

## *Teaching politics through Geography: Role-play, print media/social media and critical assignments*

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I am a lecturer in the Maynooth University Department of Geography, with teaching and research specialisms in the field of Political Geography - and particularly Electoral Geography. The modules I currently teach on include a Second Year Political Geography (GY227) module and two Third Year – Approaches to Human Geography (GY305) and Environmental Politics (GY327) – modules, as well as leading a Final Year Geography research group focusing on the geography of Irish elections.

The Department is a large one in terms of student numbers, with close to one thousand undergraduate students and sixty postgraduate students registered within the Department each year. This means that class sizes for some undergraduate modules – even in the final year of the degree – can be quite large, even though the Department does not have any compulsory modules in these years and tries to offer students a good array of optional modules.

Although some Politics students in Maynooth University can opt to take my Political Geography and Environmental Politics modules, in addition to some visiting Erasmus, most of the students taking the class are Geography students. Over the past few years, student enrolments for the Second Year module have been lower than for the Third Year module. This may be related to the fact that students claim – at the onset/when deciding whether or not to take the module – to be intimidated somewhat by their lack of knowledge in relation to politics, or claim to have little or no interest in politics. The inclusion of a more specific “environmental” element in the title/descriptor of the Third Year module tends to attract more students to this. Given this, a significant effort is required in terms of building up student’s knowledge/confidence in relation to political matters on both of these modules, as it cannot be presumed that students who take the Final Year module will have previously taken the Second Year module. Against that, a significant proportion of the Political Geography class in 2014-15 (66 students in total) claim that they chose the module because they “wanted to learn something about politics”. In the evaluation survey for this module, 39 students (62.9% of the 62 respondents) gave this as the reason for why they chose to take this module. Other popular responses to this question included the fact that 50% of the module marks were based on continuous assessment (59.7% of respondents), as well as the lecture times (45.2%), the module content (38.7%), the lecturer teaching the module (29.0%) and students’ experience of attending the first lectures in this module (27.4%). By contrast, the same questions were asked of the 2013-14 Environmental Politics class, which had an enrolment of 118 students for that year. In this case, 71.1% of respondents (64 out of 90 survey respondents) said that they chose to do the module because 50% of the module marks were based on continuous assessment, while 62.2% chose to do it because of the module content, as against other factors such as the lecturer involved (36.7%), the fact that the module had no long (two-hour) end of module exam (23.3%), the lecture times (20.0%) and the fact that they had taken GY227 in the previous year (17.8%). Thus, while a number of students choose to take these module options because they have an interest in the module content of politics in general (albeit with little confidence in their ability to engage with political subject matter), other factors such as the high level of continuous assessment involved or the days of the week that these modules were timetabled on.

So there are certain challenges being faced in terms of the teaching of politics within a Geography Department that might not arise in the context of Politics, Political Science or Government Departments. The type of “politics” being taught in a Geography context is also different to that being taught by the political scientists. In Geography the “where” matters and questions to do with place and areal differentiation are to the forefront. Teaching (and research) in Political Geography focuses on how political

trends and behaviour differs between areas, or places. In terms of the field of Electoral Geography, for instance, the main unit of study/analysis tends to be electoral data drawn from different areas (or constituencies/electoral divisions), whereas political scientists would tend to focus on survey-based data. This geographical perspective allows analyses to take account of all the views of the electorate – albeit with these being aggregated together to produce area-based electoral statistics – whereas surveys can only take account of the views of very small proportions of the electorate. The geographical approach also allows one to take account of the impact of context on political behaviour, which is vitally important given that political behaviour, as argued by John Agnew, is very much place-based. Of course, there are only certain questions that may be answered using such area-based analysis with the main limits relating to a lack of data relating to certain questions (e.g. questions that may not be covered in the Census) and the material offered from other sources, such as surveys or interviews, is necessary to address such deficits. As such, the different approaches favoured in electoral analyses by electoral geographers and political scientists can be seen to complement each other. Indeed the mapping and statistical analysis of area-based (election) figures is not an end in itself for electoral geographers, but is instead a first stepping point (as in the concept of exploratory spatial data analysis) in a much deeper process of understanding the factors and concerns that shape electoral behaviour in countries such as Ireland. The trends, patterns and relationships uncovered in statistical analyses and illustrated by maps open up further questions as to what exactly causes such relationships to happen or as to why the relationships for certain areas (outliers) goes against the overall trend(s). These questions can then be further interrogated by other – often more qualitative – methods, such as interviews, surveys or archival analysis, that in many cases can allow for a more locally grounded understanding of the wider processes or relationships to be uncovered, thus allowing for a richer and deeper understanding of the wider study area.

