

# Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 17, 1990

## POLITICAL STRATEGIES AND PERSONAL ACTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Graduate students in organization behavior, business ethics, and organizational power courses responded to three questions regarding commonness of use, effectiveness, and propensity to apply four political strategies presented using 16 scenarios. Students believe political strategies are commonly used; they believe political strategies are moderately effective, but they are not enthusiastic about using them in their personal interactions. Students in the organizational power course viewed aspects of politics in organizations more favorably than did students who had not been tutored in organization power topics in depth. Ethics students were the most willing to build a coalition to sanction the behavior of a colleague whose actions were seen as dysfunctional by the members of the organization.

### INTRODUCTION

Political behaviors affect all aspects of organizational life. Successful influence requires a knowledge of and an ability to understand the political process model of decision making. In our programs of study in administration students receive training in the rational decision making model. Students who take a course in organization theory are exposed to the bureaucratic model of decision making. Students who take a course in leadership gain exposure to influence processes associated with leadership style options, persuasion techniques, and negotiation skills. However, courses in organizational power and politics have not been generally required in MBA programs, and exposure to the political process model of decision making is often limited to a text chapter on power and authority that focuses on line/staff relationships and delegation issues.

Many students who enroll in courses on power and organizational politics expect to learn how to be devious and exploitative. They come into the course thinking that political behavior in organizations is inappropriate or that they will learn how to identify it and ferret it out so as to maintain "organizational rationality. They may perceive political behaviors as negative or Machiavellian, contrasting strongly with more favorably viewed humanistic principles. Only students with extensive work experience are prone to recognize that political behavior is a fact of organization life.

This study investigates the extent to which students view political strategies as commonly used in organizations, their perceptions of the effectiveness of using political strategies, and whether or not they would personally choose to engage in political behaviors to advance their own preferences. It attempts to develop a better understanding of the relationship between personal values and political behavior. Specifically the following questions are explored:

1. What political strategies do students see as being commonly practiced in organizations?
2. What political strategies do students believe are effective in increasing a personal power base?
3. What political strategies would students choose to use?
4. Is there intrarater agreement on the commonality of practice of a political strategy, the perceived effectiveness of the strategy, and their propensity to engage in the political behavior?
5. Are their differences in attitudes of students regarding the commonality of practice of political strategies, the perceived effectiveness of political strategies, and the propensity to engage in the political behavior as a function of exposure to formal coursework in power and organizational politics or ethics as compared to students without such formal exposure?

### Political Behavior, Personal Values

Political behavior can be defined as any behavior that seeks to increase power and/or influence decisions. Political behavior infers the use of political strategy and the existence and/or development of a political power base. The important relationship between power strategy and power base is undeniable as no strategy will succeed without a power base (e.g., expert, referent, coercive, reward, legitimate, ability to deal with uncertainty, nonsubstitutability). But power base is useless without the application of a political strategy. This paper is concerned with tactical political strategy and not with the existence development of a power base.

Personal values are a reflection an individual's concept of morality - right and wrong. This paper is most concerned with how people view various political strategies in this context. This paper contains no pre-conceived notions and will forward no comment on the actual level of morality that exists in either the political strategies discussed or the survey responses given.

### METHODOLOGY

The first step in devising this study was to isolate a set of political strategies. A review of the literature was conducted and four political strategies were identified:

1. Information manipulation (Feldman, 1988; Pfeffer, 1980)
2. Agenda control (Pfeffer, 1980)

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3. Political partnerships--coalitions (Jackall, 1983; Pfeffer, 1980; Schein, 1977)
4. Communication techniques (Bailey, 1983; Enz, 1988; Jackall, 1983; Pfeffer, 1980)
3. A member of your department who you do not especially like asks you for information. You know that he desperately needs it and that you can get it. You tell him that you 'have no idea how to go about finding that out.'

Each of these strategies satisfied the following criteria.

