Rock and Roll Will Never Die: Using Music to Engage Students in the Study of Political Science

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ABSTRACT Popular music is ubiquitous in the lives of our students, music is used by politicians at virtually every one of their campaign events, and musicians are increasingly active in politics, but music has never been considered as a pedagogical tool in teaching political science classes. This article describes the use of music in an introduction to American politics class. I argue that playing music in class can increase student interest, reinforce important concepts, and actively engage the students in the learning process. Finally, using popular culture connects meaningfully with the way that many of our undergraduate students are experiencing politics.

There are several challenges to teaching an introductory American politics course, and even more hurdles when you are teaching that class to hundreds of students in a large, nondescript lecture hall. Chief among these obstacles are a growing indifference to or cynicism about politics among our students, a pervasive feeling that politics does not relate to their lives, a lack of passion for the study and practice of politics, and the practical difficulty of keeping so many students interested, or even awake, during the lectures. For the past several years, I have experimented with an assignment that I hoped would energize the students and engage them in thinking more deeply about politics by connecting the lecture topics to something that most of them care deeply about: music. My idea was simple. I would begin each class with a song that related in some way to the topic for the day.

The use of music as a pedagogical device is not entirely new to the academy. The strategy has been used for teaching courses in Spanish literature (Bellver 2008), American history (Binkiewicz 2006), economics (Watts and Becker 2008), and cultural studies (Stanistreet 2008). In each case, the authors reported that the tool increased student interest in the class and helped to illustrate key ideas related to the course. In addition to these descriptive reports of using music as a teaching method, numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of music on people's learning in such disparate fields as science (Root-Bernstein 2001), literacy development (Paquette and Rieg 2008), social studies (Taylor 2008), and the visual arts (Burton and Abeles 2000). The teaching literature in political science, on the other hand, includes articles that advocate using the television show *The West Wing* to teach about the presidency (Beavers 2002), and the movie *Dr. Strangelove* for exploring various topics related to nuclear war (Lindley 2001). There have not, however, been any articles that examine the pedagogical benefits of using music in political science classes.

This silence is somewhat surprising for several reasons. The role of music in students' lives can hardly be overstated. A 2007 poll of 16- to 22-year-olds in California found that music and fashion were as important to their identity formation as religion, ethnicity, and race. When asked about the most important characteristic that "defines your identity," 27% indicated music and fashion, 16% religion, 15% ethnicity, and 14% race (New American Media 2007). On a more anecdotal note, fully half of the students in my 300-person class walk into the lecture hall listening to their iPods. As professors of American government classes, we typically spend a good deal of time examining how religion, race, and ethnicity are central to a person's political identity, but apparently our students believe that music is more vital in their character formation than any of these other markers. We can lament this fact, or, as professors, we can make an effort to understand the world from the standpoint of our students, attempt to increase the cultural relevance of our courses, and explore the benefits of using music to make students feel more engaged in the study of politics.

Music is also increasingly important to politicians. Bill Clinton famously used the Fleetwood Mac song "Don't Stop" in his first campaign to reinforce his stump speech that "yesterday was gone" and it was time for a change from Republican governance. At the 2008 Democratic Convention in Denver, the U2 song "City of Blinding Lights" greeted Barack Obama as he entered to deliver his acceptance speech, and Brooks and Dunn's "Only in America" accompanied his exit. Ironically, that same song was frequently used by President Bush in his 2004 re-election bid. Not to be outdone in winning over the Brooks and Dunn crowd, John McCain

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traveled the country using the same duo's hit song "That's What It's All About." Finally, playing on both her high school nickname and her well-choreographed image as a fighter against government corruption, Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin opened many of her public appearances with the Heart song "Barracuda."

Musicians have always used their art to express political views, and artists are increasingly being used by campaigns for political purposes. The Democrats sport an impressive musical lineup that includes Bruce Springsteen, REM, Neil Young, and the Black-Eyed Peas. One of the founding members of the Black-Eyed Peas, will.i.am, produced a Barack Obama–inspired song and YouTube video "Yes We Can" that was viewed more than ten million times. The Republicans have countered with a slightly less glamorous, but still impressive, group that includes Ted Nugent, Kid Rock, and Lee Greenwood. Music, in short, matters a great deal to students, has positive learning outcomes in other fields, and is used by politicians for political purposes; furthermore, musicians care a great deal about politics. It makes good sense, therefore, to see if there are any teaching benefits in incorporating music into the political science classroom.

