Navigating Stormy Seas:
Techniques for Teaching Contentious Topics in Political Science Programmes

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Abstract
In increasingly polarized political contexts, exacerbated by concerns over student safety, mental health, and media hysteria over "safe spaces" and "cancel culture", teaching contentious political science topics has become more challenging than ever before. At the same time, students do not enter as blank slates on these topics and are likely to bring their own ideas – sometimes vociferously – into the classroom. Political science topics can be inherently binary, they can carry a high risk of pre-existing biases among participants, and they can be tense and uncomfortable to discuss. Under such circumstances, how can course tutors ensure that all perspectives on a given topic are adequately addressed while ensuring that discussions are held in a respectful and collegiate manner? In this paper, we offer reflective accounts of our own experiences of political science teaching in two particularly contentious areas in the UK higher education context – nuclear weapons and Brexit – where all of these risks are high. The paper offers three techniques for overcoming tension and ensuring that the topics are covered in a balanced manner to foster good faith discussion and debate. We emphasize the use of counter-balancing case studies which challenge existing biases, the "weaponization" of expected pre-existing biases to provoke critique, and the use of humor to create a positive, open and free learning environment. We conclude that the use of these techniques can be helpful in teaching contentious topics – helping practitioners to navigate the "stormy seas" of today's challenging political science teaching context.

Keywords: Polarization, Political Science, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Political polarization has increasingly pervaded societies around the world. For those teaching in political science classrooms, this presents unique challenges – ensuring that debate remains balanced and respectful, ensuring that all perspectives are adequately covered, and ensuring that existing biases do not preclude students from exploring a given topic in its entirety. In this paper, we reflect on our experience teaching Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics in one case, and British Politics in the other. These topics at first appear to have little in common. Nonetheless, both faced the same polarization issue. It goes without saying that political science classrooms, where student interest in current affairs is high and some students may have even selected specific modules out of interest in activism around that topic, that these issues would be politically fraught. For the authors, the challenge of such polarization was to prevent classrooms from becoming "one-sided". As the so-called "Culture Wars" have become more problematic for classroom teaching, we sought means by which to ensure that these problems were mitigated against in our respective classrooms.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

The literature is abundant when it comes to advice for would-be educators and current educators struggling with the issue. Bielby (2003, pp. 377–379) provides three critical advice on how to teach contentious topics; to be well-prepared, to have appropriate facilitation, and to provide support. Hess (2004, pp. 259–260) identifies four ways of dealing with contentious topics in a classroom; to deny, to privilege, to avoid, and to provide balance in opinion. This paper builds on these works by presenting practical advice for other educators in teaching contentious topics in politics modules. There are some clear limitations to this research in that the evaluation of student responses are subjective and thus the authors cannot be certain that all students were able to learn in the way the classes were designed. The relatively small sample size also means that there is limitation in terms of generalizability of findings. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to share the practices of the authors in the hope that this will present a useful tool for other educators in their own journey in teaching politics in higher education.

A total of 236 students enrolled in British Politics in the academic year 2022/23, and 140 students enrolled in Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics in the same period. Of these numbers, we were each responsible for 40 students in the most recent semester at the time of writing this paper, in addition to 60 more from the previous year for Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics. Thus, the total number of students between us was 140.

The paper is structured based on the key lessons drawn out of the authors' teaching practice in these two modules. These are counter-balancing case studies, the use of pre-existing biases, and use of humor. Following Bielby's (2003) advice on how we need to be prepared, consider how to facilitate the delivery of the class content, and what support to offer, each section will discuss how the authors prepared for, facilitated, and provided support for the students. In addition, each section will specify which of the approaches to a contentious topic they adopted following Hess' (2004) four options (denial, privilege, avoidance, and balance). As stated previously, the primary aim of this paper is to share the authors' approaches to teaching contentious political topics so that it can provide a practical toolset for other educators to tackle the problem.