Having established this background context, the rest of this short report will focus on different innovations or techniques that I have used in my teaching of political material. As noted previously, in Geography I am dealing with a context in which students in the Department often claim to have little knowledge – and little interest! – in politics, while they also have little confidence in their ability to engage with the material. In addressing such concerns, as well as the need to develop student's critical thinking skills, the key focus in my teaching – especially in the first set of lectures in a module – is to ensure that students have a basic understanding of the key concepts and ideas associated with that module. In line with this, I hold a number of in-class exercises at random stages throughout the module. Usually taking place towards the end of a lecture, these involve students being asked a question that is based on the lecture material that preceded this exercise, with students also being allowed to use their lecture notes to answer this. These questions are framed in such a way that students are able to answer them using the material outlined/discussed earlier in the lecture, but also requires a degree of thought and engagement on their parts. All completed exercises are graded (out of 20 marks) and grades are returned to students (via Moodle) as quickly as possible, accompanied where possible with typed feedback, particularly relating to aspects where limited comprehension of module concepts is revealed. Where comprehension of the material proves to be especially problematic, students are invited to make use of my official office hours to discuss this. Comprehension is the key first step in the process of developing critical thinking and once students are able to comprehend the key concepts in a module they are then able to progress in relation to the higher-level critical thinking skills, including:

- the ability to develop logical and coherent arguments supported by relevant evidence,
- the ability to weigh up different positions on the same topic,
- the ability to detect bias in the views of others and of yourself
- the ability to think creatively in relation to a certain theme.

Key to effective critical thinking – particularly as relates to politics - is the ability to weigh up or support arguments on the basis of strong and relevant evidence. This focus on evidence-based political

thought/analysis is what – in my opinion - prevents democracy from descending into “rantocracy”. The importance of good data, and the ability to create, access and analyse good data sets, comes especially to the fore here. Part of my teaching, hence, focuses on the development of such skills amongst my student group, as far as is practicable given the amount of other course material to be covered. In doing so, I encounter – as I would put it – the “fear” that most of our students (who are mainly doing an Arts degree) have as relation to working with statistics, or even basic numbers. In order to address these concerns, and also to try and tie in with the Methodology classes being taught at the same time to Second Year students, I have developed an exercise around a “mock” tally figures data-set (based on a “mock” Maynooth University local election constituency), allowing students to tease out and analyse what these figures reveal

Queenan, Bill	Hannany, Rita	Moran, Tony	Ni Mhurchu, Neasa	Talbot, Anne	Corry, Bill	Moran, Seoda	Hall-Browne,	
Fianna Fail	Labour	Labour	Sinn Fein	People Before Profit	Socialist Party	Green Party	Independ	
St. Patrick's/President's Arch 1	1	7	0	13	0	1	21	49
St. Patrick's/President's Arch 2	1	2	0	4	1	1	15	29
St. Patrick's/President's Arch 3	2	5	0	10	0	0	15	43
St. Patrick's/President's Arch 4	1	8	0	9	1	0	19	40
Dunboyme	2	6	1	13	0	2	28	39
New House	5	1	0	12	2	0	20	44
Logic	0	37	2	5	3	1	29	102
Rhetoric 1	0	38	3	3	5	3	45	176
Rhetoric 2	3	45	4	2	9	2	51	159
Humanity 1	2	103	2	1	3	0	67	99
Humanity 2	1	86	1	1	1	0	71	81
Roverstown 1	2	40	0	2	1	0	90	69
Roverstown 2	0	27	1	2	1	1	110	71
Long Corridor	1	41	0	1	3	2	66	31
Library 1	0	13	2	13	6	2	71	21
Library 2	1	19	1	11	7	0	60	19
Manor Mills Car Park 1	2	11	3	10	10	2	19	12
Manor Mills Car Park 2	2	7	5	7	8	2	13	14
Education House 1	18	4	7	10	7	3	15	2
Education House 2	21	3	4	10	9	2	21	1
Education House 3	22	2	8	7	10	1	13	1
Laraghycam 1	55	1	2	5	7	0	21	7

