

## Rachel Bernhard | Statement of Teaching Philosophy

As a professor of political science, I have the responsibility to teach my students to think skeptically, communicate competently, and understand how politics shapes their world. The most significant challenge I've encountered to executing this responsibility comes from something I enjoy and value highly: a diverse classroom.

In both the undergraduate and graduate courses I have taught at UC Berkeley, students have had an array of backgrounds and skillsets. In undergraduate classes, many will be first-generation college students or speak English as a second language. In my graduate-level course, which introduces social scientists to computational methods, students' training and fields vary widely. Two solutions, learned from the pedagogy courses and workshops I've taken, have proven effective for me thus far. First, I use tactics like weekly emails and short papers to regularly assess students' progress, which ensures the least-advantaged students are not overlooked. Second, I mentor and collaborate with students who need more challenge than the classroom can offer.

I ground every course in the need for skepticism and scientific thought. In my undergraduate introduction to research design and methods class, the syllabus spends separate weeks covering observational, experimental, and qualitative methods, emphasizing what sorts of questions we can answer with each. In an evaluation, one student wrote that “[the class] helps me be more analytical of Poli Sci...Furthermore, the segment on research design helped me understand how to evaluate the validity and results of research in general.” I relish seeing students use these skills in their daily lives: in this class, students began informally sharing popular news articles covering what they determined to be poor-quality research. Likewise, in my undergraduate political psychology seminar, a student wrote “I was able to learn so much about human nature and interactions and beliefs that I can now use day in and day out.”

While skepticism comes naturally to many students, competent communication does not. For undergraduates, especially those with language barriers or learning differences, this can manifest in vague prose or discomfort speaking in class. One way I overcome their reticence is to have them email me a question about the readings every week. This lets me track even quiet students' progress and gives students more time to compose. One student wrote: “I liked that there were small assignments...it helped [us] be more engaged throughout the semester. Having us send in reading responses each week was also very good because it made us read.” For graduates, I stress pithy, clear communication by having students post code and write-ups of their final projects on GitHub (see [https://github.com/ribernhard/PS239T/tree/master/16\\_final-projects](https://github.com/ribernhard/PS239T/tree/master/16_final-projects)). This exercise has immediate benefits for students: three of my graduate students converted their final projects into successful grant proposals.

Requiring weekly questions from students improves their communication during class, too, creating a more level playing field and enabling efficient use of class time. “Whenever someone had a question about a topic, [Rachel] would first define the topic in question. This was really great because it kept us all on the same page. She encouraged discussion and student answers, and never belittled anyone for not knowing an answer.” Another student echoed this sentiment, saying “I struggle with anxiety, but she was able to create a great atmosphere during class - this was one of the few section [sic] where I actually participated in class discussion.”

I model honest communication to my students by publicly reporting the results of mid-semester assessments, which lets them know I take their concerns and learning seriously. “After the [mid-semester] eval was done she was asked to give more quizzes, and sure enough she did;” “she was always ready to listen to the students and willing to tailor the class to benefit the student learning.” Accordingly, I am always learning: a student told me after an exercise on sampling—using bags of M&M’s as our sampling populations—that he liked the idea but couldn’t fully participate because he was colorblind. Clear communication from my student helped me fix that mistake going forward.

Student interest in politics often starts with enthusiastic instruction, but the classroom rarely allows engaged students sufficient room to explore their own interests. Mentoring such students via research projects enables me to provide additional instruction while ensuring my scholarship doesn’t suffer. One former student emailed to say “last year I was too timid to reach out to you...But, as I enter my final year at Cal, I am determined to explore the opportunities available to do research” (email shared with permission). I have worked with eight phenomenally talented undergraduate research assistants, all from historically underrepresented groups, and informally mentored others, for which I recently won a SMART Mentoring Award from UC Berkeley. I take great joy in the collaborations and in watching a diverse younger generation of scholars emerge.

Richard Feynman, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, writes that the hardest and most essential skill one must acquire is “how not to fool yourself, because you are the easiest person to fool.” As a professor, I want to enshrine that same belief in my students, undergraduate and graduate alike. Adapting my classes to the needs of a diverse body of students requires frequent solicitation of input to ensure that every student grows according to their interests. Four years of their feedback and collaboration has made me a more careful and effective teacher, and a better scholar.

## Summary of Class Evaluations and Syllabi

Full student evaluations and existing course syllabi can be found at [rachelbernhard.com/teaching](http://rachelbernhard.com/teaching).

### Class Evaluations

“Considering both the limitations and possibilities of the subject matter and the course, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of this graduate student instructor?”

Overall weighted course evaluation average: 6.66/7

Weighted department average for same period: 6.00/7

#### Undergraduate (teaching assistant)

Introduction to Research Design and Methods | methods | 6.66/7

Democratic Accountability and Elections | American | 6.55/7

Political Psychology | behavior | 6.81/7

#### Graduate (lead instructor)

Introduction to Computational Tools and Techniques\* | methods | 6.57/7

\* Nominated for the Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award

### Class Syllabi

Syllabi available upon request.

#### Undergraduate

Introduction to Research Design and Methods | methods

Introduction to American Politics | American

Political Psychology | behavior

Gender in Western Politics | American/comparative

State and Local Campaigns | American/public policy

#### Graduate

Introduction to Computational Tools and Techniques | methods

Identity in American Politics | American/behavior

Research Design | methods