3. Counter-Balancing Case Studies

We define the use of counter-balancing case studies as case studies which run counter to expectations in the existing public and academic discourses. These were intended to challenge existing biases and open up debate by pushing back against stereotypes and previously acquired knowledge. The examples we focus on in this section are the examples of global leaders, particularly Prime Ministers Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher in relation to Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics, and the role of the £350m per week claim during the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union in relation to British Politics. In the prior case, this was intended to show the limitations in the feminist discourse in relation to nuclear weapons; in the latter case, it was intended to overcome the conception that people had been duped by a false claim in order to underscore why the claim was effective. In both cases, it was expected that pre-existing biases would play a strong role in shaping student responses, and so it was important to be aware of the political context in which the classroom was operating to ensure that planning could be made around such biases. This is the first component of the humorous contrarianism toolkit; we were "contrarian" to the popular academic and public discourses on these topics.

3.1 Counterbalancing in Nuclear Politics and Gender: Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher

In Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics, the specific class for the week was titled Gender and Nuclear Violence. Students had been expected to read Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals by Carol Cohn (Cohn, 1987), a critically important text in the study of gender and nuclear weapons. The paper argues that the technostrategic language choices of experts in the fields of security and defense, particularly pertaining to nuclear weapons, are inherently heterosexual male-dominant and sexualised, and she argues that antinuclear and feminist activists should seek to challenge the claims to objectivity and rationality inherent in the security and defense fields. With this, however, came the danger that students would take views on deterrence as a simple male/female binary. In the wider context, there is a cultural tendency to conflate femininity with anti-nuclear views and with pro-disarmament stances, perhaps because feminist groups were at the forefront of anti-nuclear movements (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1991, pp. 161–162). Considering the significant danger of essentialising "women" as a single category lacking in diversity and only reinforcing what can be considered hegemonic views of femininity and masculinity (Brown & Considine, 2022, pp. 1261–1265), it was thought important to provide counterbalancing case studies to contextualise the theoretical discussions. The counter-balancing case studies were presented as a warm-up activity. This is showcased in Figure 1.

Warm-up Activity: Who said the following?

1: "We will retaliate if attacked first with a pre-emptive strike... We will leave _____'s military little short of total destruction and ruin".

2: "The whole point of a deterrent is that our enemies need to know that we would be prepared to use it."

3: "I call upon the scientific community... to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete".

4: "The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us".

Figure 1: A warmup matching activity used in Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics. The quotes were meant to run counter to the expectations and pre-existing biases which students were expected to have.

While students were asked to quote-match all of the figures, the major focus was on May. This was followed by an ad-hoc showing of the video clip in which May, in response to a parliamentary question, states in no uncertain terms that she would be willing to authorize a nuclear strike and that such a willingness was key to the UK's deterrent capability (BBC News, 2016b). This had a further beneficial reinforcement effect in that it honed in on the concept of deterrence – a core theme of the module – and showcased how it was deployed in real terms by world leaders. Under Hess' (2004, pp.259–260) four options, this most closely fit with "denial"; since the presentation was such that any of the four could have said any of the quotes, it fundamentally presented the issue as a noncontroversial one.

This produced the desired effect; by using "contrarianism", students questioned the discursive male/female binary in the following seminar activities, one of which was an activity where students applied a gender-based analysis to a quote (selected by themselves) from Prime Minister Thatcher, a figure with a considerably more divisive reputation in the UK political context, with young people (adults aged 18-24) holding more negative views than other age groups (YouGov, 2019). While it was thought important to begin with May as a "blank slate" to prove that the ostensible binary at play is in fact considerably more nuanced, the prior use allowed for the full exploration of the motivations of Prime Minister Thatcher's views on deterrence and nuclear weapons. This was backed by a small amount of background information and a further video clip of PM Thatcher's address to the Conservative Party Conference in 1989 ('Margaret Thatcher on Strong Defence', 2013). Students were able to apply a broad variety of motivating factors bringing considerable nuance to the discussion, and achieved the objective of giving students a deeper, more comprehensive level of understanding of the role of gender in nuclear politics; the risk of having a binary discussion based around male/female stereotypes was avoided through the use of these two counterbalancing case studies.