**Figure 1: Mock tally data set for Political Geography elections task**

about political trends and political geography concepts (see Figure 1). The more that students engage with actual data-sets and the more they see how data can be used to interrogate and support arguments, the more confident and encouraged they will be about using data in future work and researches.

Given that “a week is a long time in politics”, students are strongly encouraged to make

use of media sources (both print and online) to get a handle on current developments in relation to national and international politics. Given the focus on places and the “where” in Political Geography, local newspapers can prove a rich resource here, particularly for electoral-based researches and students are encouraged to make use of these as much as possible. Resources such as the Irish Newspaper Archive, which contains back issue archives for a variety of national newspapers, such as the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Examiner*, but also a number of local newspapers, such as *The Leinster Express*, *The Limerick Leader*, *The Kerryman* and, of course, *The Skibbereen Eagle*. As well as engaging with the national and local media, I also try to encourage students to develop confidence in their writing skills to such a degree that they will consider submitting pieces of written work to both local and national newspapers. As well as developing assignments that can be reshaped for the purposes of being submitted to the annual student Geography journal, *Milieu*, students are also offered the option of taking a letter-writing assignment, where they have to write letters on current events relating to Political Geography or Environmental Politics and have to submit these to the editors of national newspapers (as well as submitting these for grading). Over the last few years, over ten letters produced by students on modules taught by me subsequently got published in national newspapers such as the *Irish Independent* or *The Irish Times* (see Figure 2). I choose to use this approach as I like the idea that student work has a life beyond being merely submitted for grading by a course lecturer, but also the potential for students to get their work published. The letters also offer an alternative format for students to produce work in, as opposed to the conventional essay-format, allowing

them to think about producing their ideas and arguments in a different way. Another alternative format that I have used for assignments in recent years includes the prospect of writing a one-act play – which does function well in terms of teasing out different arguments, as tantamount to good instances of critical thinking – instead of a conventional essay.

In some instances, students are wary about putting forward their own ideas and arguments about politics and engage in political debates. In order to address this concern, I have made use of various roleplay techniques in order to “liberate” students to engage in debates, as they often find it easier, on assuming other characters, to put forward views and engage in debates than they would if they were trying to defend their own opinions on a topic. Assuming the views of another character also helps students to look at a topic/issue from a different point of view and progresses critical skills in relation to identifying the different arguments that may be put forward by different parties to a debate. Role play can also be a lot of fun and amounts to a very different way for students to explore a topic, again as opposed to the conventional essay or report. This year, along with Claire McGing, I organised two roleplay debates for the visiting American student cohort on the Maynooth summer programme – one focusing on a debate on climate change between different world leaders and one focusing on a local debate over the proposed location of a wind-farm (see Appendix 1). The response to these exercises was generally quite positive.

In 2011, as part of the “Apprentice” task I ran with the Masters in Society and Space students, I ran a presidential election task and roleplay. In this exercise, the student teams (of which there were three) were invited to decide on a team member who they would put forward to “contest” the “President of NUIM-Land” election. This task focused around three distinct stages of the electoral process – (i) teams seeking to attain enough nominations to get their candidate officially nominated to contest the election, (ii) teams running an election campaign on behalf of their candidate and (iii) preparing for the candidates’ debate at

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Write to Letters to the Editor, Irish Independent, 27/32 Talbot Street, Dublin 1, or e-mail them to [independent.letters@independent.ie](mailto:independent.letters@independent.ie). Name and address must be supplied for verification. Lengthy contributions may be edited.



