My wide-ranging teaching experience is united by a fascination with the ways that groups, or “we”s, shape identity, generate social obligations, and produce sources of meaning for individuals in politics. A central part of my teaching is an effort to get students to think outside themselves and the groups in which they are embedded. I design my classes to include multiple means of analysis, both from practical politics (e.g. ideologies, parties, religions) and scholarly methods (e.g. institutional, statistical, legal, moral) so that students must work through different interpretations of facts in order to understand the wider context of political phenomena. A key goal is to guide students away from two knowledge-limiting attitudes. On the one hand, students learn not to have a dismissive attitude about ways of thinking different from those with which they are familiar and to respect the analytical power of various scholarly methods and perspectives. On the other hand, students avoid being bound by a single academic methodology (e.g. being merely legal, or moral, or statistical in their analysis) or political perspective (e.g. a political ideology or partisan loyalty) and thus become aware of different lenses through which reality can be viewed. My goal is for students to be able to see the underlying logic of various ways of thinking, the insights these ways of thinking reveal, and to be critical of them. I strive to equip my students to be well-rounded political scientists and engaged citizens capable of meaningful dialogue with others. This focus on “we”ness emphasizes an advantage I have as a Political Philosopher who also studies American Politics. I believe that this focus allows students to grapple productively with the reality that there is no purely objective human means of knowing social phenomena.

The first and most basic step to understanding a viewpoint, method, or phenomenon is to get a clear articulation of facts, ways of reasoning, and definitions of concepts. In my classes I always work from a carefully constructed outline to explore a reading or topic. For example, in a class on ideologies my students read Locke’s “Letter Concerning Toleration” during our unit on Liberalism. In one class period we focused on several crucial passages and distilled Locke’s argument down to 4 steps. Then, in the next class period, we explored some of the implications Locke draws from his arguments and noted some possible critiques of these ideas. I’m always diligent in getting the key definitions of crucial words (noted in class as “keywords”), such as toleration or coercion or freedom, spelled out with detailed explanations and I take care to organize class time in a logical and coherent way. Many of my students have expressed appreciation for this care in presentation. For example, one student wrote in the final evaluations: “Makes hard concepts easy to understand and takes each step of the logic to get there.” While care and logic may seem dry, I exert a great deal of effort to make the material engaging. My students frequently note my enthusiasm in evaluations and one student added an unsolicited addendum to an in-class writing assignment that read, “It is so refreshing to have a professor who cares and truly wants to teach us!”

While careful presentation is the foundation of my teaching, discussion and debate among students about actual political phenomena is constantly provoked and enhanced by the “we” centered class structures. Students are invited to discuss topics, policies, and events from the various methods and ways of thinking offered in the class and this helps avoid class discussions
that center on mere opinion. Multiple “we”s allows for a dynamic debate between developed methods and ways of thinking. The students in my Presidency courses started nearly every class with a discussion of current events that centered on one or two news articles about President Obama or some other element of the Executive that I e-mailed to the students the day before class. Students were able to use what they had read and learned to analyze current politics. At times the Presidency class (particularly the first time I taught it when I had fewer students) was more of a seminar. As the students talked, they were teaching one another various “we” perspectives (both methods from the class and their practical viewpoints) and the insights these revealed. These frequent discussions also let the students participate in the reality of finding insights through the use of different ways of thinking. Students also enjoyed my frequent use of illustrative videos. For example, in my class on ideologies I used a TEDx talk from a supermodel on how her career was possible due to genetic luck rather than hard work to illustrate Rawls’s arguments on equality.

Research and discussion papers are a central method of evaluation in my classes. Papers are crucial in that I ask students to be conscious of the “we” viewpoints and methods they use in formulating their thesis and to defend their thesis from well articulated counterarguments from other views. The extended use and consideration of different “we” perspectives that these exercises require reveal whether students have a comprehensive grasp of the material. To help students with this difficult task, I either require or strongly encouraged students to send me drafts of their papers or outlines and annotated bibliographies. While students seem to dislike these requirements, the improvement in their papers is often substantial and many students do appreciate the outcome of this process. For example, in an evaluation one student wrote, “The feedback and regular consultation of the research paper was amazing.” I also use ID and essay exams to test my students’ overall engagement with the course materials. Often, my exams test students on their ability to think from various perspectives such as offering an argument and counterargument in an essay. I take great care in these assessment methods and my students frequently note that they feel my exams and grading are fair in evaluations.

My teaching has been sculpted by my interactions with students, by comments and evaluations, and by studying teaching methods. The most important instruction I have received on teaching has come from Professor Marjorie Hershey. In her courses and support groups on pedagogy I learned various techniques for constructing lectures, crafting exams, leading discussions, and dealing with various other aspects of university teaching. I also have had the opportunity to observe excellent teachers while serving as a TA and I have appropriated techniques I believe are effective. For example, in Judy Failer’s class I observed some techniques for developing classroom discussion and appropriated some of them to stimulate discussion in my own classes. As a result of my continued efforts, my department awarded me their Associate Instructor of the Year award in 2012 and they have nominated me twice for a university wide award for teaching. These awards highlight my accomplishments and ongoing drive for excellence.

In the future I plan to offer classes on Congress, Constitutional Law, and modern political philosophy. I have also been developing class activities such as formal in-class debates between groups of students and discussion paper assignments so that students will be prepared to lead discussions on current events using class methods and developed “we” perspectives. I plan to implement these elements in my “Introduction to American Politics” class that I have been invited to teach at Butler University Fall semester of 2015.