The exercise that I examine is mostly a description of how I use music in my classes, what I see as the primarily pedagogical benefits of using music, and why I think music encourages student interest and involvement in the classroom. Although I will also make some claims about how music can enhance student learning about political science, the results are based on my observations of using the technique and my interactions with students in my classes, rather than results of a statistical test of students who were exposed to the exercise compared with those who were not.

HOW IT WORKS: THE MECHANICS

Although I have plenty of song ideas of my own, to increase student interest in each day's song choice, I encourage their recommendations and promise a small number of extra credit points to the student who suggests the song I select for each day. The total number of points that any single student can earn is miniscule, but I think it is important to incentivize participation precisely because I want to get *their* musical recommendations and *their* thoughts about the connection between music and politics. To be eligible for the points, the student needs to submit the song title, lyrics, and a one-paragraph description of why that song is the ideal choice for the assigned topic for that day. To avoid potential legal problems, I tell the students to not send a downloaded copy of the song to me over the Internet. If I eventually use the song, I am happy to buy it online. However, I also tell my students that there is no guarantee that I will use their song—in the end, I have to be convinced of the song's connection to the topic, the student has to make a strong case for that link, and the song has to be, according to my rather broad musical tastes, enjoyable.

Because I have used this assignment for several years, my playlist constantly changes based on student recommendations. There are some songs that I believe are so ideally suited to the topic of the day that I have used them every semester since I began adopting this assignment, but there are other songs I have used only once, based on the strength of the student recommendation. Playing the student-suggested songs has had the unanticipated benefit of keeping me relatively informed about changing musical trends, and it sends the important message to the students that I am not averse to "their" culture, "their" values, and "their" music. In a large lecture class in which it is relatively difficult to encourage student involvement, the assignment is also one small step toward a learner-centered pedagogy that responds meaningfully to the diverse backgrounds and interests of my students.

I typically play the song at the beginning of class and project the lyrics onto a PowerPoint slide to allow the students to follow the words as the song plays over the loudspeakers in the lecture hall. In some cases, however, I play the song in the middle of the lecture to reinforce or highlight an idea from the presentation. Students frequently send me a link to the Youtube video of the song that they have nominated for the day, and I will sometimes play this video in class if I think that it reinforces the connection between the song and the political topic for the day.

HOW IT WORKS: FITTING MUSIC WITH THE TOPICS

One of the first lectures that I give in my introductory class is on the American Revolution, and one of the first times that I used music in the class, a student suggested that I play the Beatles' "Revolution." In her written explanation of why this was an appropriate song choice, she mused—rightly, I think—that Lennon seems ambivalent about his own participation in the revolution that part of the 1960s counterculture wanted to initiate. In the song, Lennon notes that people say that they want a revolution, but he is not so certain that he wishes to be counted among those who will support the destruction that a revolution brings.[1]

After playing the song, I ask the students why they think that Lennon might have been unsure about joining the 1960s revolution. Extrapolating from the lyrics, he seems to have opposed the use of violence. But I point out to the class that a revolution is, by definition, a radical break with the status quo, that virtually all revolutions necessarily entail the use of violence, and that a key factor in the success of any revolutionary movement is its ability to provide some legitimacy to justify its rupture from the government of the day. Turning more directly to the topic for the day, I note that Thomas Jefferson seems implicitly to understand Lennon's reservations. In the Declaration of Independence (which I assign to the students for that day) Jefferson writes:

> Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

The lecture then turns to a consideration of the support for and opposition to the American Revolution among the colonists, along with a discussion of Jefferson's efforts to provide sufficient reasons to overcome those reservations about the revolution. In this case, the song serves as a springboard to consider the larger questions surrounding the American Revolution and helps students to better understand the underlying themes related to the subject.

