8-2021

The Political Turn in First-Year Composition: Student and Instructor Perspectives on Politics, Demagoguery, and Democratic Deliberation

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
The Political Turn in First-Year Composition:
Student and Instructor Perspectives on Politics, Demagoguery, and Democratic Deliberation

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jacob Buller-Young
August 2021
Acknowledgments

Since I have functionally been writing this thesis since Fall 2019, I have many people to thank for it. Because they guided the project in the first place, I am grateful to Dr. Jeff Ringer, my committee chair, and to Dr. Lisa King and Dr. Jessi Grieser, my committee members. Each of them has supported my academic career through their thoughtful instruction and compassionate mentorship.

Many of my Tennessee friends and colleagues have been steadfast in their support and encouragement. I am grateful to Anita Voorhees, Becca Napreyeva, Kelly Sauskojus, and Amber Kent-Johnson, my incredible RWL cohort; to the Herbert Writing Center research group, whose feedback on my coding scheme was invaluable; to Anne Snellen, for conducting my bracketing interview; to Holland Prior; to Melanie and Julian Reese, whose very presence is a ministry; and to my Pilgrimage family at All Souls Church.

I am incredibly thankful for my participants, especially my 13 interviewees, who courageously volunteered their experiences and, at times, their fears and vulnerabilities. That is a gift that qualitative researchers can never repay. I have done my best to honor your experiences with compassion and honesty.

My work was built on the shoulders of giants, especially Ellen Carillo, John Duffy, Lisa Blankenship, and Patricia Roberts-Miller. None of them know me personally, but their books and scholarship have been inspiring me for the past two years. I walk on the trails they blazed.

It goes without saying that I am indebted to and deeply grateful for Samantha Buller-Young, my love, my muse, and a patient listener to my half-baked theorizing. She managed to balance her 2L year of law school with my mad dash to the finish line, and her strength, gentle encouragement, and excellent butter chicken helped get me through. And, of course, I owe a lot my parents, Eric and Pam Buller, who encouraged me six years ago to pursue what I loved, even if the job prospects were dubious—though the jury is still out on that one.

Finally, both first and last, I am grateful to God. “Christ plays in ten thousand places,” as Hopkins wrote, and he is “lovely in eyes not his.” In the hard work of listening well, I see the face of Christ, lovely in eyes not his.
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the presence and perceptions of politics in first-year composition (FYC) courses. Though the “political turn” of composition studies has been the subject of much scholarship since the 2016 election, very little empirical research has been conducted in this area. As a result, this study seeks to fill that gap with empirical, mixed-methods research that examines the political perceptions of both students and instructors in FYC courses.

I begin this work by reviewing the long, fraught history of politics in rhetorical education and propose several frameworks that are helpful for clarifying this debate, including democratic deliberation and rhetorical empathy. Through 38 survey responses and 13 semi-structured follow-up interviews, I explore when, how, and why politics come up in FYC courses and how participants perceive themselves and other people as political actors in those courses. Though most of my student participants had largely apolitical experiences, instructors had a better sense for the political diversity of their classes and engaged with politically charged content with varying degrees of success.

In addition, I examine how my participants’ beliefs align with Roberts-Miller’s (2004) models of political discourse. My results demonstrate that, in their composition courses, my participants largely based their ideas on the liberal model of discourse and the deliberative model of discourse, though other models occur as well. Based on my research, I contend that composition instructors should reflect on what underlying assumptions about political discourse lie beneath their pedagogical choices. I also argue that, in order to productively integrate politics in their courses, instructors should leave behind thesis-based argument and lecture-based pedagogy in favor of exploratory argument, collaborative teaching styles, and facilitating a classroom environment rooted in listening and empathy.
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The election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 changed a lot for rhetorical educators—one might even say that it changed everything. From the white supremacists marching at Charlottesville, to the first impeachment, to the riot at the Capitol and his subsequent second impeachment, Trump was a catalyst for racist, white supremacist rhetoric and antiracist activism. From the moment he announced his presidential run, he exploited bombastic, scorched-earth rhetoric to grab media headlines and consolidate support, prompting new scholarship from rhetorical scholars examining the rhetoric of demagoguery (Roberts-Miller, 2017, 2019; Skinnell and Murphy, 2019).

It would be all too easy to center Trump’s rhetoric in discussing the ailments of public discourse, but the fact of the matter is that nearly 63 million Americans voted for him in 2016, and over 74 million voted for Trump four years later, despite his long history of demagogic rhetoric. “We don’t have demagoguery in our culture because a demagogue came to power,” Patricia Roberts-Miller (2017) argued. “[W]hen demagoguery becomes the normal way of participating in public discourse, then it’s just a question of time until a demagogue arises” (p. 2). Trump, in other words, was not a rhetorical problem himself; Trump was a symptom of a much more fundamental problem in American civil discourse. As Heitzl and Laurin (2020) noted, “80% of Americans today feel unfavorable towards their partisan foes, and the portion feeling very unfavorable has nearly tripled since 1994” (p. 179). Demagoguery, polarization, and other cultural ills merely came to the surface during Trump’s presidency. In fact, they have been growing in American political discourse since at least 9/11 (Roberts-Miller, 2017).
In postsecondary education, the burden of combating demagoguery has fallen on rhetorical educators (Steudeman, 2019), and in particular, first-year composition instructors (McComiskey, 2017; Duffy, 2019; Blankenship, 2019). Nearly a decade ago, John Duffy (2012) wrote that first-year composition “represents one of the few places in the academic curriculum, in some institutions the only place, where students learn the basics of argument, or how to make a claim, provide evidence, and consider alternative points of view,” skills necessary for sustaining the American democratic project. As such, first-year composition is “a venue in which students can rehearse the virtues of argument so conspicuously lacking in our current political debates. Should students bring these virtues to the civic square, they will inevitably transform it” (Duffy, 2012).

In a post-2020 world, wracked by racism, polarization, and a deadly pandemic, the topic of politics in the classroom matters more for critical educators than ever before, especially for teachers of first-year composition. Roberts-Miller (2004) writes that many disagreements in composition pedagogy are really disagreements “about the place and nature of argument in democratic society” (viii). Conversely, this means that politics—as the “site” for much argument in democratic society—affects our understanding of how we ought to teach first-year composition. Politics and rhetorical education are thus deeply intertwined.

As a result, this project seeks to unite the two and demonstrate, through descriptive, empirical research, how first-year composition (FYC) can respond to the “political turn” of rhetoric and composition. This empirical, mixed-methods research project is explored in five primary movements. I begin here, in Chapter 1, by examining the past to understand the present, tracing a brief history of political rhetorical education, starting with Isocrates and skipping to the nascent discipline of composition in the 1970s and 1980s. By exploring this history, I situate this
project in a recent “turn” in composition, the political turn, and articulate an empathic theoretical framework for empirical research. In Chapter 2, I describe the methods by which I conducted my study. Then, I summarize the descriptive results of my research in Chapter 3 and examine my participants’ underlying assumptions in Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of my research and chart new directions for composition scholarship.

Of course, this topic of discussion has a long and fraught past in rhetoric and composition. To better situate this project in the long arc of disciplinary history, then, I must first examine the arguments that have come before me. It is to that task I now turn.

**Literature Review**

The goal of this literature review is threefold. First, in a brief review of the historical context of my study, I hope to demonstrate that rhetorical education has frequently had political deliberation as an end goal, if not as a *topos* in itself, from its genesis in ancient Greece to its evolution in the twentieth century. Tracing the vigorous debates over politics in writing courses from Berlin (1988), to Hairston (1992) and beyond, I will then describe how the 2016 election prompted a new outpouring of scholarship in what Carter et al. (2019) called “the political turn” of the field. Finally, given the “political turn” and the various overlapping solutions that have been proposed by scholars like Carillo (2018), Duffy (2019), and Blankenship (2019), I will examine the relevant empirical scholarship, identify the gaps in the field, discuss the deliberative model of public discourse, and propose a framework for empathic empirical research in the political turn—a framework that informs the assumptions and approach of my own study.
Historical Context

With public argument and persuasion central to the study of rhetoric (Fleming, 2014), the discipline of rhetoric and composition has often had political inflection. In the Greek rhetorical tradition, rhetoric was fundamentally oriented around the polis, the city, the center of political life in Ancient Greece. Aristotle’s Rhetoric (2007) divided rhetoric into three public-facing species: deliberative (which is the most recognizably political by modern standards), judicial, and epideictic. Isocrates, a contemporary of Aristotle, placed more emphasis on paideia, a philosophical and rhetorical education for participation in the polis. Indeed, Isocrates was widely considered to be the father of “liberal education” (Muir, 2014, p. 427), though that term, and the history of the idea itself, is certainly contested (Kimball, 1986). Isocrates’s (1928) original model, set forth in Antidosis, educated for the good of the polis, so that young men\(^1\) might be formed by virtue (aretē) and enact practical deliberative judgment (doxa) in the political realm. Indeed, Isocrates (1928) wrote that “the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character” (section 21; cf. section 275). In other words, the Isocratean tradition of rhetorical training—the most influential in Western education—is rooted in political discourse.\(^2\)

\(^1\)The use of this term is intentional; paideia was intended for young male citizens. Isocrates and other Greek philosophers have been ably critiqued on the basis of gender by rhetorical scholars (see, for instance, Poulakos and Depew, 2004).

\(^2\)This is not the only possible—or even preferable—form of rhetorical education, given the ways that Greek and Roman texts have been historically used to construct a Western-centric narrative of “liberal education,” one rife with colonial, sexist, and racist structures. Communication scholars Karma Chávez (2015) and Darrel Wanzer-Serrano (2019), among others, have rightly pointed out that the history of rhetoric often perpetuates a white, Western “citizenship narrative” (Chávez, 2015). Compositionists like Gilyard (2004) and Blankenship (2019) have addressed in part how a rhetorical education might attend to difference, diversity, and democracy without perpetuating oppressive structures. In light of these critiques and reformulations, throughout this text, I have tried to avoid the term “citizenship” in favor of “democratic” or “democracy.” For the purposes of tracing the political origins of a rhetorical education, however, I have chosen to review texts that influence the mainstream theories of first-year composition.
In the early twentieth century, as college composition spread from Harvard to other schools, the dominant forms of rhetorical education were current-traditional approaches that emphasized style and literature-oriented composition courses that emphasized imitation (Hobbs & Berlin, 1990, pp. 251-255), though democratically oriented writers like Thomas Dewey and Fred Scott still argued for a more political and democratic focus in education broadly (Hobbs & Berlin, 1990, p. 258). In the latter half of the twentieth century, at the dawn of rhetoric and composition as a formal discipline, expressivism (which had existed for a number of years as an alternative to current-traditional approaches) regained traction in the 1960s and 1970s (Hobbs and Berlin, 1990). In its simplest form, expressivist writing was private, creative expression for an individual’s benefit. This approach to composition was counterbalanced by the “process” movement (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which emphasized empirical research in cognitive science as foundational for teaching writing. Of course, a hard distinction between expressivism and process elides some of the overlap between these categories; James Britton (1972), for example, was aligned with process theorists like Flower & Hayes in terms of his empirical methods but was primarily expressivist in terms of his conclusions. The point is, however, that an Isocratean (or even Deweyan) emphasis on democratic engagement was a secondary concern for both movements.