3.2 Counterbalancing in British Politics: The NHS and the £350m Per Week Claim

In British Politics, Brexit was proven to be a highly contentious topic. In Week 7 of British Politics, which covered the development of British politics from 1979 to the present, the 2016 EU referendum in which the majority of the public voted in support of Brexit was the main topic. The author adopted the option of privileging (Hess, 2004) the side of the Leave argument. This is why the Leave side's claim that £350m per week being sent to the EU would be put to better use if it was used to fund the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK was chosen as a key topic for the class. This claim acted as a counter-balance of the narrative that students would have been accustomed to, that the Leave side had won the referendum through the use of lies (Belam, 2016). This topic was relatively well-known among the British public and thus helped students formulate their own opinion on the topic as well as shortening the time of explaining it to students. Since the majority of young people supported Remain (BBC News, 2016a), it is not a stretch to believe that most of the students also would have also been inclined towards Remain arguments. In such a context, it was essential to familiarize students with the arguments from the opposite side as a counterbalance.

In terms of how the class was facilitated (Bielby, 2003), the seminar began with a brief explanation of the rebate system using official data from the Office for National Statistics (Keep, 2021). According to Bloom's taxonomy, this consists of knowledge and comprehension, ensuring that the students understand the mechanism behind the claim (Bloom, 1956). This was followed by a quote from Full Fact, an independent fact checking organization which verifies claims being made by "politicians, public institutions and journalists, as well as viral content online" (Full Fact, 2023). The quote from the Full Fact website can be seen in Figure 2.
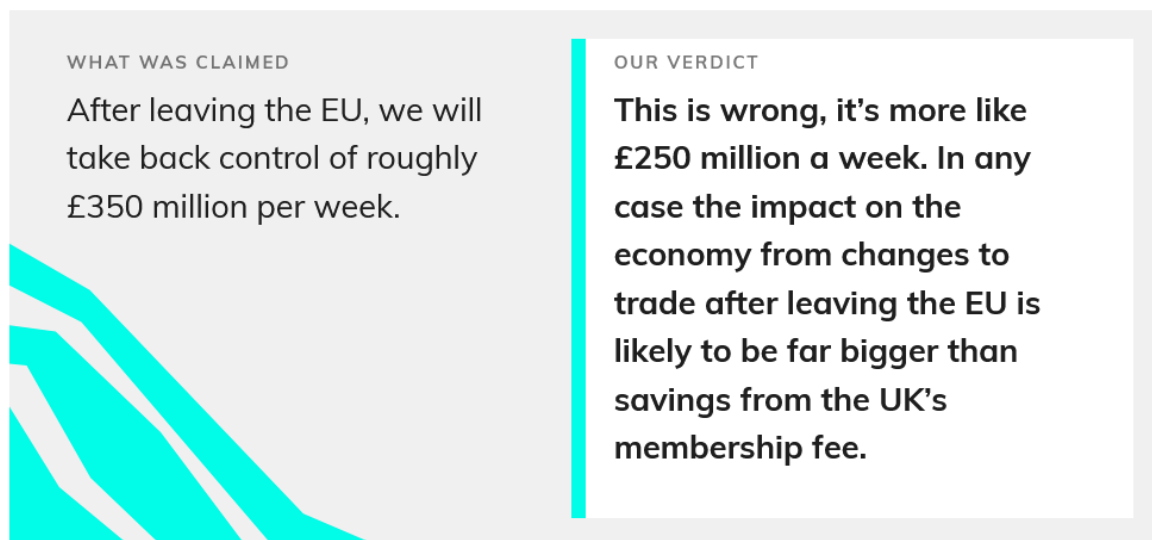

Figure 2: A screenshot from the Full Fact website showing the claim from theLeave campaign and the response from the fact checking team (Full Fact, 2017).

By introducing the quote first, students were given the opportunity to think how they would interpret this information. This provided one level above what was presented previously according to Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956); it showed how the knowledge students gained on the rebate was being applied. By introducing the data as well as the rebuttal from Full Fact allowed students time to consider how the data was being communicated to the general public, including potential Leave voters. The purpose of the author's lecture, as well

as the essay question for the module, was to have students argue as to why the Leave side won.

In terms of support (Bielby, 2003), the author shared the PowerPoint slides with links to the primary sources so that students were able to check the sources themselves, which also helped some to use the example in their own essays. Thus, the use of this counterfactual, counterbalancing case study allowed for a higher-level of learning under Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), and provided key training on conducting research on contentious topics.