Long before I had ever heard the song, a student recommended using John Mayer's 2006 pop hit "Waiting on the World to Change" to address the topic of political participation and voting. In his written rationale for the song, the student pointed out that the song provides the reasoning behind the relatively low turnout rates among young voters:

> Young people have little power over important political decision, the government has all the power, and "they" use that power to make

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> terrible decisions, like going to war. We are not politically apathetic, but as Mayer points out[,] we are really just misunderstood; we are waiting for the world to change and then we will become politically involved.

Another student recommended the same song for the topic of interest groups and made a sophisticated connection to the topic of political pluralism. "Critics of pluralism," he correctly noted, "argue that non-participation can be a result of political obstacles rather than a lack of interest. What Mayer is saying in the song is not that we are indifferent to politics, but the 'fight just is not fair.' Issues that are important to my generation are not even on the political agenda." In both cases, the song proved to be a perfect foil for the class to consider several themes, including political efficacy, the consequences of nonparticipation, and interest group pluralism.

Myriad songs can be used for different topics during the semester. Since its release in the fall of 2004, virtually every semester, a student proposes Green Day's "American Idiot," with the possible topics running the gamut from the presidency to American foreign policy, civil liberties, the media, and political culture. Despite, or possibly because of its controversial lyrics, the song piques student interest at the start of class. More important, it offers a compelling opportunity to discuss several topics. I have used it to open my lecture on civil liberties, asking the students if they believe I should have played the song, given its language, or if it should be banned in public places. This leads quite naturally to a discussion of the standards that do, or should, apply when the government decides to restrict free speech. I have also used the song for my lecture on the media, in which I ask the students if they accept Green Day's implied claim that those people who support American policy are simply pawns of media propaganda or part of the "redneck agenda." At a minimum, the song is an entertaining way to approach the issue of the role that the media plays in shaping individual beliefs about politics.

The same is true for the Black-Eyed Peas' "Where is the Love", a 2003 song that students have recommended for topics as diverse as civil rights and social welfare policy. As one student aptly noted in her submission to me: "This song has everything: race relations, the abuse of government power, and even religion and politics." After playing the song, I comment that it urges listeners to practice what we preach, but what might that mean in the context of American social welfare policy and political culture? To what extent can, or should, welfare policy be driven by the political values of justice, or even forgiveness, as the song implies that it ought to be? Those questions often elicit a fascinating conversation that is closely linked to the textbook's discussion of the disparate values that make up American political culture.

The assignment has also proved to be quite topical, with students suggesting songs or artists that have made the news for one reason or another. Although I have always been partial to Aretha Franklin's "Respect" or Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" for my lecture on gender and politics, in 2007, a student proposed that I play the rather obscure 1962 pop song written by Carole King and recorded by the Crystals, "He Hit Me (It Felt Like A Kiss)." The student pointed out that the song was produced by Phil Spector, who was at that time on trial in Los Angeles on second-degree murder charges in the death of his girlfriend. I decided against playing the song, which seemed to not simply accept violence against women, but almost glorify it. However, I was gratified to discover that the student made the connection between the song and a high-profile trial taking place in Los Angeles at the time.

An added benefit of using songs by popular groups is that issues related to some of the artists will invariably crop up over the course of the semester that can be used to highlight political themes. In 2007, for example, Green Day was asked to perform live on the finale of *American Idol*. The band agreed and chose the John Lennon classic "Working Class Hero," but they were asked by the network to avoid using the "F" word when they performed the song. The band refused, which forced the network to prerecord the song in order to delete the offending words from the broadcast. Many of the students in my class watched the Green Day performance on *American Idol*. Not only did I play the Green Day song that semester, but I also used it to approach the topic of government regulation of the media, particularly in relation to the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) power to define what constitutes indecency. The politics of the FCC reared its head again in the fall of 2009, following Adam Lambert's sexually suggestive live performance at the American Music Awards show. Conservative groups filed a complaint with the FCC over the performance and called on the agency to sanction ABC, which broadcast the awards show. It was easy to find the video of Lambert's antics online, show it to the class, and discuss what should be regulated, at what hours of the day, and what sanctions, if any, ABC should face for having broadcast that portion of the show.

For some topics, there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to the songs that can be selected. For the topic of political culture and American political values, for example, students over the years have suggested Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.," Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American," and Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son." The dilemma with this topic and these songs, of course, is that they paint very different portraits of American values and what defines American patriotism. When faced with this kind of problem, I sometimes play two songs and ask students to discuss the conflicting nature of the topic and consider which portrait of American patriotism—Springsteen's or Greenwood's—they find most accurate and compelling.