In the 1980s, then, one might identify three primary streams of teaching composition in the nascent discipline: current-traditional (writing as imitation, style, and correctness), expressive (writing as creative expression focused on individual identity), and process (writing as an individual cognitive process to be developed). At this point in the 1980s, the modern debate over politics in composition—and the role of composition itself—was kickstarted by scholars of the “social-epistemic” turn, such as James Berlin (1988) and Carolyn Miller (1984).
Berlin and other influential scholars drew on a fourth approach to writing pedagogy, one that was consciously critical and socially situated. In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” Berlin (1988) argued for a reorientation of rhetoric from a category that contains ideology to a conception in which rhetoric is “always already ideological” (p. 477). “I am arguing from ideology,” he wrote, “contending that no other kind of argument is possible” (1988, p. 478). Reviewing three strands in rhetoric and composition scholarship—cognitive psychology (or what I called “process” above), expressionism, and social-epistemic—he concluded that all pedagogy “is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed” (p. 492). These are ideological questions, and as such, they are also political questions. If rhetoric in the writing classroom is not free of ideology, it is also not free of politics.

Berlin’s position has been most closely identified with critical pedagogy; his piece drew heavily from critical pedagogy theorist Ira Shor and aligned closely with Marxist and Freirean critiques. His core claim—that pedagogy is always ideological and therefore always political—has been maintained, largely unchanged, by Marxist and critical pedagogy theorists (Trimbur et al., 1993; Sullivan & Qualley, 1994; McLaren, 2009; Carter et al., 2019). Central to this idea is that pedagogy, because it is already ideological, should come from a fundamentally ideological approach—namely, one of radical liberation (McLaren, 2009; Brady & Ohmann, 2010).

This reorientation of composition as always-already political led to substantial pushback from other scholars in the field. In the early 1990s, Maxine Hairston (1992) famously decried the politicization of composition and forcefully charged that politically oriented composition courses put “ideology before critical thinking” and that “those who advocate such courses show open contempt for their students' values, preferences, or interests” (p. 181). The backlash to her article
was just as forceful, with scholars like William Thelin and John Trimbur defending more critical approaches to the teaching of writing. “Hairston would better serve our profession,” Thelin wrote, “by foregoing the pretense that any classroom can be apolitical and concentrating on ethical ways to negotiate race, class, and gender in a politically overt classroom” (Trimbur et al., 1993, p. 253). Thelin was not the only scholar to respond; indeed, *College Composition and Communication*—the journal in which Hairston’s critique was published—received more responses to Hairston’s article than they had for any other publication in the history of *CCC* (Sullivan & Qualley, 1994). The debate over the supposed politicization of composition is one that still continues, most recently between Graff (2010) and Brady & Ohmann (2010).

**Turn of the Century Writing Pedagogy**

At the turn of the century, David Fleming (2003) proposed that compositionists return to what he termed “classical rhetoric,” focusing on *forming certain kinds of people*, rather than focusing on a process, a product, or distributing composition out of English altogether through writing across the curriculum (WAC). Fleming’s (2003) model was the *progymnasmata*, what one might call the *exercise* of rhetoric. He wrote,

> The relevance of the classical program resides, I believe, not in the actual exercises themselves…but in the very idea behind this cycle of exercises, the attempt to make of rhetoric not just a theory or art or an historical and cultural artifact or a sociocognitive process but rather a complete and developmentally attuned curriculum in written and spoken discourse, a multicourse program of language instruction whose end product is neither a text nor a skill nor some body of knowledge but a set of deep-seated verbal habits and dispositions oriented to public effectiveness and virtue. (Fleming, 2003, p. 114)

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³While Hairston’s article was perhaps the most (in)famous of the time period, other scholars were tackling political topics as well. Donald Lazere (1992/1999), for instance, argued for a framework for teaching “the political conflicts” and suggested ethical practices for fostering critical inquiry into political topics.
Fleming’s suggestions, while not adopted wholesale by other rhetoric and composition scholars, were nonetheless influential and represented a profound shift in the field. The watermark Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2011), for instance, is aimed at fostering “habits of mind” through experiences in “writing, reading, and critical analysis” (p. 1). While the Framework is not expressly civic in its orientation, as Fleming (2003) suggested, it nevertheless answers Fleming’s call to refocus on the ethos of one’s composition students. The “habits and dispositions” that Fleming (2003) focuses on had moved to the mainstream in composition scholarship.

In the twenty-first century, scholarship on democratic education flourished, in part due to a renewed focus on the teaching of argument. Rhetoric and composition scholarship on the political classroom included critical pedagogy, theory on “deep” democracy, which often draws from critical and Marxist theory (Gilyard, 2008; hooks, 2009; Carr, Zyngier, & Pruyn, 2014), deliberative approaches (Roberts-Miller, 2004; Ingalls & Morse, 2009; Jurgensmeyer & Miller, 2013), and teaching democratic skills, whether that be through argument (Fleming, 2003, 2014; Lazere, 1999), public pedagogy (Weisser, 2002; Holmes, 2016), or a pedagogy of listening (Sullivan, 2014). This iteration of rhetorical education tended to be public-facing instruction for democratic engagement. What they all had in common, however, was that the focus was typically on the skills necessary for democratic and political engagement; the role of explicit political topics (and the instructor’s relation to them) tended to be murky.4

4The two exceptions are some theorists of critical pedagogy, as mentioned above, and Roberts-Miller (2004), who explicitly named the neutrality of the instructor as an impossible task and suggested productive ways to integrate a deliberative model of political discourse into composition courses.
Composition and Rhetoric in the Trump Era

The recent history of politics in composition, from the 1980s to the present, could be mapped out in three turns: first, the social-epistemic turn of Berlin (1988) and other critical theorists, which disrupted the supposedly apolitical pedagogies of expressivism and process and argued that writing classes were always already “political.” The second turn might well be termed the “rhetorical” turn, a turn-of-the-century umbrella category under which critical theorists, public pedagogues, and teachers of argument coexisted in teaching composition as a rhetorical education with implications for public life, exemplified in the Framework (2011). While the scholars differ in epistemologies and practices, such scholars generally share the goal of promoting some form of rhetorical knowledge (cf. Beaufort, 2007) through the teaching of writing.

The third and most recent turn is perhaps better called a swerve. The divisive and defining 2016 election cycle, which culminated in the narrow election of Donald Trump, has prompted the “political turn” (a term coined by Carter et al., 2019). The election of 2016 and the ensuing events—the white supremacists at Charlottesville, the impeachment of President Trump, the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial reckoning of Black Lives Matter and the summer of protest, the false claims of electoral fraud, and the domestic terrorism at the U.S. Capitol—became an urgent exigence for rhetoric and composition. The election revealed a set of interlocking and interrelated problems at the heart of our democracy and at the heart of rhetorical education, problems that scholars of composition and rhetoric are still working to understand and unravel. The field’s response to the Trump era can be roughly categorized by two terms: literacy and demagoguery. While this is a reductive and incomplete list, these two terms address foundational issues for compositionists—namely, reading critically and writing arguments. Questions of
literacy deal with the emerging phenomena of post-truth and “fake news”; scholarship around
demagoguery addresses argument and the ideological and rhetorical fallout of the 2016 election,
which featured unprecedented toxic discourse and polarization.

election and its effect on her as an educator and a scholar of reading. She wrote, “As an English
instructor and specifically a writing instructor for more than fifteen years and a writing program
coordinator for ten years, I felt partially responsible for the outcome of the election” (Carillo,
2018, p. 7). In her book, Carillo (2018) argued that the way reading is taught or ignored
exacerbates the phenomenon of post-truth. The solution is a renewed focus on critical empathy
(Carillo, 2018, p. 62) and concrete reading practices that frame reading as a conversation, not as
information to be unthinkingly downloaded (Carillo, 2019). Carillo was not the only scholar to
address literacy practices; recent scholarship demonstrated a renewed focus on addressing
literacy habits and the phenomena of fake news and post-truth (Mason et al., 2018; Carillo &
Horning, 2020; McComiskey, 2017). The common recognition seemed to be that instructors of
writing are ideally placed in institutional structures to make a meaningful difference in shaping
the literacy practices of young people. “Writing teachers, perhaps better than anyone else,” Bruce
McComiskey (2017) wrote in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, “can prepare the next
generation of voting citizens to recognize and fight against the kind of rhetoric that characterizes
the current political climate” (p. 38). Though reading has long been ignored by postsecondary
education (Carillo, 2018), this recent movement in composition scholarship places critical
reading front-and-center in writing pedagogy.

Recent scholarship also examined the troubling rhetoric of polarization, which turns
public argument into a zero-sum game. Perhaps the most appropriate term is *demagoguery*, a
rhetorical concept refashioned for the ills of the twenty-first century (Roberts-Miller, 2017; Skinnell & Murphy, 2019; Steudeman, 2019). Demagogic rhetoric, according to Roberts-Miller (2017) in *Demagoguery and Democracy*, “polarizes a complicated political situation into us (good) and them (bad),” it reduces policy to “identity,” and it “insists that the Truth is easy to perceive and convey,” among many other things (pp. 34-35). However, trying to counter the rhetoric of demagoguery in pedagogy can sometimes lead to “pedagogic backfire,” either because it fosters student resentment or because the instructor is unintentionally participating in rhetorics of exclusion (Steudeman, 2019).

While solutions to this political crisis differ from scholar to scholar, in a post-2016 United States, arguing for a Hairston-style apolitical approach to rhetoric and composition no longer seems to be an option. “Historical exigencies,” Carter et al. (2019) argued, “call on us to enact a ‘political turn’ that embraces yet goes beyond more celebrated cultural, public, and social turns to ask critical questions about our political economy and our field’s potential response(s) to them” (pp. 19-20). John Duffy (2019) saw the political turmoil of the Trump era as an opportunity for the field to do some soul-searching. “[The] disconnection of our work from the conduct of public discourse,” he wrote, “is symptomatic of a greater disciplinary problem: our failure to explain to the general public, to colleagues in other disciplines, to our students, and perhaps even to ourselves what we do, why our work matters, and what is at stake in the teaching of writing” (Duffy, 2019, p. 9). For better or worse, rhetoric and composition has entered the political turn, and compositionists in particular must reckon with “what is at stake in the teaching of writing” (Duffy, 2019, p. 9) and how the discipline might address our toxic public discourse.
The Empirical Research Gap

Empirical scholarship on this topic from rhetoric and composition scholars is sparse, though not entirely absent. Most of the work in the “political turn” engages in theorizing and analysis (McComiskey, 2017; Roberts-Miller, 2017; Carter et al., 2019; Duffy, 2019; Blankenship, 2019; some essays in Duffy & Agnew, 2020) or pedagogical application (Carillo, 2018, 2019; Steudeman, 2019; parts of Carter et al., 2019 and Blankenship, 2019). Some recent scholarship nodded to empirical methods. Don Kraemer’s (2020) “Not to Mention Plato: Pedagogical Persuasion” addressed the role of a graduate instructor teaching composition pedagogy as a way to “serve the democratic community” (p. 171), but it’s unclear whether the graduate student case study he provided was part of an empirical project or merely an easily accessible text for analysis.

One major empirical study, though it predates the 2016 election, came from Carr, Zyngier, and Pruyn (2014), who coordinated the Global Doing Democracy Project (GDDP). The GDDP was a set of smaller studies that emerged out of a conference, and many of them used a shared online survey to conduct their research. The participating scholars sought to describe perceptions of democracy and practices of democratic education in global contexts. Notably, the original survey did not define key terms like democracy or social justice, in order to determine the respondents’ perceptions of what those terms meant (Carr & Zyngier, 2014, p. 5). Carr (2014), in his own study, differentiated between “thin” democracy—a straightforward, voting-oriented, representative conception of democracy—and “thick” democracy, which for Carr was a nuanced and participatory conception of democracy that tackles causes rather than effects.