4. Weaponizing Pre-existing Biases

With awareness of the teaching context core to the use of counter-balancing case studies, we also made use of the pre-existing biases themselves to create provocative discussion questions. This might be dubbed the "picking a fight" technique, and this was very much influenced by Hess' (2004, pp.259–260) second option of taking a side in a partisan manner. In Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics, the examples shown here are from a seminar titled Nuclear Weapons and Multipolarity, with two activities using this technique focused around the critique of pervading anti-US and anti-NPT arguments in the academic discourse with young people in Europe tending to be largely critical of US foreign policy and viewing it with cynicism (Greenwood, 2023). In British Politics, the polarization between leave and remain voters inherently led to a large risk of pre-existing biases. With large majorities of young people having supported remain (Eichengreen et al., 2021, p. 1131) and with a pervading discourse in some quarters that leave voters were "stupid" (Grant, 2017), this bias was addressed through an activity where students critically evaluated the arguments of both sides in a debate held by the BBC.

Students do not come to class as clean slates. Their previous experiences, their backgrounds, and their half-developed thoughts are brought into the classroom with them. There is pedagogical value in acknowledging this fact and using it effectively for pedagogical purposes. As Philip (2003, p. 371) notes, "a desirable pedagogic approach should recognise the importance of previous knowledge and beliefs in the learning context and express, wherever possible, non-judgmental respect towards these pre-existing values". Seminars are ideal places to try and test out these ideas and thoughts, helping hone their arguments. Similar to the contentious topics covered in the previous section, this could create problems as these unstructured thoughts and ideas could fossilise as pre-existing biases which limit the perspectives of students. In being contrarian to some of these ideas, we attempted to use partisanship as a means to deepen learning.

4.1 Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics: Anti-US and Pro-disarmament Norms

In Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics, the expected anti-US sentiment was first utilised in a warm-up activity with a counterfactual question: "If only one of the current nuclear-armed powers could have nuclear weapons, which would you want it to be and why?" Students were given a short period of time to discuss the question among themselves and then asked to volunteer answers – there are nine nuclear weapons states (Davenport & Kimball, 2023) (or ten if one counts Iran, which does not possess nuclear weapons but is generally considered a key nuclear threat), and therefore nine potential answers. The idea was to directly confront the students with the limitations of their own pre-existing bias; while they may not have been in favour of western countries possessing nuclear weapons, they were even less in favour of other countries possessing nuclear weapons. In the activity, most students answered Britain,

France or the United States with China coming a distant fourth. Student discussions centred around the issue of trust, linking to key debates in the wider module. The warm-up successfully achieved the goal of challenging discursive anti-American sentiment, which was a key objective in leading to the following activity.

The main seminar discussion was focused around the statement "It is fundamentally unfair that the United States should stop other countries developing nuclear weapons when it maintains an enormous nuclear arsenal". It was expected that most students would gravitate to being in favour of this statement, and indeed the initial reaction largely confirmed this. Nonetheless, students began to question it as the discussion continued; students incorporated the talking points of the previous discussion, and directly began to mirror some of the both real-world and theoretical discussions around arms control frameworks such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (Tannenwald, 2013, p. 300). These talking points were successful in creating a nuanced, balanced discussion. Eventually the question was reformulated and students were asked to reflect on the issue in the aftermath; what was more desirable outcome for them, non-proliferation or fairness? This was done to encourage deeper thinking later, as leaving students in what was essentially a simulation of a real arms control debate with a lack of closure encourages reflection later even as it frustrates (Asal & Blake, 2006, p. 9).

Some students changed their minds on which was a preferable outcome when faced with the question directly after having it reframed via the activity; the weaponization of the pre-existing bias in pointing out the contradiction that fairness was necessarily the most desirable outcome in the study of nuclear weapons provoked visible shock and later rumination from some students when it was pointed out that they might actually be arguing for more, not less nuclear weapons in the world. This was also an effective utilisation of the students' inherent anti-nuclear weapons viewpoint; on the one hand, they believed strongly in the values of fairness and equality, on the other, they largely believed in non-proliferation. This seminar activity allowed both to be played off against one another and thus forced students to reflect on which value they thought preferable in the context of Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics. This deepened student learning; students were forced in very stark terms to come to grips with which "bias" was preferable, with the expectation that students would ultimately conclude that neither was ideal, but forcing them to confront the decisions which preceded major global agreements on nuclear weapons.