Figure 2: Student letter gets published in the Irish Independent (October 2011)

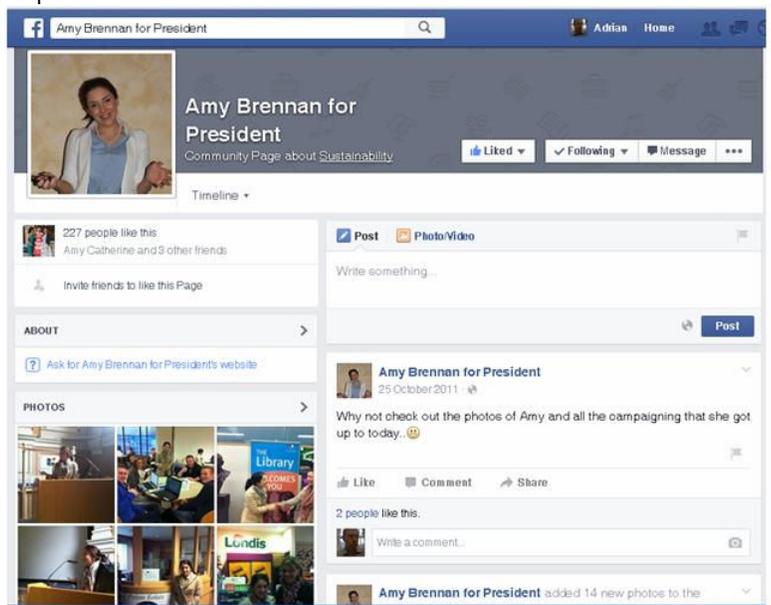


Figure 3a: Facebook page for presidential election task (October 2011)

the end of the process (see Appendix 1). The aim of the first part of the process was to illustrate the labyrinthine process of candidate nomination in the case of Irish presidential elections.

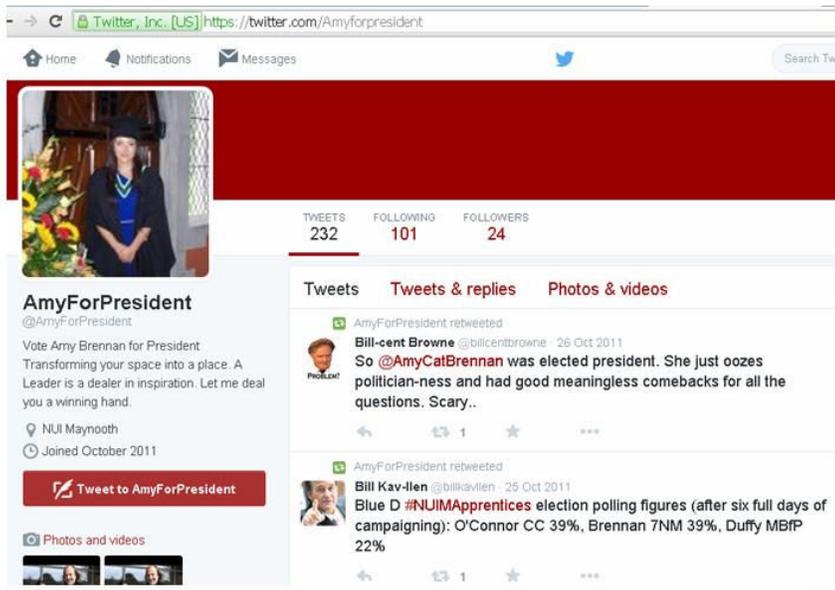


Figure 3b: Twitter page for presidential election task (October 2011)