1. The strategy is oriented towards specific results having nothing to do with power base development
2. The strategy involves the manipulation of either people or information towards a specific goal. It is not a personal, individual strategy (i.e. a personal decision to withhold information).
3. The strategy does not involve the manipulation of a person's emotional state and is more complex than simple interpersonal communication between two people (i.e. making someone feel guilt, esteem, etc.). The strategy is tactical and overt.
4. You are chairing a meeting next week and are now arranging the agenda. Five issues will be discussed. One proposal which you support is especially controversial, and you're afraid that prolonged debate might lead to its rejection. Hence, you place it last on the agenda in anticipation that people will be tired and less likely to debate.
5. You work in department 'A'. Many department 'A' projects require the cooperation of department 'B' to be effectively implemented. You find that the Director of department 'B' is a pivotal influencer. You nurture an outside of business relationship with this Director to give you guaranteed support on every project.

The survey instrument used in this study presented sixteen scenarios illustrating the political strategies. These are presented in Exhibit 1

Students were asked to respond to each scenario using a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree) for each of three questions:

1. I think this is an effective strategy.
2. I think this is a commonly used strategy.
3. I would personally use this strategy.
6. Clyde makes a recommendation at the last departmental meeting that is one vote short of acceptance. You tell Clyde that you will support his recommendation only if he supports your attempt at acquiring new software for the department's computer. He has no interest in the software but nevertheless agrees.
- 7A. President Bush wants to unilaterally confront Iraq and needs world support. President Assad of Syria also wants to reduce Iraq's power. They join forces on this one issue even though they disagree on most others.

### EXHIBIT 1

#### POLITICAL BEHAVIORS - SCENARIOS

1. You have performed a cost-benefit analysis on a proposed purchase of new equipment. You like the equipment and believe that it would be a beneficial purchase. Your objective analysis has shown substantial benefits in product quality and throughput. However, a facilities department analysis indicates high maintenance costs and reliability issues that might jeopardize a supportive final outcome. When presenting your analysis and recommendations, you do not show the facilities department's analysis.
- 2A. You are negotiating to buy a car. You decide within the next week and have no problem with any reasonable down payment. You tell the salesman that you are in 'no hurry to buy and cannot afford a big down payment.
- 2B. You have finished an evaluation of two potential suppliers. You know that 'B' is your choice because the Manufacturing Director is your friend; however, 'A' appears to be as good or better based on the objective criteria. Both vendors tell you that they prefer a month's notice for large volume orders. You write in your report that 'A' is incapable of supplying sufficient volume without well over a month's notice.
- 7B. You are the manager of your department. You wish to have a fellow manager in another department removed because you do not agree with his objectives and he has effectively influenced decisions in the past that went against you. A number of other managers are also opposed to this person. You all go together to your director and present a case against this manager, essentially asking for his demotion or removal
8. You sit on a committee in charge of employee suggestion activity. You have a suggestion from one of your employees that you support, but it has risks. Instead of implementing the change unilaterally (the employee would still receive credit), you refer it to committee for approval. It might fail in committee, but then if it fails after implementation, you are not solely responsible for the decision to implement.
9. Joe, who is an engineer in quality assurance, is interested in a supervisory position. You are a manager in charge of new products and Joe is presently reviewing specifications on your newest creation. Joe is qualified for the promotion, but needs your recommendation to assure him the position. You let Joe know that if he accepts your proposed specifications then he will receive your recommendation.

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10. Manufacturing has been complaining that purchasing has too much power concerning the choice of suppliers. Top management has asked you, as the purchasing manager, to respond. You decide to implement a supplier-rating program. When designing the program parameters, you purposefully make the criteria subjective and ambiguous knowing that it will have no real effect on your decisions. You just want to appease manufacturing.
11. You get assigned to a corporate committee evaluating possible expansion and immediately profess your lack of prior preference for any specific proposal. Your initial responses at meetings are framed to give other members this impression. However, there really is a proposal, which you have preferred from the start. Once you have both proven your objectivity to the other members and established influence, you begin to tactfully maneuver support for your proposal.
- 12A. You're in a job interview for a management position. The interviewer professes that his/her company doesn't believe in job enrichment. It is not cost effective. You personally believe in job enrichment, but inform the interviewer that you agree.
- 12B. Top management in your company is strongly motivated to cut costs. You are aware of management's preferences and think that their emphasis is misplaced. Nevertheless, whenever possible, you let management know that you're worried about escalating costs.
13. You are a lawyer prosecuting someone on a murder charge. There is substantial evidence that casts doubt on whether you have the right person. You know that by strictly relying on the evidence you will lose. To sway the jury, you bring in pictures of the murder, emphasizing the murderer's cruelty and the victim's virtues..