4.2 British Politics: Brexit Rematch

Once again, the example used here comes from Week 7 of British Politics. Similar to how the use of a familiar case study allowed for the class to focus on the discussion rather than introducing the case study itself, pre-existing biases can help the educator cover more topics in a short time. The module leader had also encouraged the use of students' instincts rather than their knowledge, cognisant of the diversity of the student cohort. Considering this level of diversity, the use of pre-existing biases was actively adopted as an ice-breaker activity at the start of the seminar. In the case of Brexit, students who were taking the course in 2022 would have been around 12 years old (assuming they were 18 years old at the time of enrolment in the course program) when the referendum was called and spent most of their GSCEs and A-level education following the news of the country's negotiation process for a Brexit deal. Brexit was thus a familiar topic for students. Thus, the background of students including their age and social network (Bielby, 2003) allowed for the effective use of pre-existing biases.

The class discussion was designed to first ask students to share how their family members, friends, and constituencies discussed Brexit. This enabled the discussion to naturally include both Leave and Remain perspectives. By encouraging students to share what kind of discussions they had with people who supported Leave and Remain, it personalized the different views and reduced the pre-existing biases to take control of the narrative.

This was followed by a group activity in which students became strategists for either the Leave or Remain campaign. The task was for them to think of three things as listed in Figure 3. First, they had to decide who they wanted as key spokespeople (high-profile politicians or public figures) who could best deliver the strongest arguments of their campaign. Second, they were asked to identify the key arguments which they believed would make their side appealing for both their base supporters as well as the people they believed could be swayed to support their side. Finally, they were asked to identify key voters - both those who were most likely to vote on their side, as well as the target group of potential voters they wanted to convince to vote on their side. This activity was only 15 minutes in duration, so it relied heavily on pre-existing biases as to what kind of arguments were most associated with either side as well as who they imagined supporting Leave or Remain. This encouraged students to consider both sides of the argument, which provided a balanced use of different opinions (Hess, 2004).

Brematch: Brexit rematch

Leave Campaign
- Key spokesperson(s)
- Key arguments*
- Key voters (those likely to vote & those you need to convince)

Remain Campaign
- Key spokesperson(s)
- Key arguments*
- Key voters (those likely to vote & those you need to convince)

Figure 3: The "Brematch" activity slide giving directions to students on how to conduct the task.

In short, rather than pre-empting pre-existing biases, the author decided to actively use it to humanize the different sides. Pre-existing biases can thus help students focus on the analysis, as well as help students consider different perspectives in a given argument.

5. The Use of Humor

Both authors made extensive use of in-class humor for the purposes of ice-breaking and to efficiently relay information. In Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics, a key approach to this across all classes was the use of internet memes, many of which were themed around the Star Wars franchise. Internet memes are increasingly used in modern classrooms across numerous disciplines; they promote critical thinking and creative activities based around them are a form of active learning (Kyrpa et al., 2022, p. 50; Wells, 2018, pp. 243–244), and they are

effective in catching and retaining student attention and relieving tension (Kyrpa et al., 2022, pp. 50–51). Star Wars was selected due to not only the author's personal interest in the franchise but also because of the broad space it occupies in popular culture; 63% of people in Britain aged 18-24 profess to have seen at least the original six Star Wars films (albeit with a slight imbalance between male and female demographics with 73% of males and 58% of females having watched them) (Nelson, 2012). Even those who had not seen the franchise can also be assumed to have at least some degree of knowledge of it considering it has been widely referenced or parodied in other media, and the humor-softening effect is still present regardless as long as students can tell that a joke is being told. The specific example is from the class Nuclear Weapons and Domestic Politics, in which the "For the Better, Right?" or "Anakin-Padme" meme template was used.