The GGDG and many of the other texts cited above examined postsecondary education broadly; in composition scholarship, there is less empirical research on these issues, with a few
notable exceptions. Lara Smith-Sitton and Courtney Bradford (2020) explored the politically charged topic of immigration in a community-based learning course and collected data from students to examine student perspectives, perceptions, and whether community-based learning leads to civic growth. The five students in their study had limited exposure to immigration before the course and found the class beneficial, both in terms of their new knowledge about immigration and their civic engagement in that area (Sitton & Bradford, 2020, p. 72). Their findings demonstrated that community-based learning has potential for teaching political literacy, especially when it centers on the lived experiences of those affected by political policy (in this case, immigrants). In the same edited collection, Canfield (2020) presented a case study from an advanced composition course, in which she found “a tendency to approach information from personal, unexamined biases,” even in a course aimed to foster critical information literacy (p. 158). In both cases, however, the researchers examined upper-level composition courses, not first-year composition (FYC), making their findings limited in their application to FYC.

In contrast, Stroup et al.’s (2013) older study was conducted in FYC courses that implemented explicitly political content in the curricula. They found that teaching both political information and dialogue led to higher levels of civic engagement. However, even though Stroup et al.’s study focused on first-year composition courses, their discussion was situated in political science and civic education scholarship rather than rhetoric and composition. First-year composition was merely a convenient “site” for their research, rather than integral to their theorizing and discussion.

In other words, while there is some empirical scholarship on democratic education broadly (Carr et al., 2014), on politics in upper-level writing classes (Sitton & Bradford, 2020; Canfield, 2020), and even on politics in FYC (Stroup et al., 2013), there is no empirical
application of the “political turn” that focuses specifically on FYC as education for democracy. Part of the problem with conducting empirical research on politics in FYC, I would argue, is the field’s unwieldy definition of politics. Because teaching writing is always already politically inflected, the term “politics” is so expansive that it’s virtually unusable for empirical research, which often requires relatively stable definitions and focused, well-bounded research questions.

Still, some scholars have come up with more focused categories. For example, distinctions have been made between politics and the political. Any reflection on democracy, wrote Muriello et al. (2012), necessarily leads to politics, in the same sense as Berlin’s (1988) use of the term. Alongside this acknowledgment, however, they helpfully clarified the difference between “the political” and “politics,” naming the latter “a complex configuration and expression of power,” while the political refers to the expressions of actors within a “political sphere” (Muriello et al., 2012, p. 160). This distinction—politics as an expression of power, and the political as the actors (or expressions of those actors) in the sphere of politics—may be summarized as explicit politics and implicit politics. Explicit politics is the tip of the iceberg, the inner ring of two concentric circles—the outer circle being a cultural, social, and critical conception of politics as relations of power. This distinction allows for empirical researchers to acknowledge the inherently political nature of teaching while distinguishing those political structures from more visible forms of politics.

**Constructing a Framework of Empathy**

My own study both addresses the empirical research gap and engages directly in the recent soul-searching of the field. As the above review suggests, the question has become not whether teachers should engage in explicit political issues in the classroom, but how teachers ought to
engage it. For many scholars, the heart of this democratic crisis is a fundamental lack of empathy and the absence of true democratic deliberation. The solution to political demagoguery, Roberts-Miller (2017) argued, is listening: “the best way to open the Faraday cage of demagoguery isn’t by aspiring to some emotion-free hyper-rationalism; it’s by practicing compassion for those whom demagoguery says we should treat as Other. It’s by imagining things from their perspective” (p. 77). Similarly, Carillo (2018) posited that critical empathy, expressed through dialogic and affective reading habits, was one possible solution for addressing political literacy and facilitating democratic engagement (pp. 32-33).

In other words, the proposed solutions to the two problems I have outlined above—a culture of demagoguery and post-truth reading habits—are both fundamentally grounded in empathy. Responding to Carillo’s (2018) call “to consciously incorporate attention to empathy as a form of constructing meaning, as a way of ‘reading’ one’s data particularly with participant-based research within the field of rhetoric and composition” (p. 37), I propose to formulate a broad, flexible framework for what Carillo called “empathic research,” drawing on her suggestions as well as the work of Lisa Blankenship (2019) on rhetorical empathy.

Carillo’s (2018) recommendations for empathic research primarily relied on rejecting the false dichotomy of rationality and affective experience. Instead, she suggested that researchers should seek out the “unexamined emotional dimension of our research” (Carillo, 2018, p. 44). Carillo provided examples of what empathic research might look like, such as plagiarism scholarship of Rebecca Moore Howard, which sought to see issues of plagiarism from a student’s perspective. Empathic research, Carillo (2018) concluded, “is research that is not afraid of recognizing in our research the range of ways we construct meaning and knowledge” (p. 44). In other words, research based in empathy may mean “setting a research agenda that deliberately
allows for these emotionally inflected ways of knowing when conducting participant-based studies” (Carillo, 2018, p. 44). As Cindy Johanek (2000) noted, research methods should be contextualist. In a political landscape dominated by affective—and often toxic—forms of argument, a research framework like Carillo’s is essential. Empathic research encourages researchers to pay attention to the ways that participants, as embodied, affective creatures, may bring those ways of being in the world into the study.

To clarify what is meant by “empathy” and how an empathic framework may attend to issues of difference and power, I turn now to the work of Lisa Blankenship (2019). Blankenship’s work responded to a similar exigence as Carillo (2018) and Duffy (2019) by seeking to remedy the polarization of the American public. Blankenship forwarded a theory called “rhetorical empathy” to address toxic discourse—not only in the United States broadly but in composition classes as well. Blankenship’s conception of rhetorical empathy is both critical and constructive in nature; “it balances and sustains,” with a place for “exposing the workings of power and for resisting the temptation to use the tactics of those we critique” (Blankenship, 2019, p. 17). She identified four primary characteristics, which include “[y]ielding to an Other” through listening to their stories, considering another person’s motives, self-reflection and critique, and “addressing difference, power, and embodiment” (Blankenship, 2019, p. 20).

The latter point is an acknowledgement of how terms like empathy and civility have too often been used to silence minority voices and perspectives. Rhetorical empathy does not ignore imbalances of power, and the element of self-reflection is meant to aid in examining how one might be implicitly reinforcing oppressive structures of power. However, Blankenship (2019) believed that “approaching others in rhetorical engagements must begin with changing ourselves, with listening, with trying to understand the personal and political factors that influence the
person who makes our blood boil” (p. 20). Listening is crucial to empathy, and rather than that call being a potential tool for oppression—telling *Others* to listen and, by doing so, silencing them—it is reflexive and begins with oneself.

Although rhetorical empathy is a helpful framework in itself, it’s particularly insightful for researchers who have a positionality like mine. As a white, heterosexual, cisgender Christian man, I am particularly susceptible to structural biases and prejudices on race, gender, religion, and sexuality.\(^5\) Because rhetorical empathy *requires* reflexivity on the part of the practitioner, “[a]dopting this stance is vital for people with privilege” (Blankenship, 2019, p. 11). Rhetorical empathy means that I must embrace vulnerability, consider my own potential blind spots in regards, and attempt to see my work from the perspective of those who have been historically disenfranchised. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, this reflexive approach required me to seek out alternative perspectives and approach my data carefully.

Taken together, the work of Carillo (2018) and Blankenship (2019) have several ramifications for empathic research. First, as discussed above, empathic research requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher; reflexive methods, such as bracketing interviews, are essential to that work. Second, empathic research must consider affective modes of communication and be attentive to the presence of “emotionally inflected ways of knowing” in the research (Carillo, 2018, p. 44). In this case, empathic research means that political belief must not be understood on a purely intellectual or cognitive level, but as part of a wider network of affective and embodied experiences that may come with strong emotions or influential narrative frames. In addition, empathic research must involve “yielding to an Other” through

\(^5\)For example: In my survey protocol, I never thought to ask for racial or ethnic information from my participants (despite revising the survey three times over the course of several months). It became a serious limitation in my data. I doubt one of my colleagues of color would have neglected to ask the question—and race and ethnicity, unsurprisingly, ended up being a theme in the follow-up interviews.
careful listening (Blankenship, 2019). In the case of empirical participant-based research, this principle means careful attentiveness to my participants’ motives, experiences, and ways of being in the world. These three implications form the methodological foundation of the present study.

*Empathy and Democratic Deliberation*

Rhetorical empathy, in addressing the polarization of our civil discourse, requires us to reject problematic forms of argumentation. It is understandable, then, that scholars like Patrick Sullivan (2014) prefer to forego thesis-based argument entirely in favor of reflective writing, which is a reflection of his empathic approach to composition (p. 94). Blankenship (2019) also critiqued thesis-based argument, particularly “as a vestige of Aristotelian epistemology” which necessarily “centers on changing an Other rather than listening and seeing the world through an Other’s eyes” (p. 107). The result of this Aristotelian emphasis, Blankenship (2019) wrote, is that writing pedagogy privileges “the presence of a thesis or argument and its clear defense” (p. 107). While these are important critiques, rhetorical empathy need not require that writing instructors dispense with argument altogether; rather, it means that instructors should “ask students to recognize the contextual and personally situated nature of all arguments and discourse,” to understand the perspective behind the argument (Blankenship, 2019, p. 118).

Such a recognition is found in the deliberative model of public discourse proposed by Patricia Roberts-Miller (2004), which encourages constructive conflict with an empathic perspective, an argument where one makes oneself “understood in the words others use” (p. 213, emphasis original). This model counteracts post-truth and fake news culture by reducing the “chances of the sort of consensus that results from discourse within an enclave” (Roberts-Miller,
2004, p. 186) and also pushes back against demagoguery with “good disagreements” (Roberts-Miller, 2017, pp. 123, 127).

It’s important to note that Roberts-Miller’s (2004) deliberative model is not necessarily the same thing as deliberative rhetoric, though both can be traced back to Aristotelian approaches. Aristotle (2007) viewed deliberative rhetoric as future-facing discourse that is aimed toward explicating “the advantageous and the harmful” for the polis through persuasion or dissuasion (p. 49). As Steven Katz (1992) wrote, “All deliberative rhetoric is concerned with decision and action” (p. 259). Katz (1992) famously went on to describe deliberative rhetoric as part of an “ethic of expediency” (an alternative translation of “advantageous”). He concluded, “In Aristotle’s treatment of deliberative rhetoric, then, expediency seems to become an ethical end in itself” (Katz, 1992, p. 261).6 In other words, Aristotelian deliberative rhetoric—in the context of modern-day politics—is primarily oriented toward advantageous policy (a rhetorical approach that Katz rightfully revealed as questionably ethical).

While the deliberative model of public discourse that Roberts-Miller (2004) proposes is certainly connected to deliberative rhetoric, it is substantially reframed. For one, Roberts-Miller draws primarily on political theory (such as the work of Iris Young and Jürgen Habermas) rather than rhetorical theory. In addition, while individual rhetors may make arguments toward what they view to be advantageous, the structure of the deliberative model is fundamentally oriented around “discursive conflict” between rhetors who are “reaching across [their] own differences” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, pp. 184, 183). If properly facilitated, the deliberative model “teaches

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6Katz (1992) went on to demonstrate how this “ethic of expediency” was used in the writing of Adolf Hitler, convincingly displaying the dark side of deliberative rhetoric. It’s worth noting, as contemporary rhetoricians did, that Katz may be misreading or exaggerating Aristotle on the ethics of deliberative discourse. “[O]ne should not persuade what is debased,” Aristotle (2007) noted in his opening to Rhetoric (p. 35), though he acknowledges that deliberative rhetors in practice are not always concerned with ethics (Aristotle, 2007, p. 49).
rhetors to think about their argument from different perspectives (rather than striving for a perspective-free stance)” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 183). In other words, rhetoric in the deliberative model consciously makes room for difference, prioritizes listening, and is aimed toward collectively discussing the right course of action for a given scenario. The structure of the deliberative model protects and prioritizes minority perspectives where Aristotelian deliberative rhetoric might not.