Scenarios 1 through 3 relate to information manipulation strategies. Scenario 1 illustrates the selective use of criteria o increase power; scenario 2A and 2B use information distortion; and scenario 3 uses secrecy.

One scenario, scenario 4, illustrates an agenda control strategy. Scenarios 5 through 9 relate to political partnerships. Scenario 5 illustrates the use of a patron or mentor to increase influence; scenario 6 uses reciprocity; scenario 7A and 7B use coalition building; scenario 8 calls or diffusion of responsibility; and scenario 9 relies on cooptation.

Scenarios 10 through 13 embody communication techniques as political strategies. Scenario 10 relates to ambiguity of communication to gain the advantage; scenario 11 is an attempt to engineer the impression of objectivity in a decision-making situation. Scenarios 12A and 12B require Duplicity on the part of the actor; and scenario 13 illustrates: he use of emotional appeal.

The purpose in presenting two scenarios for three of the

strategies--information distortion, coalitions, and duplicity--was to determine whether respondents tend to react to the political strategy or the context of the situation.

The survey instrument was distributed to 102 graduate students in four courses in an MBA program in the last quarter of the semester--two introductory organizational behavior courses, one course in ethics and one course in organizational power and politics. In total, 95 questionnaires were useable. Analysis of the data was performed using a social science statistical program package.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Commonness, Effectiveness, and Personal Attractiveness of Strategies

Means and standard deviations for responses to each of the scenarios are presented in Table 1. For the total study population agenda control was seen as the most commonly used political strategy, the most effective political strategy, and the political strategy students were most willing to use. The political partnership strategies as a group were ranked second on commonality of use, effectiveness, and propensity to use. Communication strategies ranked third and information control strategies ranked last on all three issues tested.

TABLE 1  
RESPONSE SUMMARY FOR POLITICAL BEHAVIOR  
RATINGS

Strategy	Effectiveness Ratings							
	OB Group N=61		Ethics Grp N=15		Power Grp N=19		Population N=95	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
<u>Information Manipulation</u>								
1. Selective Use	3.85	1.33	3.60	1.24	3.21	1.62	3.68	1.39
2A. Distortion	2.11	1.28	1.87	1.13	2.26	1.28	2.10	1.25
2B. Distortion	4.02	1.20	3.93	1.22	3.21	1.47	3.87	1.28
3. Secrecy	3.77	1.42	4.07	1.49	2.56	1.54	3.59	1.53
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY							3.30 0.96	
<u>Agenda Control</u>								
4. Agenda Control	2.25	1.21	1.67	0.72	1.42	0.51	1.99	1.09
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY							1.99 1.09	
<u>Political Partnership</u>								
5. Patronage	2.07	0.96	1.87	0.74	1.44	0.78	1.92	0.93
6. Exchange	2.08	1.12	2.07	1.16	1.32	0.48	1.93	1.06
7A. Coalition	1.72	0.78	1.57	1.09	1.61	0.85	1.67	0.84
7B. Coalition	2.89	1.18	2.36	1.39	2.84	1.07	2.80	1.20
8. Diff. Resp	2.25	1.03	2.00	1.18	1.89	0.83	2.14	1.02
9. Cooptation	3.31	1.37	3.43	1.28	2.37	1.26	3.14	1.38
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY							2.27 0.62	
<u>Communication</u>								
10. Ambiguity	3.63	1.26	3.14	1.35	2.16	0.96	3.26	1.34
11. Neutrality	2.42	1.20	1.85	0.90	1.79	0.63	2.21	1.10
12A. Agree	2.97	1.34	2.79	1.42	3.11	1.33	2.97	1.34
12B. Agree	2.57	1.21	2.77	1.24	1.42	1.30	2.57	1.23
13. Emotion	2.27	1.31	2.07	1.07	2.36	1.38	2.26	1.29
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY							2.65 0.82	