In British Politics, on the seminar about the 2010-2015 UK Coalition Government, a party-political broadcast which parodied the four highest-polling political parties (the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrat Party, and the UK Independence Party) was utilised. The task was for students to watch this 3 minute 40 second broadcast from the 2015 general election and discuss in pairs what it told us about the political parties in question. Since the video was a caricature of the four political most significant parties, the task was to identify the characteristics of them which were being made fun of. This is a key component of the humorous contrarianism strategy; in addition to serving its own purposes, humor signals to students that taboo and difficult topics need not be tense.

5.1 Nuclear Weapons, Global Politics, and a Galaxy Far, Far Away

The "For the Better, Right?" meme template focuses on the two characters Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala in a romance scene. The meme template refers to subverted expectations from an initially reasonable position with an undesirable outcome. This meme reached peak prominence in 2021 and remained popular for some time after (Google Trends, 2023; Know Your Meme, 2021). In the specific context of the class, the meme concluded a discussion on how views on security, deterrence, and nuclear weapons have shifted in Japan, which was given as a case study essentially arguing that changed circumstances have made issues such as nuclear weapons sharing more politically saleable in Japan than they were previously. The meme in question is presented in Figure 4, which was generated using a free online meme generator.
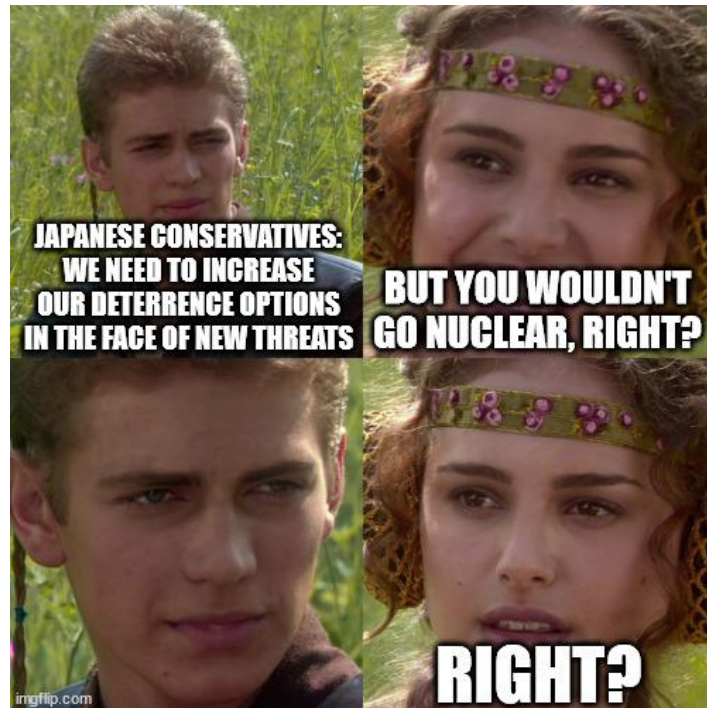
Figure 4: The "For the Better, Right" meme template as it appeared in a class activity. The meme communicates the idea that, contrary to pre-existing biases, deterrence is growing in prominence as a topic in the Japanese security discourse and nuclear weapons no longer hold the taboo they once did.

The meme was intended to convey a complex message in a simple format, encapsulating issues surrounding the security debate in Japan. The meme alludes to the possibility that while increasing deterrence options (a position which would widely be regarded as reasonable), that this could eventually lead to nuclear proliferation (an unexpected and less desirable outcome in the context of Japan and nuclear politics). This meme drew amusement from students, which was followed by further discussion and questions about the likelihood of Japan adopting nuclear weapons. This example, using Japan, also acted as a counter-balancing case study and it allowed the weaponization of students' pre-existing biases to subvert expectations. In the context of the class, this tied to a wider question about whether domestic politics were likely to cause or prevent nuclear proliferation. The humorous nature of the example created a positive atmosphere, and a robust discussion was held on the subject with a diversity of viewpoints. This worked as part of the broader strategy to combat in-classroom tension and to showcase that nuance was present even in seemingly clear-cut examples. Again, the goal was not to proselytize; only to encourage openness and diversity of viewpoints.