Playing songs by well-known artists can also be an opportunity to consider the larger question of what role artists do or should play in a political democracy. Politicians actively seek the endorsement and support of famous musicians, which suggests that their campaigns believe that these backings have some value. What I like the students to think about, however, is how important they think a political endorsement from an artist that they like is in shaping their own political values. In short, can you love the Black-Eyed Peas and hate Barack Obama?

Finally, there are some songs that I have played simply because the tune is exceptionally catchy or the link between the song and the topic is humorous. For the lecture on criminal procedures, a student recommended the Bobby Fuller Four's classic hit, "I Fought the Law." The song's refrain, "I fought the law and the law won," raises issues about who wins and who loses in the American criminal justice system. For the topic of the presidency, a student suggested "The President's Song" from the cartoon series *The Animaniacs* and included a link to the video. The student noted that he used that song to memorize the presidents for his AP U.S. history test in high school. I hesitated to play the song, let alone show the video, but the song does name every U.S. president, and it does so to the tune of the "Calvary Charge"

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from the *William Tell Overture*. Despite my reservations about showing a cartoon at the beginning of class, the students loved it, and many of them commented that they remembered that cartoon from their childhood. I had different reservations about playing the Beatles song "Taxman," with its suggestion that the government may tax virtually anything, including the street, your heat, and even your feet. I worried that the song might play into some of the worst stereotypes of my students about an omnipresent government's power to tax everything they own. Nonetheless, the song offers an opportunity for students to consider what the government does tax, what the government chooses not to tax, and what difference any of these decisions make in our lives. Moreover, there are only so many good songs on the topic of taxes.

Finally, students invariably recommend what they think would be a funny song to play before a test. Students have asked if I might consider playing the theme song from the movie "Jaws," Queen's "Under Pressure," and "I'm So Tired" by the Beatles. In the interest of minimizing student anxiety before an examination, however, I have decided against this relatively cheap laugh and chosen to play something a bit more soothing or even uplifting before a test.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED: THE COSTS

After several years of using music in my introduction to American politics classes, I have learned that there are some disadvantages to this exercise. The most evident drawback is that starting each class with a popular song runs the risk of reinforcing the idea that the point of education is not so much to enlighten our students as amuse them. This problem can be compounded when teaching several hundred students in a large lecture class, in which the focus is so much on the performance aspect of teaching. Starting class with a recognizable and catchy rock song can establish me in the students' minds as a glorified talk show host—a sort of political science Oprah Winfrey—who will go to any lengths to keep them engaged with the material. Any pop or rock song plays with the listeners' emotions through its beat, lyrics, and rhythm, entertaining them, to be sure, but possibly not doing much more than that. Moreover, almost any song by U2, Green Day, Neil Young, or a comparable musical group is a difficult act for me to follow.

Even the best song, moreover, often fails to capture the complexity of the various topics that are typically covered in an introductory American politics class. Students often recommend John Lennon's "Imagine" for any number of topics, but as much as I like the song, I am not persuaded that its implied message that the world would be better off without governments and nation states should be advocated in a political science class. Playing many songs, in short, risks oversimplifying very complicated topics.

The assignment is also time-consuming, both in terms of preparing the assignment and taking time during the class to play the song and briefly discuss it. Not surprisingly, the extra-credit assignment is exceptionally popular with my students, who have submitted hundreds of song recommendations over the past several years. It takes time for me to read the song's lyrics and the student's rationale for using it in a particular class, listen to the song if their argument has merit, and decide whether to play the song. The start-up costs for the exercise were also relatively high, because I did not initially have a stable of songs from which to choose. There is also the issue of lost class time. My class meets twice a week for one hour and forty minutes. Because I want the students to link the lyrics of the song to the topic of the day, I do not begin playing the song until class has officially begun, so the playing and discussion of the song can use as many as ten minutes of valuable class time. This is not an inconsiderable amount of lost class time, particularly for faculty at other schools who might have shorter classes. For me, however, the assignment has been worth both the added preparation time and the lost class time, because I like music and am happy to spend some hours listening to more music, and because I have come to value the benefits of the assignment.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED: THE BENEFITS