I have embarked on this tangential discussion for two reasons. First, while Roberts-Miller (2004) examined six different models of argument for the public sphere, I find the deliberative model the most persuasive. As a result, it’s important to foreground my own partiality as I examine my data and—as I will discuss in my methods section—use Roberts-Miller’s (2004) models as a heuristic for qualitative analysis. Second, the deliberative model is the form of argument that is most closely connected to the empathic approaches advocated by Carillo (2018) and Blankenship (2019). While Roberts-Miller doesn’t frame the deliberative model in terms of empathy, democratic deliberation nevertheless prioritizes listening and reaching out to the Other. In other words, the deliberative model is the form of argument that can short-circuit the rhetoric of demagoguery through Other-centered empathy (Roberts-Miller, 2017). As a result, I view the deliberative approach and the empathic approach as inextricably intertwined. Together, the empathic and the deliberative form the theoretical foundation for the present study. They also inform my overall goal: to find productive ways for teachers of writing to respond to the urgent exigencies of the “political turn.”

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7The other five models, which will be discussed in the methods section, are the liberal model, the technocratic model, the interest-based model, the communitarian model, and the agonistic model. Roberts-Miller (2004) argued that the liberal model, which is closely aligned with the “liberal education” tradition, was the most dominant in composition pedagogy.
Conclusion: Research Questions and Structure of the Thesis

Based on the above literature review, this study will fill several significant gaps in composition scholarship. First, it seeks to study student perspectives on political content in the classroom, which has, until now, been limited to anecdotal evidence in larger, primarily theoretical conversations on writing pedagogy. This data will not only inform current pedagogical practice but will also seek to fulfill the ethical obligation that writing researchers have to represent their students fairly (Johnson, 2019). Second, this study will provide descriptive data, similar to the GDDP, that provides insight into the current political practices of composition instructors and how their students perceive those practices. Finally, this study will conduct new empirical research into this highly theorized but under-researched topic and will also suggest new directions for research.

The discussion above led to the following research questions for the current study. Given the dearth of empirical research on this topic, descriptive, exploratory research is needed to define the boundaries of this area of study and what factors might influence the perspectives of students and instructors in composition courses. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- In what ways do political topics come up in first-year composition classes, and how?
- If professors bring up political topics in any form, why do they do so? If not, why do they avoid it?
- How do students perceive what happens in class politically, especially when the professor or their classmates introduce political discussions, issues, or topics into
the classroom? Conversely, how do instructors perceive it when their students introduce political discussions, issues, or topics into the classroom?

- What are the differences, if any, between the perceptions of students and instructors on this topic?
- Given the answers to the above questions, in what ways can political topics be addressed in FYC in a constructive and empathic fashion?

In order to investigate these research questions, I have structured this thesis in five chapters. Based on the theoretical framework I have just described here in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 details my mixed-methods methodology, which sought descriptive, statistical survey data and followed up with semi-structured interviews of both students and instructors in Fall 2020. I also survey my coding scheme, which was in part built on Roberts-Miller’s (2004) six models of discourse, plus her later conception of demagoguery (Roberts-Miller, 2017).

In Chapter 3, I begin to describe the results of my study, focusing on my descriptive research questions and providing an overview of the data: when, how, and why politics came up in FYC courses and how participants perceived themselves and other people as political actors in those courses. By combining statistical data with qualitative trends, I provide a comprehensive picture of my participants’ views and explore their differences.

In Chapter 4, which seeks to dig beneath the surface of the descriptive trends and understand the underlying assumptions that my participants have about public discourse and FYC. I lean heavily on Roberts-Miller (2004) and demonstrate that, in their composition courses, my participants largely based their ideas on the liberal model of discourse and (surprisingly) the deliberative model of discourse, though other models occur as well. I close
the chapter by beginning to discuss the implications of these discourse models, specifically by examining how relying on the liberal model led to ideological inconsistency on the part of two instructors.

I conclude this study in Chapter 5, which discusses the implications of this research at length and begins to chart paths forward for ethically integrating politics in FYC. I do so by examining my own positionality as a researcher before providing suggestions on instructor positionality, curricular change, and directions for future research. I end in the hope that others will take up this work: to innovate composition pedagogy for the sake of healing our broken civil discourse.
Chapter 2: An Empathic Methodology

Given the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, this study both seeks to describe what is happening politically in first-year composition (FYC) courses and understand the perspectives of students and instructors on this topic. Since rhetorical empathy is the cornerstone of my approach, I sought to listen to and understand the perspectives of the primary stakeholders in composition courses: instructors and their students. In this way, I have tried to practice “yielding to an Other” by listening to the stories my participants share (Blankenship, 2019, p. 20). Because empathic research calls instructors of writing to try to understand other perspectives, listening to students in particular is one of the basic goals of this project. Because students can sometimes be “Othered” in composition scholarship (see, for instance, the checkered history of religious rhetorics, summarized by Vander Lei, 2014; Marzluf, 2011), researchers have a responsibility to seek out the perspectives of the students affected by pedagogical practices and represent them carefully (Johnson, 2019).

Before I describe my methods, participants, and strategies in detail, a clarification of terms is in order. In this study, I have specifically defined politics in what I have described above as “explicit” politics. “Explicit” politics may be defined as topics, issues, and discussions that revolve around what a country, state, area, or city should do or be, primarily on a governmental level. These political issues may be social in nature, such as LGBTQ+ rights, racism, and sexism; they may also be regulatory issues (for example, regulatory political topics might include the minimum wage, gun control, or drug offenses); they might address fiscal issues, such as

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8This listening practice extends to instructor perspectives as well, though they are not often mentioned in composition scholarship in terms of ethical representation. In my study, I was conscious that I might not share approaches, beliefs, or pedagogical strategies with the instructors that I interviewed; “yielding to an Other” was a practice that was crucial to representing them ethically as well.
local, state, or national budgets, the national debt, or questions of public salary; or they may deal
with the words and actions of political figures. While this list is not exhaustive, it demonstrates
that politics, as used in this study, is focused in definition but topically broad.

Some political issues, especially social ones, are ideological icebergs, which manifest
themselves on a governmental level and can be addressed at a governmental level but cut deep to
the core of a society’s values. As mentioned in the literature review above, many scholars
recognize the teaching of composition as inherently political (Trimbur et al., 1993; McLaren,
2009; Muriello et al., 2012). This study is not meant to argue against the essentially political
nature of the classroom. However, defined as such, political ideologies are difficult to
consistently identify in a classroom context, and many students in the classroom may not
recognize them as political per se. Thus, this study follows Murriello et al. (2012) in separating
politics—as an expression of power—from the political, which deals primarily with rhetoric and
actions in the public sphere. In other words, this project deals with the proverbial tip of the
iceberg.

In my study, I utilized a mixed-methods approach, which allowed me to seek (limited)
generalizations about my topic while also collecting rich qualitative data to contextualize and
complicate my numerical data. Specifically, I collected quantitative data in the form of Likert
scale survey questions from a group of students and instructors \((n = 38)\), and then followed up on
the survey data with individual interviews of a smaller number of students and instructors \((n =
13)\). The interview participants were randomly selected from a list of students and instructors
who had agreed to continue participating.

In what follows, I describe my method in five parts. First, I summarize my institutional
context and examine how it may have impacted my study. Second, I describe how I constructed
my survey and interview protocol and briefly summarize the protocol. Third, I summarize my participants’ demographics for both the surveys and the follow-up interviews. Fourth, I explain and define how I analyzed my data and explore the coding scheme that I used for my qualitative analysis. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the limitations of this project.

**Institutional Context**

This study was conducted at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, an R1 land-grant university and flagship of the University of Tennessee system. About 30,000 students attend the school, according to the Office of Institutional Research and Development’s (n.d.) Quick Facts page. That number includes approximately 5,500 first-year students who enrolled Fall 2020 (Office of Institutional Research and Development, n.d.). Undergraduates are primarily in-state students—78% overall—and the university is a predominantly white institution (PWI), with students of color comprising less than 20% of the student population (Office of Institutional Research and Development, n.d.).

The Writing Program at the University of Tennessee is a transfer-based curriculum and a recipient of the 2012 CCCC Certificate of Excellence (University of Tennessee Knoxville News, 2012). The average student at the university is required to take a two-course sequence: English 101 and English 102. While both are positioned in the tradition of rhetorical education, English 101 primarily teaches rhetorical concepts, such as rhetorical analysis, stasis theory, and argument, while English 102 focuses on academic research, aiming to facilitate transfer through inquiry-based writing (see Fishman & Reiff, 2008). Both sequences, as Fishman and Reiff (2008) note, are based in research on “teaching for transfer” and rely on transfer-based

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9See Appendix A and Appendix B for full-length copies of the survey and interview protocol.
frameworks from scholars like Anne Beaufort (2007). Graduate instruction in composition pedagogy is required for master’s students in English and is strongly advised for PhD students without teaching experience; new instructors are required to attend teaching workshops to learn the specifics of the curriculum.

As I will discuss below, the majority of students and all of the instructors were enrolled in or teaching English 101. Of the two course sequences, English 101 lends itself the most to rhetorical inquiry and political topics. Some common topics, such as social media, healthcare, and “fake news,” are relatively political in nature; others, such as metacognition, are less expressly political. As the results of my study indicate, because English 101 involves teaching argument, even ostensibly apolitical course topics can be taken in political directions by students. As such, English 101 courses were an ideal site for research on politics in FYC during a presidential election season—though, as I will discuss in the next chapter, those courses were substantially impacted by their modality and perhaps the timing of the study.

Survey Protocol

For this study, I constructed two survey instruments: one for students, and one for instructors. The survey protocol was meant to directly answer the descriptive research questions guiding my study, seeking information about how “politicized” students and instructors perceive their class(es) to be and what factors influence those perceptions. Like other descriptive studies on democratic engagement in education (Carr, 2014; Zyngier, 2014), my protocol relied primarily on Likert-scale questions. Generally, the questions were ordered from least sensitive to most sensitive, as advocated by MacNealy (1999), and from simple and descriptive to complex.
Not counting questions involving informed consent and eligibility, the student survey contained 28 questions (including sub-questions) and the instructor survey contained 31 questions (including sub-questions). The student survey asked seven categorical questions with two open-answer questions; the remaining 20 questions were on a five-point Likert rating scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The instructor survey was similarly constructed, though it had eight categorical questions and three open-answer questions; the remaining 20 questions were also Likert scale. The surveys collected categorical data about the participant’s gender, FYC course, course theme, and the reason(s) why politics comes up in class. The instructor survey also included a question about institutional standing (i.e. tenure-line, nontenure-line, and GTA).

While the categorical questions mostly related to background information, the Likert-scale questions primarily examined the perceptions of the participants: perceptions of the course, perceptions of one’s own political positionality, and perceptions of politics in FYC courses in general. The student questionnaire included questions about the students’ perceptions of their classmates and their professor; the instructor survey asked about the instructors’ perceptions of their students. Through each of these questionnaires, I sought to obtain information that would tell me where, from whom, and how politics came up in FYC and what factors influenced those perceptions.

Once the survey protocol was complete, I used QuestionPro to create a secure online questionnaire. To seek valid data for comparing students and instructors, I sent both surveys to instructors first; if an instructor opted to participate and completed the survey, they would then forward the student survey to their class(es), using a template email that I provided. Ultimately,
14 instructors and 24 students responded, for a total of 38 participants (see “Participants” below for more information).

**Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was semi-structured and asked about the experiences of the participant in FYC while also following up on their survey responses. I chose a semi-structured protocol for its flexibility; it gave me the structure to compare themes across multiple interviews while also allowing me to follow up on striking statements, key terms, or meaningful experiences from my participants. In my interview technique, I generally drew on the insights of Seidman (2019), which include prioritizing listening, asking participants to reconstruct their experiences, and requesting that the participants tell me a story about the topic under discussion. One important aspect of Seidman’s approach, which is echoed elsewhere in the literature review above, is the idea of interviewing as a relationship. Because politics has the potential to be an emotionally charged and even distressing topic of discussion, foregrounding the interviews as relational was crucial.

