



# THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

## In the classroom, truth trumps politics

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Before President Donald J. Trump was elected in 2016, many political science teachers concealed their personal political biases, intent on maintaining a nonpartisan environment in the classroom. However, in just one term, Trump's presidency has profoundly transformed the way that political science is being taught throughout the U.S. and beyond.

The unconventional presidency that is the Trump administration has provided political scientists, educators and students with a bone of contention: Is it okay for educators to show their political bias? Is it okay if teaching from moral ground involves tipping one's hand toward a political party?

As a student of political science, the answer is clear to me. Yes; it is okay to indicate preference towards a political party if the moral imperative to speak the truth requires that of an educator. It is no longer possible to teach a class that discusses both sides of the political spectrum in an objective and authentic manner. The influence of politics has expanded beyond the shaping of people's attitudes into alterations of people's perceptions of the truth. The politics of Trump have surpassed partisanship.

We are living in an increasingly polarized world; our nation is divided into two distinct ideological halves, separated by policies and differences of belief. Our 45th president does not fit into the commonly-accepted boundaries of American politicians; much of what he says is morally reprehensible, or just inaccurate.

In just 1,316 days, the president has made over 22,200 false and misleading statements, according to the Washington Post Fact Checker. His most common claim, being repeated 407 times, is, "Within three short years, we built the strongest economy in the history of the world." The Fact Checker states that this is incorrect, as the economy under Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson and Bill Clinton did better than it has under Trump.

Regardless of party, no one can deny that our

nation's leader spreads dangerous and false information almost daily, particularly in relation to coronavirus information and voting-by-mail. Trump's remarks and tweets have repeatedly crossed over the line, away from ethical standards and factuality.

Upper School Political Science Teacher Colleen Roche echoed this sentiment.

"Whether it is insulting people from other countries, imposing anti-Muslim travel bans, mocking handicapped reporters or boasting about assaulting women, there are just so many aspects to his [Trump's] character that I find problematic," Roche continued, "I feel that as an educator, it is really doing a disservice to my students if I overlook that behavior."

Teachers cannot be expected to maintain nonpartisan rhetoric when faced with a president who

behavior. However, there are certain policy positions that can't be tolerated at a school with a mission like Masters. If a policy supports racist, homophobic, sexist and anti-Muslim stances, teachers cannot balance objectivity in teaching while remaining true to their values, especially considering the school's emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion.

The criticism of Trump in my political science class is made easier by the majority of left-leaning students on the roster, and the relative scarcity of his supporters. I also recognize that if my teacher was a Trump supporter, I would not want him or her to incorporate political opinions or biases into conversations. However, if he or she were a Trump supporter and followed the same prescription of operating from the moral imperative of discussing the truth, I think the classroom would still create a

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— Colleen Roche, Upper School History Teacher

has refused to denounce white supremacy. During the first presidential debate, Trump responded to moderator Chris Wallace's request to condemn white supremacy with the statement, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by," referring to a far-right, neo-fascist and male-only organization that encourages violence, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

While it has been made difficult to do so, teachers should attempt to separate discussions on liberal and conservative policy with Trump's personal be-

positive environment for dialogue.

Teachers have an obligation to create an academic atmosphere that stimulates and challenges students of both conservative and liberal backgrounds, forcing them to evaluate their viewpoints. They should attempt to create a classroom environment that reflects the moral and ethical values for which they stand, and provides students with the resources to create their own informed political opinions.

Trump supporters at Masters. I thought it would be interesting to examine what it's like being such a small political minority in our mainly liberal school. One student that I reached out to for an interview declined; he said that he didn't want to be shamed or called a racist. The student felt like he had to resort to anonymity to express his political beliefs. This moment told me more about Masters' political climate than any article I could've written.

The Instagram direct message exchange between my interviewee and I was not the first conversation I've

had like that. I've heard from other centrist and conservative students that bringing their ideas to the Harkness table has not always been easy. As an educational institution, one of our biggest failures is our closed-mindedness to political views different than ours—especially when it comes to Trump supporters.

