

Two Successful Approaches to Teaching AP Government

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Students from Amador Valley High School participate in the We the People national competition in Washington, D.C., in 2013

(Photo by Brian Ladd)

Amador Valley High School, in Pleasanton, California, uses two unique approaches to teaching Advanced Placement Government and Politics. AP Government consists of six units: Constitutional Underpinnings; Political Behavior and Political Beliefs; Mass Media, Interest Groups, and Political Parties; Institutions of Government; Civil Liberties and Civil Rights; and Public Policy. Our first method of instruction is a somewhat traditional approach that strictly adheres to the curriculum outlined by the College Board; however, the course, slated as a one-semester class, is combined with AP Macroeconomics to create a yearlong course. The second approach is a course offered as part of the Center for Civic Education's *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* curriculum. It is a one-semester course that also addresses the six units prescribed by the College Board, but through a more applicable methodology.

Combining AP Government and AP Macroeconomics

We offered the first AP Government and Politics course in the fall of 1998. There were 60 students in two sections

for the first semester only. At the end of the semester, we found that there was not enough time to teach the public policy unit. In addition, the students would be moving to an economics course taught by

another instructor. As we neared the AP examination in May, the students were not very motivated to come for evening review sessions to go over what they had learned in the fall. Though they did fairly well on the test, many indicated that it would be better to have taken the course the second semester. One of the problems with having the course the second semester is that we do not start our semester until the last week of January, and the AP examinations are offered with six weeks left in our school year; thus, we would not have enough time to cover the curriculum.

It was decided to create a year-long course that would combine AP Government and AP Macroeconomics. Macroeconomics was selected over

microeconomics because the connection between government, economics, and social policy could be easily established. The course would begin each year with the first three units of government followed by four units of macroeconomics. This would enable the students to study the curriculum from the units that contain the largest number of AP examination questions in the months of February and March. Throughout the year, the concepts taught in both classes are reinforced through current policy decisions in the news. The students quickly see the connection between both subject areas, and as one student described, “Just about everything we learn in class seems to be on the news each night.”

Though the students’ report cards and transcripts indicate they are taking AP Macroeconomics the first semester, and AP Government the second semester, it is a yearlong course and their grades are cumulative throughout the year. Students who choose to drop the course at the semester’s end have completed neither course and must enroll in college preparatory economics and civics the second semester to complete their high school graduation requirements. The course provides a unique opportunity for all types of students: students who are interested in the social sciences and students in the hard sciences who are interested in economics. Many of these students have indicated that they would not have signed up for the other course if it were not embedded within the structure of the yearlong course. Through a yearly survey, we have found that, though students tend to be stronger at one subject than the other, they have learned to think outside of their comfort zone, developing skills they never realized before. One student who was more mathematically inclined stated that he signed up for the course to take macroeconomics, but found that he truly enjoyed the government portion and enjoyed the connections as the subjects were interwoven.

We the People:

The Citizen and the Constitution

The second approach to AP Government is through the *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* curriculum, which is divided into six units that address the foundations of American constitutionalism. The division of the units allows teachers to engage students in narrowly tailored lessons focusing directly on the American constitutional system. The six units are explicitly linked to the AP Government standards. They are: Unit 1: What are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System?; Unit 2: How Did the Framers Create the Constitution?; Unit 3: How Has the Constitution Been Changed to Further the Ideals Contained in the Declaration of Independence?; Unit 4: How Have the Values and Principles Embodied in the Constitution Shaped American Institutions and Practices?; Unit 5: What Rights Does the Bill of Rights Protect?; and Unit 6: What Challenges Might Face American Constitutional Democracy in the Twenty-First Century?¹

Each unit is taught independently and the students are divided into six groups where they prepare testimony on the three overarching questions for each unit. While the questions can be answered by merely using the text, AP students are provided with the opportunity to complete research incorporating historical context and current events that relate to the overarching question. For example, in Unit 4, one main question reads:

Which has been more important in the extension of rights to all Americans, the Supreme Court or the political action of individuals and groups?

1. Describe the roles of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government in the expansion of rights.
2. Are groups that attempt to extend the protections of the

Constitution to all Americans interest groups (what Madison called “factions”)?