Despite these limitations, there are several benefits that argue in favor of using music in this way. First and foremost, I believe that the assignment is a way to engage students in learning about politics, and that it can ultimately help them become better political scientists. Playing a song helps me to explicate key points about the study or practice of political science more effectively—or at least differently—than the textbook. Students often find even the best political science textbooks to be dull, but they rarely think that about music. I have no intention of abandoning textbooks, but music can often be a successful way to highlight topics to which students only give a cursory glance in the book. Playing the right song can also help students to remember the material from the class. One of the highest compliments I received on the assignment came from a student whose song choice I selected one day; afterwards, she e-mailed me:

> Political science does not come very naturally to me and I am struggling some in the class, but music is something that I am extremely passionate about and so I am really challenging myself to look at politics through a new light. . . . After spending so much time looking at the Dixie Chicks song I now remember that the First Amendment relates to freedom of speech and of the press.

If it takes a Dixie Chicks song for this student to learn about free speech, then that is fine by me.

Second, music boosts the energy level of the class, which is something that is often desperately needed. It is no accident that music is ubiquitous at sporting events, because it invigorates the crowd and prepares them to participate in the game. Education is not a game, of course, but there is nothing wrong with borrowing a strategy from the sporting world and increasing the students' initial engagement with a political science class. Music is a valuable tool for drawing students into the topic, setting a tone for the class, and focusing attention on the material to come.

Third, the assignment is exceptionally popular with my students. The most frequently written comment that I receive on student evaluations is my use of a song at the beginning of class. The assignment's celebrity is hardly a justification for its use, but the comments suggest something much more valuable to me: music makes the class seem more relevant to and timely for the students. Shortly after Chris Brown was arrested in 2009 for assaulting his pop-star girlfriend, Rihanna, a student suggested that I play one of Brown's songs as a way of highlighting the problem of violence against women. In my view, this was a perfect instance of a student making the connection between her love of music and a very real social and political problem. In contrast with using a particular television show or movie for pedagogical purposes, making use of music has the added benefit that the material can and does constantly change. Putting the onus on students to suggest particular songs ensures that their selections

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are widely recognized by their peers. The assignment also sends the valuable message that the classroom is a relatively open environment where the interests and background of the learners can make valuable contributions to the learning process.

Fourth, the assignment encourages students to offer an interpretation of a piece of music and make sophisticated connections among various topics. On the topic of immigration, a student suggested the famous Woody Guthrie song "This Land is Your Land." The student had recently discovered that the second verse of the song, which is often omitted, is much more overtly political than the more familiar verses. The verse refers to "a big high wall that tried to stop me." The student pointed out that "in the modern context, we might think of this lyric as referring to an actual physical wall to keep out illegal immigrants. But Guthrie suggests that America belongs to everyone."

My students love music and typically know a lot more about music than politics. We can lament this fact, or we can accept it and use the passion that students have for music to actively engage them in the themes of the course. What has been particularly impressive to me is that students are often able to offer sophisticated interpretations of the songs they love and connect those lyrics to the world of politics. That has perhaps been the most important benefit of the assignment: taking the passion and information that students have about music and getting them to think about the same topics as they relate to politics.

Used in the right way, music can have tremendous pedagogical benefits. While I have used it in my American politics class, I believe that this assignment could easily be applied to introductory classes in comparative politics, international relations, or even political theory. The key is to have fun with the assignment, and to follow Neil Young's good advice to "keep on rockin' in the free world." ■

NOTE

1. I included lyrics to the actual songs when I originally submitted this article for publication in *PS*. However, the editor and I subsequently discovered that there are exceptionally strict legal guidelines that govern the use of lyrics, and there is apparently no educational exemption. Gaining permission to use the lyrics from the copyright holders proved to be a byzantine, costly, and Kafkaesque enterprise. Try as I might, I could not convince the copyright holders that there was very little money to be made in an article published in *PS*. It thus became necessary to take out many of the actual lyrics in the article. If you are not familiar with the songs mentioned, however, it is not difficult to find the lyrics to these songs, and virtually every other song, on the Web. One such site is http://www.aaalyrics.com.

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