not for reasons I had anticipated when I decided to develop it.

The reasons for developing the course are fairly obvious. There is the selfish reason: I like learning new things, and there is no better way to learn than to teach. Thanks to an external fellowship, I was able to carve out time to read obsessively and prepare a course on a new subject. It is among the best perks of the academic profession that many of us can simply decide to teach a new course and then get paid to learn all about it.

The less selfish reason was in response to a problem I saw in liberal bubbles on and off campus: Many people who care about politics know little about what conservatives think. I was motivated by the feeling that we, at Tufts University, were graduating students who were majoring in political science and other politics-adjacent fields but knew next to nothing about how half of America thinks about politics.

And so I designed a curriculum and started teaching. And teaching the course had several consequences that I had not anticipated, which together made for an unexpectedly important development in my career and life.

The first is personal. Until 2022, when I started reading deliberately from conservative scholars and about conservatism, I had little incidental exposure to conservative thought. When I have taught my usual set of courses, mostly on US elections, I have always been committed to teaching about competing sides in debates, for instance around gerrymandering or *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, and doing so with empathy to each side's views. But my professional reading has stayed close to specific policy issues and academic work. In my personal reading, I typically get my news from the local print paper and had not thought much about conservatism as an idea. To the extent that I have "heterodox" views, personally, I would mainly have attributed that to contrarian instincts rather than a coherent worldview.

This may seem a little strange coming from a person whose job it is to learn about politics. Somehow, I had long had a set of personal commitments around the centrality of religion and family in my life, a preference for local community action over national programs, an aversion to radical economic proposals and the misplaced confidence of reformers and social justice activists, but it took me to close to my 40th birthday to find my way to William F. Buckley Jr., Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, and others, and only because I wanted to teach this class. But they suddenly opened my eyes to the possibility that maybe I'm not merely a contrarian after all! Maybe I have a set of commitments that amount to a worldview that other people have too!

The second unexpected consequence is that the course's material affects students differently than I had anticipated. I anticipated that there would be some students who would

take the course because they see themselves as conservatives and want to know more about who they are. I anticipated that there would be even more progressive students in the class who would want to figure out how the other side thinks. I did not anticipate that most students would be closer to blank slates. They have an unsettled mix of ideas about politics in their heads. They have some family members who are left and some who are right. And they're just trying to figure it all out.

I also did not anticipate how deeply personal the material in a class on conservatism can be. When I teach about elections, we have debates about topics that are controversial but not particularly personal. No one has gotten too emotional in a conversation about voter ID laws.

But suddenly I'm in a room of a hundred young adults, and the topics we're discussing include marriage and divorce, faith and family loyalty, gender and sexuality, and racial conflict. The material is personal, particularly for people just coming of age and thinking deeply about how they want to live their lives. In some instances, the perspectives they encounter provide comfort and a sense of grounding in an age of turmoil. In other instances, the perspectives feel threatening and foreign, exactly the stuff that fills them with anxiety. Inevitably, students come to office hours and want to process what they've learned and how it relates to their own life. And so my initial desire to expose students to conservative political ideas unexpectedly turned into an opportunity to learn from and with students about how to live a good life. That's not something you get from teaching about election policy.

Finally, while my ambition initially was to offer only one course on conservatism on a liberal campus, I got a remarkable lesson in how a small effort can lead to something bigger. The course revealed a demand that I didn't know existed on our campus. First 40, then 60, then 100 students started signing up to take the class. A small chapter of the Federalist Society asked me

to serve as a faculty adviser. It has grown thanks to the student leadership and is now a strong voice on campus in support of viewpoint diversity and respectful dialogue. Students who wanted more of a conversation than is possible in a 100-person class asked that we start a reading group. And students have asked for more opportunities for debates and discussions on controversial policy topics.

And then the university noticed all the positive energy around the class. Here we have a class on conservatism that is tackling every sensitive issue in a room with students on the right and mostly students on the left, and it goes great. Students like it and want more of it. The students want more exposure to different perspectives. They want to be mature adult citizens who can handle an edgy debate and alternative perspectives. In some cases, they've been trapped in an ideological bubble by their families, high schools, college classes, and themselves, but they want the bubble to pop. And so now, as of summer 2025, we are establishing a whole center to expand viewpoints in higher education, with a focus on curriculum, research, and campus culture. All because three years ago, I thought students should learn just a little something about conservatism.