Before each interview, I reviewed the survey responses of each individual and marked particularly striking patterns or answers that might benefit from clarification or elaboration. I began each interview by asking the participant to define politics for me; after discussing their survey answers, I asked the participants macro-level questions about the role of politics in FYC and what positive or negative experiences they might have had with political discussions or interactions in FYC. In doing so, I hoped to enrich and nuance my survey-based answers to my descriptive research questions. In addition, I wanted to seek out the “why” behind instructor decisions and student reactions.
Participants

As previously mentioned, the study had a total of 38 participants, with 14 instructors and 24 students participating. In addition, 6 students and 7 instructors participated in follow-up interviews that ranged from 15 minutes long to an hour. The background and demographics of the participants are described below.

Instructors

Fourteen instructors chose to participate in my survey questionnaire. All of the instructors were teaching English 101 at the time. Twelve of the participants identified as female; the other two identified as male. Racial and ethnic data were not collected. In follow-up interviews, one instructor identified as a gay woman, and one instructor identified as white, straight, and cisgender; no other demographic information relating to racial, ethnic, or sexual identity was offered by the instructors in their interviews. The participants in the survey were evenly split between graduate teaching associates and nontenure-line faculty, with seven participants each. The majority of the participants were teaching online asynchronously, and 50% were using the same course theme (metacognition). Only two were teaching hybrid or in-person. Thirteen out of the 14 instructors identified as at least somewhat politically liberal; the remaining instructor somewhat agreed to the statement, “I consider myself politically conservative.”

Among the participants in follow-up interviews were four graduate teaching associates (GTAs), both MA and PhD students: Amos, Donna, Mandy, and Amy.\textsuperscript{10} In addition, I

\textsuperscript{10}The names used in this study are pseudonymous. Some pseudonyms were selected by the participants themselves, and the rest were assigned after each interview was completed.
interviewed three nontenure-line faculty: CJ, Josiah, and Deborah. Five of the instructors identified as female, and two identified as male. Five of the instructors were teaching entirely online; one instructor taught a hybrid course, and another taught an entirely face-to-face class. All seven instructors identified as at least somewhat politically liberal, although their definitions of the term ranged from libertarian to progressive to socialist.

**Students**

A total of 24 students completed the survey, though not all of them answered every question. Approximately 63% of the student participants identified as female, and the remainder (37%) identified as male, which roughly corresponds with the Fall 2020 entering class, though women are slightly overrepresented. As with the instructor surveys, racial and ethnic data were not collected. In follow-up interviews, one student identified himself as an international student from the Caribbean, and two more identified themselves as being the children of immigrants from Asia. No other demographic information related to racial, ethnic, or sexual identity was offered by the students interviewed. There was a major contingent of English 102 students in the survey results (34% of the total). The majority of students were taking an asynchronous online course (73%), with 41% being in a metacognition-themed English 101 course (10 out of the 15 students in English 101). None of the participants were in a hybrid or in-person class.

The political demographics of the student participants were more mixed than those of the instructors. Two-thirds of students identified as at least somewhat liberal (about 66%), including eight students (33%) who strongly agreed to the statement, “I consider myself politically liberal.”

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11According to the university factbook (Office of Institutional Research and Development, n.d.), approximately 57% of entering freshmen identified as female (43% as male).
On the flip side, 8% of students strongly agreed to the statement, “I consider myself politically conservative,” and a further 30% agreed or somewhat agreed.\footnote{The disparity between the two questions can be explained by one student who identified as libertarian in an open-answer response, and thus identified as neither conservative nor liberal.}

Six students participated in follow-up interviews, evenly split between male and female students: Abby, Ember, Josh, Kate, Leo, and Matt. While none of them were in a hybrid or in-person course, they were split between asynchronous courses and courses that were a combination of synchronous and asynchronous elements, with three students each. All of the students considered themselves politically liberal, and their answers to my follow-up questions regarding their political beliefs ranged from centrist to progressive.

**Data Analysis: Descriptive and Magnitude Coding**

After all of the surveys were collected and the interviews were completed, I transcribed each interview manually and used a loosely descriptive coding method (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102-105) to identify the primary topics addressed across all 13 interviews. Given that descriptive coding tells the researcher what’s in the data, not what the data means, I then designed a coding scheme to better answer my research questions. The codebook I developed after transcribing my interviews has three main components: descriptive codes, magnitude codes, and hypothesis codes.\footnote{I am grateful to Jeff Ringer for suggesting this structure to me.}

First, I maintained some descriptive codes in order to better answer my descriptive research questions. Unlike my original descriptive codes, which were numbered in the dozens, I narrowed my descriptive codes down to four primary perceptions: Perception of Class, which primarily dealt with politics in FYC course content; Perception of Instructor, for students who specifically commented on their FYC instructor as a political actor; Perception of
Students/Classmates, which addresses students as political actors in FYC; and Perception of Self, which refers to student and instructor self-perceptions as political actors in FYC. After coding through the data once, I revised the codebook to split up Perception of Class into two codes: Perception of Class and Perception of Class (Hypothetical), which refers to participants speculating about the role of politics in a composition course.

The values of these categories were coded with magnitude coding (Saldaña, 2016, 86-91). Four magnitude codes—positive, negative, mixed, and neutral—were combined with two categories (political and apolitical) for a total of eight magnitude codes. Each time a descriptive code occurred in a transcript, then, a magnitude code was applied to measure whether that perception was political or apolitical and whether it was positive, negative, mixed, or neutral. Placing the magnitude and descriptive codes in matrices allowed me to track whether certain perceptions correlated (whether, for example, “Perception of Class” and “Political-Negative” overlapped frequently).

Finally, I also created seven hypothesis codes, which emerged from Patricia Roberts-Miller’s (2004, 2017) work but were revised and reworked whenever the qualitative data required new flexibility or emerging definitions. Thus, any given codable unit in an interview transcript could have up to three codes applied: a descriptive code, a magnitude code, and a hypothesis code. Because the hypothesis codes were particularly complex, I will devote an entire section to describing those codes below.

Data Analysis: Hypothesis Coding

My hypothesis codes were developed from six models of public discourse proposed by Patricia Roberts-Miller (2004), with the addition of a seventh category outlined by Roberts-Miller in
Demagoguery and Democracy (2017). The seven models are: the liberal model, the technocratic model, the interest-based model, the communitarian model, the agonistic model, the deliberative model, and demagoguery. The purpose of these models is for my project—as it was for Roberts-Miller in hers—to see what these models of discourse reveal about participants’ political assumptions, particularly their assumptions about what discourse should look like and how arguments should be conducted in the public sphere. These assumptions are fundamental to the teaching of composition, particularly if composition is seen as a rhetorical education and/or as a way to teach argument. As Roberts-Miller (2004) wrote, “Much of our disagreement about pedagogical practices is disagreement about what it means (or should mean) to participate in a democratic public sphere” (p. 4). As such, these models are a helpful framework for defining the more fundamental disagreements that may exist between instructors and between instructors and students.

It’s important to note that this taxonomy is not meant to be definitive or settle the discussion once and for all; Roberts-Miller (2004) acknowledged that her own book “makes a monolith of each models discussed, obscures important distinctions, ignores various traditions, and implies a necessary connection between theory and practice” (p. 222). “The last thing I want,” she wrote, “is for my very ad hoc definitions to be reified” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 222). Rather, Roberts-Miller meant to spark a conversation, to provide critical frameworks with which to examine the political foundations of composition practices. It is in this spirit of critical inquiry that I use her formulation of these models of discourse. Indeed, though Roberts-Miller’s definitions remain at the core of each of the models, the specific iterations that I describe evolved as a result of the coding process, making my framework more of a heuristic than static categories. Rather than using them as an inert framework, I sought to develop the seven models
iteratively, allowing them to inform my data and allowing my data to challenge and refine my models. Not only does this process make the framework more valid for qualitative inquiry, but it’s also a way I sought to “listen” to my participants and allow my results to emerge organically from their experiences, rather than deductively from my preexisting assumptions. Below, I describe each code and outline how it was defined for my analysis.

**The Liberal Model**

Roberts-Miller (2004) summarized the liberal model in this way: “The liberal model theorizes a public space where people rely on rational discourse in order to determine what is in the universal best interest” (p. 4). The liberal model relies on persuading a “hypothetically neutral or mildly skeptical audience,” rather than persuading the opposition (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 7). It is identified primarily with current-traditional pedagogy, “grounded in enlightenment values of civility, rationality, neutrality, and autonomy” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 18). Difference must be “transcended,” in favor of profound individuality and the ability to think critically and objectively (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 35). Roberts-Miller (2004) noted that the common definition of liberal in political terms is “only grammatically related” to the liberal model of discourse (p. 21), which simply emphasizes tolerance, personal and religious freedom, fair elections, and so on—not a certain political party or standpoint. In terms of human identity, the liberal model relies on autonomy “as a goal for how people should try to think,” and the hallmark of autonomy is rationality (Roberts-Miller, 2004, pp. 67, 71).

This definition of the liberal model had several implications for coding. First, neutrality is a keyword for the liberal model, particularly neutrality that assumes that that which is traditional is neutral (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 28). In addition, the liberal model in education often holds
the goal of forming a student “who transcends the particularities of his/her identity and experiences in order to evaluate policy proposals from a neutral perspective” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 92). This manifests in two ways: first, a “liberal education” that emphasizes conformity to traditional ways of knowing, transcending difference, and the universality of truth, which is found in acculturation (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 92). Second, and more commonly, the liberal model’s ideal of the autonomous, educated self can be seen in instructors taking on the role of referee, making no judgements about the good (i.e. being neutral on most topics) but still concerned with the right (issues of justice), intervening only when “one student interferes with the autonomy of another student” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 95).

Thus, when coding for the liberal model, I sought evidence of the following characteristics: neutrality on the part of the instructor; “banking” pedagogical methods (i.e. depositing a certain rational disposition; “liberal education”); writing argument as a thesis-driven list of reasons; and student autonomy as an ultimate goal, particularly with regard to their own conception of “the good.” Of course, some statements may seem to represent the liberal model on the surface but may be more nuanced or complicated. Accordingly, if the participant emphasized neutrality or objectivity with caveats (such as the impossibility of being unbiased), if student autonomy meant something other than the ability to transcend one’s own perspective, and if rationality included affective modes of argument as valid, then I did not code for the liberal model.14

14 Much of this paragraph, and the parallel paragraphs in each section below, is adapted from my codebook’s inclusion and exclusion criteria. The full codebook can be found in Appendix C.
The Technocratic Model

According to Roberts-Miller (2004), the technocratic model “assumes that policy questions are fundamentally technical questions and are best solved either through letting technical experts make the decisions or through using the public sphere for the dissemination of technical information” (p. 4). It may be extreme, where “experts make the decisions,” or it may be less extreme, “in which the general public makes the decisions after listening to information from the experts” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 37). Either way, it is “policies without politics” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 37).

In coding, I looked for the assumption that the role of first-year composition is “technical training” in “giving students technical competence” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 38). Such an assumption conflates public discourse and technical discourse as being the same thing (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 39). I did not apply this code if the statement implied that the “technical skills” of composition are apolitical training in public discourse, or if it seemed to view information from experts as one option among many for seeing a political issue (rather than the only perspective that matters).