This strategy was successful, mirroring previous academic works (Garner, 2006, p. 180; Jeder, 2015, p. 829). Humor was used to soften the tension around difficult topics or topics where one-sidedness was expected. This was effective both because the references were immediately recognizable, and also because humor allowed for a higher degree of openness among students. Classroom climate is widely discussed in the existing literature; there is a wide consensus that perceived openness increases knowledge and engagement and even real-world political participation (Campbell, 2008; Castillo et al., 2015, pp. 31–32; Persson, 2015, p. 595). Humor was a useful means by which to improve classroom openness and to signal to students that even difficult topics could be discussed freely. In the teaching of topics where

strong preexisting biases were present or where classroom acrimony was expected, the experience of Nuclear Weapons and Global Politics demonstrated that it was vital.

5.2 British Politics: Parody and Political Satire in Education

The use of humor was attempted in most of the seminars, but there are many reasons why humor may be important in a politics class. For one, students tend to associate humor with enthusiasm towards the subject (Bakar, 2020, p. 143). Educators can use it to lighten tension, and if done sporadically it can help maintain a good balance between the seriousness of university education with an inclusive atmosphere (Bakar, 2020, p. 142; Martin, 2022). It helps distil complex topics into something people can understand (Becker & Bode, 2018), similar to the use of memes in the previous section.

A prime example of this was in Week 10 of British Politics in which the students were introduced to the UK's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015). This time period presented a challenge as to how to best discuss the major topics of the time period in the span of a single seminar. The author decided to use a 4-minute party political broadcast from 2015 by the Green Party of England and Wales titled Change The Tune (♫ Change The Tune - Green Party Election Broadcast [2015], 2015). The broadcast was a parody of the four highest-polling political parties of the UK (the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, and UK Independence parties), and it encapsulated some of the main controversies of the coalition government (♫ Change The Tune - Green Party Election Broadcast [2015], 2015). The jokes were useful for a politics class as they were not only accurate, but captured the commonly held public discourse well - in other words, it "flew close to the truth" (Buonanno, 2018, p. 71).

The aim of this activity was a form of reverse learning with the students required to figure out the issues which were being parodied. In the 4-minute video clip, a parody of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, then-leader of the Liberal Democrats, winks suggestively as he sings along with the other politicians "and we all agree on tuition fees", as can be seen in Figure 5. The Liberal Democrats were at the height of their popularity in the lead up to the 2010 general election, leading some to describe the phenomenon as "Cleggmania". The key group energised by the Liberal Democrats was young people as the party promised an end to tuition fees. The Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government with the Conservative Party and raised tuition fees from £3,000 to £9,000, a move that was never quite forgiven by the public and contributed to their defeat in the general election five years later (BBC News, 2015). Thus, from just a second of footage, students needed to identify that the man was Nick Clegg, the promise that tuition fees would be eliminated, and that the Liberal Democrats reneged on this when they formed a government with the Conservative Party.

Figure 5: A screenshot from the Change the Tune broadcast showing the "wink" on the topic of tuition fees by the actor portraying Nick Clegg
(♫ Change The Tune - Green Party Election Broadcast [2015], 2015).

Consequently, the use of humour offers much potential and scope for creative teaching and can be used to serve as an important teaching tool. There are some limitations in this approach such as the need to avoid certain parodies (Hess, 2004) to maintain an inclusive environment. In short, humor, if used appropriately, has the potential of elevating the student learning experience.

6. Conclusions

Both authors found the strategy of humorous contrarianism effective in maintaining open classroom environments and promoting discussion of difficult or one-sided topics. In particular, our collective experience has reinforced the findings of previous academics on the efficacy of using humor (Garner, 2006, p. 180; Jeder, 2015, p. 829), and on the criticality of preparation and knowing the material (Bielby, 2003, p. 377). We would emphasise in addition to the criticality of the knowing the material that knowing the context on key political debates is key. We also made conscientious efforts where possible to ensure that the materials we used were accessible and well-known. In doing so, we were able to immediately and positively signal to students that these topics were "open for discussion" and could be enjoyed despite the sometimes difficult and uncomfortable nature of the discussions. The counterbalancing case studies and weaponization of pre-existing biases worked in conjunction to enable this. We hope that these techniques will provide grounds for further experimentation in teaching difficult topics in an increasingly polarized university environment.

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