Initially, students work independently to research their answers. The students come together to prepare a concise and informative four-minute presentation that will be presented to a panel of experts (teachers, lawyers, judges, legislative aids, former members of Congress etc.). After the students “testify” in the mock congressional hearing, the judges ask them a series of follow-up questions for eight to ten minutes in which they are allowed no notes or manipulative methods. In addition to building collaboration and oral presentation skills, this activity better prepares students for their free response questions on the AP test. The students are part of a competitive civics team, and compete at the congressional district, regional, state, and national levels. As students progress through the local, state, and national competitions, they are required to prepare testimony for a new set of questions at each level. Amador Valley High School has been a part of the *We the People* program since 1989 and has qualified for the national competition 12 times and finished in the top three in the nation seven times.

Teaching Methodology

Each unit typically lasts about two to three weeks. On the AP Government website, students are provided with key concepts, objective questions, and notes for each day’s lecture, and they must complete an assigned supplemental reading on the unit. Students are encouraged to print the notes and review them prior to class so that they are able to spend more time listening and participating in the lecture-discussion format of the class. We observed that too many AP students spend their time writing down all the information the instructor is providing rather than listening, analyzing, and actively participating. Providing students with the notes beforehand allows them to preview the day’s lesson.

Time is spent at the beginning of the year reviewing the writing requirements of the AP Government examination. The AP Government exam requires students to write four free responses in 100 minutes. The free response questions are very different than the AP World History and AP U.S. History essays and Document-Based Questions. It is important to spend at least two class periods reviewing the styles, requirements, previous prompts, rubrics, and student-produced examples to insure that students understand the type of answers that graders are seeking.

The class is taught as a lecture-discussion seminar and grades are determined by examinations and unit presentations. The students are given their textbook and supplemental reading assignments for the unit each month and are expected to actively participate and be prepared for class each day. The teacher interweaves current events with the lectures to allow students to see the connections between concepts and real world applications. Therefore, the students must keep abreast of the news on their own. As seniors, the students will soon be voting and our goal is to promote a lifetime of active civic participation.

Within each unit, students are also required to do supplemental reading to enhance their learning and understanding. The readings include the *Federalist* and the *Anti-Federalist* essays and articles from social science publications. Though we create our own reading packets, there are many excellent supplemental readers on the market. In the past, we provided students with a reading guide to help them through the readings. However, we found that students would only look for the answers and not read for comprehension. Instead, now we give our students copies of the readings and require them to annotate. Our observation is that many students do not know how to annotate correctly, so we spend half a class period teaching them annotation for understanding. As a result, the discussions are much richer and every student is engaged.

Lesson Plans

When teaching the Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Mass Media unit, we use two strategies to cover a large quantity of material in an expedited amount of time: Jigsaw readings and student-generated interest group briefs. For the first approach, seven articles are selected from Peter Woll's reader, *American Government: Readings and Cases*.² The class is divided into seven corresponding groups. Each group is responsible for reading their assigned article and forming a "lesson" that they will teach to the class. The reason this lesson has been successful in our classroom is because it enables students to take an active role in the learning process. As a group, they develop a teaching strategy, based on their own educational experiences, that addresses the key points of the article. Their proposed lesson and analysis of the article is submitted for teacher review prior to the classroom presentation. Over the course of the unit, the students teach their lessons on assigned days.

In addition to the *Jigsaw* reading approach, the students also complete an Interest Group brief. For example, the students will "draw from a hat" a slip of paper with one Interest Group on it. The assignments require students to identify the organization's location, demographics of members, structure of the organization (local, state, national, international), type of interest group, the group's electioneering focus (PACs) and policy emphasis, the purpose and benefits of the group, relationships within the iron triangle (Congress, bureaucracy, interest groups), and any controversies or issues that the group has addressed. Once the research has been completed, the students prepare a one-page brief addressing the criteria outlined in the assignment. After the briefs are graded, students present them before the class. The student audience is responsible for filling out a matrix that highlights the key elements of each Interest Group.

Conclusion

While both course styles have been successful, we encourage students to enroll in the class that best meets their interests. We currently have 123 students enrolled in the yearlong course, and 30 students enrolled in the *We the People* course. There are 22 Advanced Placement courses offered at Amador Valley, and enrollment is open to any student who wishes to take an AP course. As more students have enrolled in the AP Government course, the passage rate has held relatively constant at 94 percent with a median score of 4.01. We pride ourselves in engaging our students in civic education and strongly believe that all students are capable of achieving success at the Advanced Placement level in the Government and Politics course. 🌍

Notes

1. Center for Civic Education, *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* (H.S. Level 3rd ed.) (Woodland Hills, Calif.: Center for Civic Education, 2009).
2. Peter Woll, ed. *American Government: Readings and Cases*, 19th ed. (New York: Longman Pearson, 2011).

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