The Interest-Based Model

The interest-based model is fundamentally based in “self-interest in regard to public policies” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 5). Any political conflict is settled, not through argument, but through “bargaining, relying on market forces, and/or advertising” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 5). The interest-based model often manifests most clearly when one assumes that “people’s political stances are the result of their socioeconomic status and interest” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 6) and is one way to abandon the liberal ideal of neutrality (p. 98). It has strong connections to the
adversary model of democracy, which assumes that democracy is simply a struggle of power where winning is the goal, and principles only surface after power is seized (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 100; though see the discussion of demagoguery below). In this model, democracy is simply balancing competing needs and interests, and “identification [is] the main rhetorical strategy” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 111). Ultimately, it results in “expressivist argumentation,” where the goal of argument is simply “to express one’s opinions in ways that seem authentic representations of one’s self” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 117).

When coding for the interest-based model, I looked for theories that see the “major responsibility of the rhetor as making his/her policies the most attractive” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 99), particularly statements that seem to reduce public rhetoric to identification with the audience or beliefs about policy to one’s socioeconomic or cultural positionality. I also looked for expressive argument (though see demagoguery below for a discussion of how expressive argument functions in that context). I did not apply this code if a statement implied audience identification is one of several possible strategies, or if audience identification was expressly factional.

The Agonistic Model
Much more “conflictual than communitarian or liberal discourse but not quite the verbal free-for-all of interest-based discourse” (p. 5), the agonistic model—as Roberts-Miller (2004) explored through the work of Hannah Arendt—emphasizes that a “confrontational method” of civil discourse is “the best way to prevent tyranny and totalitarianism, to ensure that injustices are discussed” (pp. 121, 122). It is not “expressivist, positivist, or social constructivist” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 125); rather, it searches for truth in both “individuality and commonality” (p.
126) by rhetors agreeing to disagree—in other words, agreeing to “engage one another” in continuing disagreement (p. 127). In this way, agonism (especially polemical agonism) is “how one tests the validity of one’s thought,” through sustained disagreements (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 131).

To code for agonism, I searched for statements that emphasized the presence of (if not the value of) conflict, confrontation, or adversarial argument about a political topic, or statements that indicated that conflict or argument was a tool for clarifying positions. I also looked for places where my participants saw conflict as productive in itself, rather than as a tool to move beyond one's enclave or reach out across difference.

During the process of coding, this definition was refined substantially as a result of two instructor interviews. Part of the problem was that Roberts-Miller did not make a clear distinction between agonism and the deliberative model (which is a difference-oriented, agonistic form of the liberal model). Thus, after coding the two instructor interviews once, I returned to my codebook and rewrote the deliberative and agonistic sections. Based on the instructor interviews and on Roberts-Miller’s (2004) definition of the deliberative model, I made one primary distinction between deliberation and agonism. I coded for agonism whenever conflict was seen as helpful in itself and there was no clear movement toward reaching out across differences; I coded for the deliberative model whenever conflict was present, but the participant emphasized the need to reach beyond one’s subjectivity and frame one’s argument in the terms that the other person would use (cf. Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 213). The difference between listening-oriented agonism and conflictual deliberation, in other words, is direction—are the participants reaching out across their differences (deliberative) or not (agonistic)? This question became crucial for navigating the more complex sections of my data.
The Communitarian Model

Sometimes referred to as a “neo-Aristotelian” model, the communitarian model critiques liberalism for its “transhistorical foundations for democratic practice,” preferring social constructivism, and rejects the “privileging of the autonomous individual,” because such priority of autonomy makes liberalism functionally based in self-interest (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 5). The communitarian model does not pretend to be neutral, as the liberal model does, or devolve into base self-interest, as the interest-based model does (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 143). Instead, it is aimed toward the common good and believes that political communities should not be neutral in that regard; political communities should promote “the spirit of community engagement” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 143). According to Roberts-Miller (2004), legislation in the communitarian model “always does and always must have a moral basis, and that a society must be grounded in some kind of moral consensus” (p. 145). This moral consensus is one of the roles of education, “enculturation into democratic values, like altruism, civic-mindedness, mutual respect” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 146).

In composition, the idea of discourse communities can be closely identified with the communitarian model, since in discourse community theory, writing courses “become rites of passage into communities whose very nature students lack the ability to critique or change,” where membership “means conforming” to the standards of the community (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 156). While both the liberal model and the communitarian model see education as the inculcation of democratic values, if one sees the origin of democratic values “in particular sociohistorical trends” and aimed toward the common good, that is an indication of a communitarian position (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 180).
In coding for the communitarian model, then, I looked for consensus-building, civility, acculturation toward democratic values and the common good, normative discourse communities, and communally oriented social constructivism. I did not code for the communitarian model if the inculcation of character is aimed toward individual autonomy rather than the common good, or if democratic values are universal values rather than socially constructed norms; both of these are characteristic of the liberal model.

**The Deliberative Model**

The deliberative model is somewhat similar to liberalism, in that it relies on “who makes the best argument, not who has the most power,” but is more attentive to the broader nuances of “argument” and includes affective modes (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 5). It also acknowledges, unlike the liberal model, that “we cannot free ourselves of our own perspective” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 182); in the deliberative model, rhetors are “expected to move beyond one’s own subjectivity, but not to free oneself of it entirely” (p. 183).

As an Other-oriented model of discourse, the deliberative model “requires that people try to present their own arguments in ways that people who are very different might understand” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 197). It is ultimately agonistic, because it prioritizes difference as the key to successful deliberation; one’s own perspective is ultimately tested and refined by encountering different perspectives. Crucially, it requires contextualizing one’s perspective to the Other: “In deliberative democracy, one must make one’s argument understood in the words *others* use” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 213, emphasis original).

Roberts-Miller noted that in the liberal model (as well as the technocratic), the personal is “nondeliberative,” where personal experience is fundamentally “nonargumentative” and is thus
not valid for discussion. At the very least, that one “cannot critique or disagree with someone’s personal experience”—it is merely expressive (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 210). In contrast, the deliberative model holds space for personal experience, not just as an expressive argument, but as “something with which people might disagree” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 211). In other words, experience is neither unique nor universal, but is itself a kind of evidence that can be persuasive or contested.

As noted previously, the primary difference between the deliberative model and the agonistic model is the deliberative model’s attention to reaching out across difference. Accordingly, when coding for the deliberative model, I sought instances where difference was a key for refining public discussion, while still requiring a culture of listening aimed toward communication. I also looked for partition-based explorative argument (rather than thesis-based); student discourse as peer discourse; fairness as the role of the teacher (not neutrality); and affective argument and experience as valid for discussion.

The process of coding my interviews led to a key distinction in my deliberative coding. Each of these models exist on a flexible matrix, where one axis is expressive to deliberative, and the other axis is irenic (i.e. conflict-avoidant) to agonistic. While this spectrum can be used to define each model, it was a particularly useful heuristic for developing the deliberative model. Specifically, two instructors both appeared to draw on the deliberative model, but they did so in very different ways. One instructor emphasized mediation and finding common ground; another emphasized clarifying conflict and class discussion. To account for this, I distinguished between
the *irenic* deliberative, which is mediative and seeks temporary points of agreement, and the *agonistic* deliberative, which is highly conflictual.\(^{15}\)

**Demagoguery**

Demagoguery is not a model of discourse *per se*, but a degradation of the interest-based model of discourse.\(^{16}\) Roberts-Miller examines the concept of demagoguery at length in her book *Demagoguery and Democracy* (2017). At its core, Roberts-Miller (2017) wrote, demagoguery “is about identity. It says that complicated policy issues can be reduced to a binary of us (good) versus them (bad)” (p. 8). In demagoguery, politics becomes a “zero-sum game—the more they succeed, the more we lose” (Roberts-Miller, 2017, p. 13). Public disagreement in demagoguery can be grouped into three categories: “group identity…need…and what level of punishment to enact against the out-group” (Roberts-Miller, 2017, p. 33). In other words, who is in and who is out? How can we blame “them” for our problems? How should we punish those on the outside?

Demagoguery relies on a variety of tactics, including increasing polarization, charismatic authority, the perceived simplicity of truth (which is easy to understand and anyone who doesn’t is dumb or evil), discrediting any opposition argument as “biased” and thus not worth engaging, and “universalized nostalgia,” the misleading notion that a particular tradition is just how things are done (Roberts-Miller, 2017, pp. 34-35, 59-61, 39, 47). It’s also notable that Roberts-Miller (2017) connected demagoguery with her earlier matrix of public discourse, arguing that demagoguery “thrives in an expressive public sphere” that can be either irenic (silencing dissent)

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\(^{15}\)I am grateful to the JAHWC research group for this insight, which occurred during a group coding session; I coded a section as agonistic and my colleagues coded it as primarily deliberative.

\(^{16}\)I’ll note here that this is a conclusion I’ve drawn myself; as far as I know, Roberts-Miller has not expressly connected her scholarship on demagoguery to her earlier work on models of public discourse.
or agonistic (shouting down dissent)—though she used the terms “niceness” and “antagonistic” in the text (p. 85).

When coding, I looked both for evidence of demagogic rhetoric (such as binaries of “us” vs. “them”) and evidence of a wider culture of demagoguery (toxic patterns of argument that may not explicitly appeal to identity). Specifically, I searched for content that referred to highly polarized communities or rhetoric; the perceived simplicity of truth (i.e. black-and-white thinking that adheres to political factionalism); constructions of “need” that blame an outside group for the problem; accusations of bias that allow an argument to be dismissed on the basis of identity; and aggressive rhetoric that sees political deliberation as a zero-sum game.

Limitations

This dataset, and thus the results and conclusions of my research, are limited in several ways: my student and instructor correspondence, sample size, context, and demographic representation. First, it seems there was a substantial mismatch between the students and instructors, despite my best efforts to design the study to allow for direct comparison. This mismatch occurred in both the surveys and in the interviews. For example, 9 students who completed the survey identified as students in English 102 (including one of my interviewees), but none of the instructors who completed the survey were currently teaching English 102, perhaps indicating that an instructor misunderstood the instructions or forgot to take the survey. There was also some mismatching in terms of modality. For instance, I interviewed (by chance) the only two instructors who were teaching hybrid or in-person classes, whereas all of the students interviewed (indeed, all of the students who completed the survey) were enrolled in online FYC courses. This disproportionate
representation makes my survey results of limited value in comparing the data between the two populations and drawing conclusions.\footnote{Outside of course modality, the sample for interviewees was fairly balanced. The interview participants are a nearly even split between students (6) and instructors (7), with both GTAs (4) and nontenure-line faculty (3), men (5) and women (8), with representation from students of color (at least 3), and with both synchronous/asynchronous modalities among students and instructors.}

The institutional context, while useful for studying rhetorical education as a specific site for research, also substantially limits my results. The pandemic meant that many instructors used an online course template to structure their courses; in the case of instructors like Amos, that meant that instructors who had previously encouraged political discussions steered away from them in order to maintain focus on the template topic. In addition, because English 101 is a predominantly rhetorical and transfer-based course, my results are not necessarily generalizable to writing about writing (WAW) courses, writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC), or pedagogies that focus on academic literacies rather than rhetorical knowledge.

In addition, the sample size for the survey data (38 total participants) means that only very limited conclusions can be drawn about wider trends. As I will discuss later, statistical tests and models may not yield statistically significant results from such as small sample, particularly if the responses are subsequently divided into smaller categories (such as students and instructors). While some conclusions can be drawn, any generalizable conclusions must be couched in the most tentative terms.

Finally, the demographic representation also limits the scope of my data in two different ways. As mentioned earlier, I did not collect data about race, ethnicity, or sexuality in either the surveys or the interviews, though it came up in both. The lack of questions on those topics was a significant oversight on my part and means that an important theme in the interviews—the role
of one’s racial, ethnic, and cultural background in political identity—cannot be more fully explored in this study.