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Table 1 continued

Strategy	Commonality of Use Ratings			
	OB Group	Ethics Grp	Power Grp	Population
	N=61	N=15	N=19	N=95
	M S.D.	M S.D.	M S.D.	M S.D.
<u>Information Manipulation</u>				
1. Selective Use	2.61 0.95	2.47 1.13	1.84 0.83	2.42 1.00
2A. Distortion	1.95 1.22	1.60 0.83	1.74 1.05	1.85 1.13
2B. Distortion	3.00 1.13	2.87 1.22	2.52 1.12	2.85 1.13
3. Secrecy	2.64 1.25	2.47 1.19	2.17 0.99	2.52 1.20
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				2.42 0.77

## Agenda Control

4. Agenda Control	2.16 1.02	2.00 0.76	1.74 0.87	2.05 0.96
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				2.05 0.96

## Political Partnership

5. Patronage	2.15 0.96	1.60 0.74	1.39 0.50	1.92 0.91
6. Exchange	1.97 0.95	1.87 0.99	1.53 0.51	1.86 0.90
7A. Coalition	1.77 0.76	1.57 0.85	1.83 1.10	1.76 0.84
7B. Coalition	2.57 1.02	2.14 1.17	2.84 0.76	2.56 1.01
8. Diff. Resp	2.07 0.85	1.57 1.18	1.83 0.51	1.95 0.81
9. Cooptation	2.51 0.96	2.43 1.09	2.11 0.74	2.41 0.94
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				2.08 0.53

## Communication

10. Ambiguity	2.65 1.04	2.43 1.02	2.05 0.78	2.50 1.01
11. Neutrality	2.45 1.03	2.38 1.45	2.05 0.62	2.36 1.03
12A. Agree	2.05 0.95	2.14 1.23	1.95 0.78	2.04 0.96
12B. Agree	2.15 1.02	1.92 0.76	1.95 0.91	2.08 0.96
13. Emotion	1.83 1.06	1.86 1.03	2.05 1.08	1.88 1.05
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				2.17 0.59

Strategy	Propensity to Use Ratings			
	OB Group	Ethics Grp	Power Grp	Population
	N=61	N=15	N=19	N=95
	M S.D.	M S.D.	M S.D.	M S.D.
<u>Information Manipulation</u>				
1. Selective Use	4.20 0.87	4.07 0.88	3.53 1.39	4.04 1.02
2A. Distortion	2.39 1.43	1.87 1.25	2.21 1.23	2.27 1.40
2B. Distortion	4.23 1.02	4.40 0.73	4.00 1.25	4.24 1.01
3. Secrecy	3.90 1.23	4.20 1.01	3.67 1.46	3.90 1.25
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				3.61 0.77

## Agenda Control

4. Agenda Control	2.64 1.20	2.07 0.88	1.53 0.84	2.34 1.17
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				2.34 1.17

## Political Partnership

5. Patronage	2.54 1.18	2.53 1.30	1.83 1.04	2.40 1.19
6. Exchange	2.70 1.17	2.60 1.40	1.84 1.01	2.52 1.22
7A. Coalition	2.13 1.04	2.14 1.29	2.33 1.33	2.17 1.13
7B. Coalition	3.48 1.21	2.79 1.53	3.74 1.28	3.43 1.30
8. Diff. Resp	2.57 1.19	2.29 1.27	2.28 0.83	2.47 1.14
9. Cooptation	4.03 1.08	4.14 1.23	3.53 1.31	3.95 1.16
OVERALL FOR STRATEGY				2.82 0.63

## Communication

10. Ambiguity	4.05 0.93	3.57 1.09	2.79 1.08	3.72 1.10
11. Neutrality	2.78 1.40	2.54 1.20	2.53 1.35	2.70 1.36
12A. Agree	3.22 1.19	3.64 1.28	4.00 0.88	3.43 1.19
12B. Agree	3.08 1.29	3.00 1.15	2.95 1.22	3.04 1.25
13. Emotion	3.73 1.18	3.79 1.42	3.74 1.37	3.74 1.24

## OVERALL FOR STRATEGY

3.34 0.76

Agenda control is structural strategy. Setting an agenda is impersonal and, therefore, not likely to infringe on individual freedoms. The order in which issues are addressed at a meeting or items are considered in a particular situation can affect the attention paid to the issue, the likelihood that the group will be "ready" to deal with the issue thoroughly, and the likelihood of acceptance or rejection as a function of how the "meeting has gone" to this point.