Fallon and Fiona Buckley who did so! While it was thought that the students would find the nominations difficult to access, they actually did very well at this, but some got so much into it that they will still looking to attain nominations long after they had met their number required to have their candidate officially recognised. The next stage focused on developing a campaign for the presidential candidates, with most of the teams developing Twitter, Facebook and YouTube presences to support their candidate and to attract more and more support to their cause (as illustrated by the examples in Figures 3a, 3b and 3c). The final phase involved preparations for the final debate between the three candidates, which was the last part of the exercise. Based on how each team rated on these different stages of the process, a winning team and winning candidate was announced at the very end of the activity. The extent to which the candidates developed the mannerisms and behaviour of the “real” presidential candidates, as the activity progressed, was in fairness rather impressive and also somewhat scary! I would like to think that this activity did leave a lasting impression on some of – or at least one – of the group, given that the winning candidate, Amy Brennan, went on to work for the Constitutional Convention after completing her Masters and is currently employed at Twitter!

Teams were set a number of nominations that they needed to access to get their candidate officially nominated, requiring them to attain nominations from different Geography and Sociology/Politics staff members and other NUI Maynooth staff members, as well as actual politicians (including the candidates in the “real” election) and political experts/commentators (including a number of academics). Social media was used in order to contact, and access the nominations of, the different politicians and political commentators. Sadly, only a few commentators made the students “work” for their nominations, with honourable mentions here for Johnny



Figure 3c: YouTube page for presidential election task (October 2011)

## Appendix 1: Details on the climate change and windfarm “role-play” debates

### Climate Change debate

With the crucial United Nations conference on climate change taking place in a few months time, it has been decided to hold a debate on this issue in a “neutral” country, namely Ireland, which will be chaired by local TV host/journalist, Claire-iam O’Callaghan. A number of major world leaders will be taking part this debate, as well as some other leading international figures.

#### Characters:

Claire-iam O’Callaghan: Irish TV host/political journalist and chair of the debate

Barack Obama: President of the USA

Xi Jinping: President of China

Narendra Modi: Prime Minister of India

Angela Merkel: Chancellor of Germany

David Cameron: Exceptionally posh Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

Donald Trump: Contender for the Republican Party nomination for the US Presidential election

Leonardo DiCaprio: Actor and celebrity environmentalist

Enda Kenny: Taoiseach (Prime Minister of Ireland), who is only delighted to be in this high profile company and is hoping for a selfie with Barack and Leonardo

### Wind Farm debate

It has been proposed that a wind farm is to be constructed on a 60 acre site near the village of Ballytroid in the north-west of Kildare County. Some of the local population are not happy with this and want to stop this development from taking place. A debate is to be held in Ballytroid ICA Hall on this issue, which is to be attended by The Minister for the Environment and chaired by high-profile political journalist. A debate is to be held in Ballytroid ICA Hall on this issue, which is to be attended by The Minister for the Environment and chaired by high-profile political journalist, Kav-cent Browne.

#### Characters – and motivations:

Kav-cent Browne: Easily over-excited Irish TV host/political journalist. Always wants people to “answer the question”

The Minister (for Environment): In favour of the development but does not want to unduly annoy the local people so close to an election

Deputy Mossie “The Hat” McMurphy: Veteran, 75-year old, Fianna Fáil TD (member of parliament). If his party was in government he would be support the proposal, but as Fianna Fáil are in opposition he is violently against this

Hope O’Leary: Local member of the community who is in favour of the development as hopes to sell land for this

Ferdia Murphy: Dublin 4-based environmentalist, who very much supports the idea of wind farms and believes that there should be more of these in rural Ireland

Deputy Mary O’Mahony: Local Labour Party TD. Personally, she is in favour of the idea of wind farms, but she is not too keen on having them in her local constituency due to the

## Appendix 2: Details on the (a) candidate nominations, (b) campaigning and (c) debate phases of the “President of NUJM-land” task