In addition, although I did not reveal my own political beliefs, it’s likely that selection bias played a role in my student sample. Though roughly one third of the student participants in my survey identified as politically conservative, not a single conservative student was interviewed. Multiple conservative students agreed to continue participating, and although conservative students were contacted as part of a random sampling of potential interview participants, none responded to my requests. Since I identify as politically liberal, the “Other” in many of my political arguments are conservatives; because this study does not include any conservative voices (outside of short survey answers), it is perhaps the biggest limitation in the present study.¹⁸

¹⁸The interviews were conducted shortly after the November 2020 general election, which was likely a significant factor in participant self-selection.
Chapter 3: Politics in First-Year Composition: Initial Trends and Perceptions

This chapter seeks to outline the initial results of my study by synthesizing statistical data and providing a bird’s-eye view of the qualitative trends. Specifically, I will answer my descriptive research questions by exploring how and when political topics emerge in FYC; how students and instructors perceive what happens in the class politically; and what differences there are between the perceptions of students and instructors.

To answer these questions, this chapter will have five primary sections. First, I will begin by exploring how “explicit” politics emerge in FYC contexts, including in asynchronous modules, on Zoom, and in face-to-face classrooms; this initial section will summarize the survey data on how, when, and how often politics comes up in FYC. Then, in the second section, I will evaluate potential factors that may influence the data discussed in the first section. In the third section, I will move beyond describing what’s happening politically in FYC into how participants perceive the class, as well as how they perceive themselves and others as political actors. Once I’ve discussed the quantitative and qualitative data on participant perceptions, I will then examine disparities between various groups in the data, primarily focusing on the differences between students and instructors. The chapter will then conclude with a summary of how students and instructors perceive the role of politics in composition (that is, looking beyond their current class to reflect on what’s possible in FYC), which will synthesize both the survey responses and the trends in the follow-up interviews.
Perceptions of “Explicit” Politics in First-Year Composition

By and large, despite the fact that this study took place during the 2020 election cycle, students and instructors had largely apolitical experiences in their composition courses. Approximately 38% of instructors surveyed at least somewhat agreed that politics came up often in their course, though few agreed moderately or strongly (15%).\(^{19}\) This trend was even more striking for students; only 13% of students at least somewhat agreed that politics came up often in their course. In addition, a substantial majority of students and instructors did not believe that their class topics were political, a trend that was nearly identical for students (60%) and instructors (64%).

Compared to the survey sample, the interview participants in politically charged FYC classes were somewhat overrepresented, but their responses still generally indicated that FYC courses were mixed-to-apolitical. Six of the 13 participants in follow-up interviews were in apolitical FYC courses, with three additional participants describing their experience of the course as sometimes political. Only two participants—both instructors—described their course as unequivocally political.

Very few participants brought up politics of their own volition in their FYC courses, including instructors. In answer to the statement, “I bring up politics often [in my class],” only two instructors (15% overall) at least somewhat agreed, with an identical number of students saying the same (8% overall). While the language of “often” could mask participants who might broach political topics infrequently, a large plurality (48%) of students strongly disagreed with that statement, and a majority of instructors (62%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. These

\(^{19}\)The statistics in this chapter have been rounded to the nearest whole number for ease of reading. As a result, some of the percentages may not add up exactly to 100.
responses, taken together, seem to indicate that a majority of the participants avoid political topics altogether.

When political topics did come up in these FYC courses, there were several reasons why, with some striking differences between students and instructors. About one third of students (29%) indicated that politics didn’t come up in their course at all. The remaining 71% identified one or more of the following reasons that politics came up in their course: the class theme, the class assignments, the instructor’s examples, or one’s classmates (see Figure 1). Among these categories, the most common was the class theme (35%), followed by the course assignments (26%), one’s classmates (22%), and the examples of the instructor (17%). In contrast, there was a clear plurality among the instructor responses (see Figure 2). Among the 79% of instructors who indicated that politics did come up in their courses, 35% of instructors identified their students as one of the reasons why. The other categories were tied, with 22% each.20

While the overall picture is still blurry—there appear to be multiple reasons why political topics may be broached in an FYC course, including course content, the students, and the instructor—the instructor survey data mentioned above matches a trend in the qualitative data. Several instructors who personally avoided politics in their teaching allowed their students to explore politically charged topics. One instructor, Josiah, described this as an “opt-in” situation, since students had the freedom to choose their topics: “Several students do opt in to discussing [political] themes…but many also don’t opt into it. So I see a wide array of engagement with overtly political things and stuff that's less overtly political.” This sentiment is echoed by other instructors and may indicate why instructors were more likely to say that political topics were brought up often in their courses.

20One student and one instructor also used an open-answer option to identify the election as a reason why politics would come up in class. These answers were not included in the statistical calculations.
Figure 1: Reasons Why Politics Came Up in FYC (Students)

Figure 2: Reasons Why Politics Came Up in FYC (Instructors)
Overall, then, the participants in my study—both students and instructors—had largely apolitical experiences in their FYC courses, and few participants intentionally brought up political topics in their class. While instructors were slightly more likely to see the class topic as political and to see political topics come up, this trend seems to be due to the fact that individual students sometimes chose to pursue political topics (even if the course topic was ostensibly apolitical). The other reasons behind these trends—and the factors that influenced these answers—will be explored below.

Factors in Political or Apolitical Composition Courses

There are three main factors that will be explored in this section, factors that relate directly to how, when, and for what reason political topics crop up in FYC courses. These three factors are course theme, modality, and one’s definition of politics (a primarily qualitative question addressed in the interviews). As I will demonstrate below, the results were illuminating, though ultimately inconclusive.

One of the assumptions explored in this study was that course theme has a significant influence on whether students and instructors perceived their course topic to be political. This hypothesis is supported by the data, though the picture is complex and limited by the sample size. As stated above, 36% of instructors and 40% of students saw their class topic as at least somewhat political. While this trend did change somewhat depending on one’s course theme, the data is too limited to draw definitive conclusions. The most common course theme—cited by 18 participants overall—was metacognition. Out of those participants, 33% overall (38% of instructors and 30% of students) saw the course theme as at least somewhat political, which is slightly lower than but still comparable to the overall average. This number is smaller for
students and instructors in a social media-themed course (20% overall) but with a much smaller sample size (n = 5). The more politically charged course topics were also more idiosyncratic; 44% of the students in a food-themed English 102 course identified the topic as at least somewhat political (n = 9), and 50% of those who identified their course theme as “Other” also saw the topic as politically charged (n = 6). Follow-up interviews with instructors who taught these “other” courses indicated that the courses were organized around themes like human behavior and information literacy.

In other words, according to the survey data, themes like metacognition and social media seemed to be less politically charged than themes like information literacy or food, but the small sample size for themes outside of metacognition limits the scope of these conclusions. For instance, a t-test comparing metacognition to the other themes (in response to the question “My class topic is political”) does not yield a statistically significant result (p = .36) and has a small effect size (r = 0.16). A t-test with the course theme and the question “Politics comes up often in my class” yields a more substantial result, with a lower p-value (p = .1) and a small-to-medium effect (r = 0.23). In both cases, metacognition courses were less politically charged in comparison to the aggregate of the other course themes.

All in all, course theme (particularly course themes that seemed inherently politically charged, like information literacy) seemed to influence whether a participant had a political experience in FYC but did not seem to substantially determine it. These results may indicate that the “opt-in” approach described by Josiah was common for other instructors, and that almost any flexible course theme could become “political” if a student choose to go that direction. For example, Josh—one of the students interviewed—was enrolled in a social media FYC course. When asked whether he saw the theme as political, Josh said that he saw the course theme as a
“base foundation from which we can write” and that he specifically chose to examine political misinformation in his paper—implying that other students might have chosen to go in different, more apolitical directions.

The second major factor this study examined was course modality. Because this study took place during the first full semester of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants could have five possible course modalities: asynchronous online, synchronous online, a combination of both, hybrid, and fully face-to-face. Of the participants who were teaching or taking fully asynchronous courses ($n = 24$), 17% at least somewhat agreed that politics came up often in their course, compared to 29% of participants in other modalities ($n = 14$). That being said, t-tests based on course modality (divided up into asynchronous vs. other) did not yield any statistically significant results or substantial effect sizes when compared to questions that asked about the political nature of their current class. The only notable difference was when participants were asked about their students or classmates bringing up politics often. Participants in asynchronous classes disagreed more strongly than participants in other modalities ($p = .24$, effect size $r = 0.22$, indicating a small-to-medium effect). This difference was largely influenced by instructors, since 29% agreed or somewhat agreed that their students brought up politics often, compared to just a single student (6% of the total) who somewhat agreed that their classmates brought up politics often. This difference is likely due to the fact that students in asynchronous classes interacted with their classmates rarely—a common theme in the qualitative data—and instructors teaching asynchronously interacted with individual students frequently through grading and conferencing. Overall, then, while it seemed that participants in asynchronous classes were a little less likely to have political interactions, the data is inconclusive.

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21Technically, hybrid could also be divided up into multiple subcategories. Only one participant—an instructor—taught or took a hybrid course; they had both synchronous and asynchronous online elements.
In contrast, in the qualitative data, modality seemed to have a more substantial effect on whether instructors and students engaged politically with one another or with others in the class. Multiple students I interviewed said that, because their class was asynchronous, they had little to no interaction with their classmates or professor, much less political interactions. Some implied that political topics might have emerged if their course were more interactive. While instructor responses were more mixed—they interacted with dozens of students at a time through grading and feedback, and thus had more opportunities for political interactions—one instructor said that their students never mentioned politics during asynchronous activities, but that those same students would bring up political topics in synchronous class sessions. While this statement alone doesn’t establish a correlation between asynchronous online coursework and apolitical FYC experiences, course modality did seem to have an effect to some degree.

The third and final factor examined here is the participant’s definition of politics. This factor was explored primarily through the qualitative data. Though politics was defined at the beginning of the survey, I opened each follow-up interview by asking the participant to define politics for me. Specifically, I asked them to name what “working definition” they had in mind while they were taking the survey. The results from my participants varied significantly. Most students and instructors understandably connected politics to the 2020 election or to the workings of government. Several instructors and students saw politics as social—not just in terms of social issues (that is, issues of social justice), but in terms of politics as a social act. There was also a significant trend of referring to politics in cultural terms and in terms of identity (i.e. race, ethnicity, and sexuality). Mandy, an instructor, defined politics in terms of identity and self-awareness; as a result, she saw metacognition as an inherently political course theme, because it dealt with questions of the self. One of the students interviewed, Leo, primarily saw
politics in cultural terms—perhaps unsurprisingly, since he was an international student. He frequently conflated cultural artifacts (such as food) with political discussion, which led him to say that his class was politically charged. While each participant’s definition of politics was not examined quantitatively in the survey data, in the qualitative data, it was substantially related to the participant’s perceptions of their FYC class.

Each of the three factors examined here seemed to have some degree of impact on the participants’ experiences in FYC. While course theme and modality appear to be loosely related to one’s political experiences—that is, some course themes are more politically charged than others, and non-asynchronous courses appear to open up the possibility of more political interactions—the stronger correlation seems to be with each individual’s definition of politics. This trend opens up a conversation on how a participant’s positionality and beliefs might influence their perception of politics in FYC. It is to this topic that I now turn, first to describe how participants perceived themselves and others as political actors, and then to compare the responses of students and instructors (as well as other discrete groups in the data).

**Participant Perceptions: Class, Self, and Others**

The previous section dealt with how, when, and for what reason political topics crop up in FYC courses. In other words, it described participants’ political experiences in FYC and examined what factors influenced the presence of politics in FYC courses. This section aims to broaden the conversation by moving from description to perception: how participants perceive the course itself politically, as well as how they perceive *others* and *themselves* as political actors with political beliefs. The summary below will draw on survey questions as well as the descriptive
and magnitude codes in the qualitative data. Because this study seeks to examine both student and instructor perspectives, each group will be discussed separately.