Of the six political partnerships scenarios, the most acceptable was scenario 7a which proposed that President Bush align with President Assad to reduce Iraq's power. Given the survey was administered a few weeks after the end of open conflict in the Iraqi War "Desert Storm," students had some empirical evidence that this strategy was used, was effective, and had positive consequences for the actors. Scenario 7b also focused on coalition formation as a specific strategy in an organizational context, one wherein the political players attempted to develop a coalition whose goal was to sanction a colleague's behavior. Responses to scenario 7B were significantly less favorable than those to scenario 7A. This finding suggests that people respond to situations as opposed to the behaviors. The least acceptable political player chose to recommend a colleague for promotion on the condition that the colleague agree to a "deal" related to setting quality control specifications affecting one of the political player's work projects

Results related to the communication scenarios were mixed. The scenario seen as the most commonly used depicted a lawyer influencing the outcome of a trial. This behavior was seen as fairly effective, but students did not envision themselves engaging in it. Their aversion to using such a behavior may have related to a lack of identity with the law profession rather than to their feeling that the behavior was personally unacceptable. The most favored personal behavior regarding a communication scenario was to withhold expressing personal preferences in a meeting until the political player felt an image of objectivity had been established. The least acceptable communication scenario dealt with changing purchase order procedures so as to disempower purchasing agents. Rejection of this behavior may have reflected a need on the part of respondents for structured and impartial decisions- a reaffirmation of the need for rationality in a system. Scenario 12A required the actor to feign agreement with a job interviewer regarding job enrichment, and scenario 12B required feigning agreement with top management regarding cost cutting as a solution to an organizational problem. There was no significant difference between responses to these situations. Either the contexts of the situations were seen as similar, or students were responding to the strategy. With the information available, it is not possible to draw a conclusion.

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Scenarios using information control were seen as generally the least common, least effective, and least attractive as personal behavior choices. All four of the information control scenarios required the individual to lie either by commission or omission. The scenarios required secrecy, distortion, and selective information transmission. Responses to scenarios 2A and 2B were the most acceptable and the least acceptable information control strategies, respectively. Scenario 2A, required distortion of information during negotiations with a used car salesman. Perhaps, for many students this was regarded as "expected" even "reciprocal" behavior. Scenario 2B required the political player misrepresent contract conditions to favor one supplier over another. Perhaps the high risk of being "caught" in this lie, its possible repercussions, and a perceived low personal payoff contributed to the reticence on the part of respondents to agree with this behavior. In this instance the same behavior in two different contexts elicited significantly different responses. The Bush/Assad coalition strategy (scenario 7A) was seen as the most effective, the most common behavior, and the most attractive to use. The least effective, least common behavior, and least attractive to use was distortion of information regarding a supplier capabilities (scenario 7B).

### Intrater Agreement

Did students who found a political practice to be common also see the practice as effective? Did students who found a political practice to be common also express a desire to personally engage in such a behavior? Did students who felt a political strategy was commonly used express a willingness to use the behavior for personal benefit? Chi-square was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the means for each of these questions for each of the strategy groupings. These data are presented in Table 2.

There was no significant difference between the mean ratings on the commonality and effectiveness of the use of the agenda control strategy. However, in all other instances, significant differences were found between the mean ratings for commonness of usage and effectiveness, between the mean ratings for commonness of usage and propensity to engage in the behavior, and between effectiveness of the strategy and propensity to engage in the behavior. Respondents were most likely to agree that other people use political strategies. They were significantly less likely to agree that political strategies are effective and they were most reluctant to agree that they would personally be willing to engage in political behaviors. "Generally, people engage in political behaviors, sometimes they work, and maybe I would be willing to try it," is a statement that captures the essence of respondent attitudes regarding the use of the political strategies tested in this study.