<p><b>1. The Nomination Process:</b></p> <p>Any of you following the long presidential campaign saga will be aware of the Byzantine rules dictating the candidate nomination process. Of course, to make this task real, similarly obscure rules will apply here. For their candidate to be officially declared a candidate for the office they will have to attain nominations across categories (i), (ii) and (iii), which can be supplemented/compensated for by nominations from category (iv):</p> <p>(i) A (verified) nomination from at least ONE of the following people in Geography/Sociology/NIRSA: <i>Mark Boyle, Brendan Gleeson, Mary Benson, Rob Kitchin, Jane Grey, Mary Corcoran, Orla Dunne.</i></p> <p><b>Note that each of these people can only nominate one candidate – if they do nominate two people then Bill will accept the first verified nomination given to him. Note also that there is no limits on the number of nominations that a team can pick up.</b></p> <p>(ii) A (verified) nomination from at least TWO of the following people in Geography/Sociology/NIRSA: <i>Rhona Bradshaw, Justina Senkus, Claire McGing, Sandra Walsh, Conor Murphy, Ronan Foley, Gerry Kearns, Sinead Kelly, Karen Till, Neasa Hogan, John Sweeney, Paul Gibson, Mary Weld, Mary Gilmartin, Mary Murphy, Peter Murray, Aghra Kerr, Honor Fagan, John O'Brennan, Mark Farrell.</i></p> <p><b>Note that each of these people can only nominate one candidate – if they do nominate two people then Bill will accept the first verified nomination given to him. Note also that there is no limits on the number of nominations that a team can pick up.</b></p> <p>(iii) A (verified) nomination from at least ONE “real” politician: <i>Must be a current TD, Senator, MEP, county/city councillor or presidential election candidate (for the Aras election, not the NUJM Apprentice election!!!), or someone who was a TD or Senator at the start of the year. Note that each of these people can only</i></p>	<p><b>2. The Campaign</b></p> <p>The team will have to devise a campaign around their candidate. Bill doesn't want to spurn your creativity by suggesting what you should be doing here, but he or his acolyte, Adrian Kavanagh, will make themselves available for consultation. Bill himself doesn't do long-winded advice, so will restrict his own personal consultations to his Twitter site (i.e. advice from Bill can only be given in 140 characters or less!): <a href="http://twitter.com/billkavlen">http://twitter.com/billkavlen</a></p> <p>The regular Apprentice Forum discussion page on the NIR602 Moodle page will be where campaigning events (imaginary or, better still, real) should be announced and where teams can engage in friendly discussions with the opposition and the “electorate” (all of which will suspiciously look like Adrian Kavanagh...)</p> <p>The campaign team may need to appoint a “dust buster” (look that up yourselves)...</p> <p>If the campaign team can generate a level of interest in their candidate outside of just the NUJM Apprentice community, and show evidence of this, this will be deemed as “very good”...</p> <p>So be creative as possible here and give your candidate every chance of winning the election...</p> <p>Note – throughout the campaign <b>opinion polls will be released</b>, giving teams an idea of what impact their campaign is having at that period of time...although polls are deceptive beasts and prone to fluctuations...</p>	<p><b>3. The Candidate and the Debate</b></p> <p>The candidate, no matter what the provocation, should try to be as presidential as possible all throughout the campaign.</p> <p>The candidate shouldn't have much to do with the actual running of the campaign, but should put themselves at their team's disposal when photo opportunities are required...etc.</p> <p>The candidate should realise that this post has the same level of power as the real President's position...</p> <p>The candidate should have one “big idea” for what they would do with the NUJM Apprentice presidency and hammer this home relentlessly... This may be quite an “airy fairy” aspiration one (given that this role will not carry that much power...well actually it will carry no power...)</p> <p>At the big debate, the candidate will have between two and three minutes to talk about their view of the presidency and their “big idea”, they will accept one question from their <b>opponents</b> and one from the <b>floor</b> and then will be harranged by Bill-cent Browne.</p> <p><b>The Task on October 26th</b></p> <p>10.05am: Before the big debate, each team will get a 3-5 minute window where they will describe their campaigning efforts over the week. This will be followed by the debate.</p> <p>After a break to allow simmering emotions to calm down, Bill will announce (i) the winning candidate and (ii) the scores for the different teams. He will then invite the project manager of the third</p>
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