Don't get me wrong: it's hard to find anyone more anti-Trump than I am. I hate everything about him and his administration, from his character to policies. I have very little respect for any adult that supports him. In most environments, it's difficult for me to have open dialogue with Trump supporters; it feels counterproductive and only further depletes my hope for this country's politics.

But high school is not like most environments. Rarely does someone come out of high school as the same person they came in as. Scientifically of course, the brain continues to develop through teenage years, but more than that, students have been told that high school is an environment for us to become a different, and maybe better, version of ourselves. Masters is a space for positive growth in every facet of life; why should that stop at political growth?

For most, if not all, our first sense of political alignment

comes from our parents. I still remember my dad waking me up the morning after 2008 election night to tell me that Obama had won. I was happy because he was happy. It was that simple. Only by freshman year had I begun to diverge from and question some of my parents' views. It's ridiculous for a freshman to come into this school and feel cut off because of their support for Trump. Those views have been shaped by their previous environments more than anything, and yet we treat young Trump supporters as if their views are set in stone.

I've had students and teachers argue that politics plays a different role in the classroom during the Trump era. I fully agree with that. Trump is a liar and an abuser of the Constitution; to not acknowledge that in a political science class would be counterproductive. Criticizing elements of Trump's administration for teaching moments is fair, but we need to draw a firm line between that and deliberate, non-pedagogical polarization of Trump supporters inside of the classroom and out.

In our school's political climate, we effectively create separate political and ideological echo chambers. An isolated Trump supporter is more likely to develop a Trump obsession than an appreciation of why the school community takes issue with their views. Without political dialogue, the rest of the school of Trump opposers will only

become further entrenched with their own views, becoming more and more out of touch with the reasons that someone may side with Trump in the first place.

We are, after all, a school that values the Socratic method as a way to find a deeper understanding of a subject. We have open, argumentative dialogue about everything: I've witnessed debates about things as minuscule as comma rules, and as trivial as the best cereal offered at the Dining Hall. With an election looming and many of our students eligible voters, the stakes are clearly higher than Fruit Loops vs. Frosted Flakes. We should be able to have healthy, productive debate about the upcoming election so that we can have a better understanding of what goes into our vote. The only way that can work, however, is if we allow Trump supporters to bring their voices to the table without fear of being shut off from the entire student body. Right now, we are failing at that.

As the election creeps closer, November 3rd is making its way into every classroom and every chat in between classes. Masters: I want you to keep an open mind going into the discussions. Embrace healthy debate. Avoid making assumptions about people without knowing the whole story. And lastly, like the real Masters student I know you are, never be afraid to be honest and speak your mind when you think someone is in the wrong.

## Q&A

Tower sat down for a Q&A with Senior Henry Schatz, the founder of centrist and conservative affinity group and the co-president of Next Generation Politics.

### DO YOU FEEL THAT ANY OF YOUR CLASSES ARE TAUGHT WITH POLITICAL BIAS?

"Throughout my eight years at Masters, **teachers obviously have displayed their political biases** in the classroom. I think it is a hard thing not to do, and given the current political climate, **it's understandable**. I think Ms. Roche has done a great job of balancing both sides."

### DO YOU THINK POLITICAL BIAS HAS A PLACE IN THE CLASSROOM?

"In general, you don't want the teachers influencing the students. High school students are pretty **impressible** and are going to listen to their teachers. However, with the current state of the country, I think it is hard for teachers not to. But, if they are going to teach with bias, it [the bias] should be directed towards **ethics** and **values** more than a specific party or their stance on a specific issue."

### HAVE YOU EVER FELT UNWELCOME TO PARTICIPATE IN DISCUSSIONS DUE TO BIAS FROM TEACHERS?

"Not really personally, because I'm very vocal and if someone says something that I disagree with I will speak up. I definitely feel that other **less vocal** and **quietly centrist people** might **not feel comfortable** speaking up in this environment."

## Embracing healthy debate leads to political growth

M. BRODY LEO  
News Lead Editor

This was not supposed to be my story for this issue. Initially, I had pitched the idea for a piece on experiences of