The rankings of the ratings were not significantly different except in three instances:

1. The commonness of usage of scenario 7B behavior was ranked 15 of 16; while the rankings for perceived effectiveness and propensity to engage in the behavior were ranked 10 of 16.

TABLE 2

CHI-SQUARE DATA FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RATINGS  
OF EFFECTIVENESS VS. COMMONALITY OF PRACTICE  
EFFECTIVENESS VS. PROPENSITY TO USE  
COMMONALITY OF PRACTICE VS. PROPENSITY TO USE  
FOR ORGANIZATION BEHAVIOR, ETHICS, AND POLITICS  
STUDENTS

#### Agenda Control

Effectiveness v. Commonality of Use	0.59
Effectiveness v. Propensity to Use	3.33**
Commonality of Use v. Propensity to Use	2.63*

#### Political Partnerships

Effectiveness v. Commonality of Use	3.31**
Effectiveness v. Propensity to Use	10.10**
Commonality of Use v. Propensity to Use	12.27**

#### Communication

Effectiveness v. Commonality of Use	6.69**
Effectiveness v. Propensity to Use	9.22**
Commonality of Use v. Propensity to Use	14.34**

#### Information Manipulation

Effectiveness v. Commonality of Use	10.13**
Effectiveness v. Propensity to Use	4.22**
Commonality of Use v. Propensity to Use	14.70**

\* p < .01

\*\* p < .001

2. Although agenda control ranked 5 of 16 on effectiveness and 3 of 16 on propensity to use, it ranked 8 of 16 on commonness of usage. This is a common practice. Students are apparently naive regarding this behavior. It would be interesting to hold constant age or years of work experience to test this hypothesis.
3. Emotional appeal was ranked 4 of 16 on commonality of the behavior. It ranked 8 of 16 on effectiveness and 12 of 16 on propensity to use. This behavior exhibited the higher variance in rankings.

### Sub-Group Analyses

Is there a difference in the perceptions of political strategies between students who have been exposed to formal training in ethics, those who have been exposed to formal training in organizational power and politics, and those who have not had formal training in either of these areas. To explore this question chi-square was used to test the significance of mean differences between group ratings--organizational behavior, OB; ethics, E; and power and politics, PP--on effectiveness, common usage, and propensity to use the strategy.

Effectiveness measures. PP students rated distorting information (scenario 2A), being secretive (scenario 3), exchanging favors (scenario 6), using cooptation (scenario 9), and communicating ambiguously (scenario 10) as more effective political strategies than did OB or E students. PP students rated selectively using information (scenario 1), controlling the agenda (scenario 4), and appearing to be noncommittal (scenario 11) as being more effective than did

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OB students. in no instance were the ratings of effectiveness higher for the "non-tutored." Perhaps PP students had begun to believe the effectiveness of playing politics.

Commonness of use of political strategies. Significant differences between groups on ratings of the commonality of use of behaviors were found on three items. PP students rated using information selectively (scenario 1) and communicating ambiguously (scenario 10) higher than did OB or E students. PP students also rated patronage (scenario 5) as a more common practice than did OB students.

Propensity to use a political strategy. PP students were more likely to information selectively use information (scenario 1), engage in patronage behaviors (scenario 5), propose an exchange of favors (scenario 6) and communicate ambiguously (scenario 10) than were either OB or E students.

PP students were more likely than E students to engage in the use of secrecy (scenario 3) and cooptation (scenario 9) behaviors.

E students were more willing to build a coalition whose goal was to influence upper management to demote or fire a manager whose behavior was seen as dysfunctional by several other managers at the same organizational level (scenario 7B) than were either OB or PP students.

Without further studies in this area, it is not possible to conclude that formal instruction in power and politics affects student attitudes regarding political behavior. There is some evidence in this study to support this hypothesis. It may simply be that students who elect to take such a course are already prone to view politics favorably. But based on my experience, many of the students come into the class wanting to learn and with mixed attitudes regarding the political process.

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