**Student Perceptions of the Course**

As mentioned above, only 40% of students agreed that their class topic was political (and most of those students only somewhat agreed to the statement). Only 13% of students somewhat agreed that politics came up often in their class. That being said, nearly two-thirds of students (64%) indicated that they were at least somewhat comfortable with political discussions in class (with 48% agreeing or strongly agreeing), and only 8% of students strongly disagreed (see Figure 3). An identical number (64%) agreed that politics makes their English class more interesting, though of that sample, the students who somewhat agreed (24%) were in the plurality.

Notably, the responses were even more positive when students were asked whether political references or discussions benefited the class or were constructive (72% at least somewhat agreed to both). There is a caveat here: 36% of students believed that politics distracted from the class. In addition, 8% of students indicated they had felt frustrated as a result of a political discussion in class, compared to 64% who said they had not. (An additional 28% said they weren’t sure if they had ever felt frustrated.) It’s notable that both of the students who had indicated frustration had also identified earlier as politically conservative; one student noted their dislike for government was not an opinion widely shared among their peers, and the other student expressed frustration with “blatant” liberal commentary.
**Student Responses to "I feel comfortable with political discussions in class."**

- Strongly Agree: 8%
- Agree: 12%
- Somewhat Agree: 16%
- Somewhat Disagree: 16%
- Disagree: 12%
- Strongly Disagree: 36%

*Figure 3: Student Comfort Level with Political Discussions*
Some of the nuances in these numbers get teased out in the qualitative data, which indicated that students generally didn’t mind political topics in the classroom but were wary of emotionally charged political rhetoric. While counting the number of codes can be a crude measurement of the trends in the data, it’s illustrative here. In a matrix that examines when descriptive codes and magnitude codes overlapped in the data (Table 1), “Perception of Class” occurred 12 times in conjunction with “Political-Positive” and 13 times with “Political-Neutral.” In contrast, “Political-Negative” and “Political-Mixed” were only coded alongside “Perception of the Class” three times in total. In all three cases, the negative or mixed codes were referring to a highly polarized kind of political argument (which was later coded for demagoguery).

In sum, though most students had fairly apolitical experiences, they were largely open to politics in their courses, as evidenced by the large majorities that thought political references or discussions were constructive or made class more interesting. The students who were later interviewed provided insight on the students who might have been more hesitant: they thought that talking about politics in FYC left open the possibility for polarized and emotionally charged arguments, and they favored a more regulated approach to political discussion. In Kate’s words, constructive discussion involved “giving a lot more direction” than simply asking for students’ thoughts on a political topic.

Instructor Perceptions of the Course

As discussed previously, 36% of instructors somewhat agreed that their class topic was political, and 38% somewhat agreed that politics came up often in their course(s). Instructors were also

22Political codes in the table are overrepresented in terms of sheer numbers and don’t necessarily reflect the political nature of these classes. In the interviews, I typically followed up on any political references, sometimes multiple times, thus inflating the number of codable data on that subject.
Table 1: Number of Intersections between Descriptive and Magnitude Codes (Students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Class</th>
<th>Apolitical Neutral</th>
<th>Apolitical Positive</th>
<th>Political Mixed</th>
<th>Political Negative</th>
<th>Political Neutral</th>
<th>Political Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Class (Hypothetical)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Perception of Classmates</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Perception of Instructor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Perception of Self</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
asked a series of questions about whether they were comfortable with discussing political discussions and whether political topics or discussions aided their teaching. 54% of instructors indicated that they were at least somewhat uncomfortable with discussing politics in class (with a mean of 3.5, indicating mixed or neutral results; see Figure 4). When asked about politics in the course in general, however, 82% of instructors believed that political references or discussions benefited the class to some degree and 91% thought that discussing politics in class was constructive. Some instructors believed that politics could be distracting; 27% somewhat agreed that political references or discussions distracted from the class material. In addition, 50% indicated that they have felt frustrated as a result of a political discussion or topic in their FYC class(es).

Though most instructors said that political references or discussions were beneficial or constructive, in follow-up interviews, instructors indicated that they generally limited the scope of politically charged topics or assignments. These instructors didn’t demonstrate enthusiasm for political topics so much as they did their functional use. In a matrix that combines the descriptive and magnitude codes (Table 2), the “Political-Positive” code appeared with “Perception of Class” 17 times, compared to 23 occurrences of “Political-Neutral,” indicating frequent (but primarily functional) use of political topics by some instructors. “Political-Mixed” and “Political-Negative” occurred a total of six times, usually in reference to the possibility for backfire, polarization, or distraction from the “class concepts” (broadly construed).

Two instructors didn’t limit political topics in the same way as the others. Mandy, who was teaching the metacognition theme, connected her theme to human identity, and so politics was an integral (if implicit) part of that course. “Students sort of have to have an awareness of who they are as people,” she said, “like in terms of identity politics—and thinking about how
Figure 4: Instructor Comfort Level with Political Discussions

Table 2: Number of Intersections between Descriptive and Magnitude Codes (Instructors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apolitical Neutral</th>
<th>Apolitical Positive</th>
<th>Political Mixed</th>
<th>Political Negative</th>
<th>Political Neutral</th>
<th>Political Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Class</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hypothetical)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Perception of Self</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Perception of Students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that relates to metacognition, in terms of how they relate to their world based on their identity politics.” The last instructor, Deborah, taught an explicitly political course theme. She used political content as, in her words, “a means of encouraging critical thinking.” Unlike the other instructors, she saw rhetoric as fundamentally political, and so politics was primary, not secondary, in her courses. When teaching rhetorical analysis, she would ask her students: “How are you being manipulated here? How are they trying to get you to believe what they're saying?” She added, “That's politics, that's all of it.”

**Student Perceptions of Instructor**

Only 8% of students at least somewhat agreed that their instructor brought up politics often, with the vast majority (74%) either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. In addition, 17% of students noted that their instructor’s examples were one of the reasons that politics would come up in their FYC course. While no survey questions asked whether students responded positively or negatively to their instructor’s comments, one student did bring up their professor’s political conduct in an open-answer response. The response followed up on a question about whether students had ever felt frustrated as a result of a political discussion in their class; the student said, “Blatant Liberal comments from professors are frustrating.” In a later open-answer response, that same student wrote, “I feel if Professors and students can make broad liberal comments they should be able to listen and except [sic] when conservatives come forward with their opinions.” Because no conservative students were interviewed, there is no other qualitative data to follow up on the possibility that conservative students might be more frustrated by their instructors than liberal students.
In the qualitative data available, students were largely agnostic on their perception of instructors as political actors. As shown in Table 1, 11 of the 14 codes for “Student Perception of Instructor” were in the apolitical category. Both “Apolitical-Positive” codes occur in Abby’s interview. She told me, “This semester I have not had any interaction with any teachers, like politically. I just—I feel like that's how it should be, anyways.” What ideas students did have about their instructor’s political positions were largely speculative. According to Josh, who was in a partially synchronous class, “I got the general sense that she might be—this is shooting into the dark, mind you—I get the general sense that she might be, if we're talking political spectrum, maybe left-leaning.” He promptly followed this up by saying, “I honestly have no real clue,” which was par for the course in the rest of the student interviews.

Instructor Perceptions of Self

A number of questions in the survey and interview protocol asked how instructors perceived themselves as political actors in the classroom. As discussed previously, all but one instructor (92%) considered themselves politically liberal, and there was near unanimity in questions about the importance of politics (all agreed, and 75% strongly agreed, with a mean rating of 1.5), how closely one follows politics (83% agreed that they followed politics closely, with a mean rating of 1.8), and whether they considered themselves politically informed (all instructors at least somewhat agreed, with 83% agreeing or strongly agreeing). Collectively, these results indicate a substantial difference between instructors’ personal views (which place politics in high priority) and their professional roles (which are much more mixed).

The qualitative data helps to unpack this difference more thoroughly and reveal some of the nuances of these questions. Instructors’ views on political topics have been explored above,
and the results indicate that most of them saw politics as secondary to the course content. In other words, even though instructors personally believed in the importance of politics, they saw themselves as instructors of politically neutral “course content,” such as literacy and rhetorical awareness. Political topics were largely secondary to those pedagogical goals.

That being said, instructors chose to go about handling those secondary topics in different ways. Three out of the seven instructors interviewed saw their role in the classroom as mostly apolitical and neutral; they did not bring up political topics and did not engage in political discussion, except when students broached those topics of their own accord. Three other instructors, however, saw their role in the classroom as at least somewhat political, even if their classes were ostensibly apolitical. Amy, for instance, acknowledged that her political perspective “intersects in the way that I grade them on conventions and style in their writing…. If I can read what it says, and it doesn't interfere with the meaning, and it doesn't detract from whatever genre we're teaching in, then I'm very very lenient on grammar.” Another instructor, CJ, said, “It might be expedient for me to at least bring my politics in as far as they relate to social justice issues.” In this way, she acknowledged, she is not neutral or apolitical, though she still tried not to “make it incredibly apparent” what her political views were. The third instructor saw their very presence in the classroom as political, since they openly identified as gay. “I'm gonna be gay because I'm gay,” they told me.

The outlier, of course, is Deborah, who identified as progressive and not at all apolitical. When asked to elaborate on that term, Deborah said, “Being progressive means actively trying to make change, whether that be in terms of how I vote, in terms of the things I talk about, and things I teach…. I mean, it's pretty clear what side of the divide I'm on, I don't think you can hide

---

21In order to better protect my participants, I have chosen to use gender-neutral pronouns when referencing characteristics or beliefs that might risk revealing their identities.
that.” While she didn’t want students to simply adopt her point of view, she also didn’t think
neutrality was possible.

Regardless of whether they believed instructors should be political or apolitical in their
teaching, instructors shared similar strategies for dealing with political topics. For example, CJ,
Amy, and Donna had strikingly different approaches to political content in their courses. CJ’s
course theme was expressly political, and she saw her role in her class as somewhat political as
well. Amy saw her role as political—insofar as grading was concerned—but tried to avoid
political topics in her class. Donna believed it was her responsibility to be apolitical both in her
role as the instructor and in her facilitation of the course theme. Despite these differences, all
three shared a similar tactic to dealing with students who brought up political topics, especially if
those topics were particularly polarizing or delicate: redirection. In essence, these instructors
tried to guide any particularly delicate or sensitive political content back to the (usually
apolitical, or at least neutral) assignment prompt. CJ said, “I try to just redirect back to the
assignment [when inappropriate political content comes up]. Because I don’t—I feel like it's my
responsibility to teach them how to engage with material more ethically, but I don't think it's my
responsibility to change their political views.” Donna agreed, framing it in terms of transfer: “I
don't feel like I need to do the work of showing them that they need to transfer [evaluation of
credible sources] to the political arena. I feel like my job is to show them how to gain that skill
and then they can, if they choose to, transfer it there.”

While these responses demonstrate a diversity of viewpoints, ranging from apolitical and
neutral roles to expressly political and ideological ones, instructors generally agreed that they
should not impose their viewpoints on their students, and most of them acknowledged that their
political positionality influenced their instruction to some degree or another. Sometimes this
belief took the form of apolitical neutrality, and sometimes it took the form of challenging student beliefs directly, but in each case, instructors emphasized the tools of rhetorical concepts and critical literacy that their courses offered students.

**Student Perceptions of Self**

Student perceptions of themselves as political actors generally tracked with instructor responses, though students were more moderate. Students primarily identified as liberal (one third strongly agreed, and two thirds at least somewhat agreed), and they generally agreed that politics was important (96%), that they followed politics closely (79%, though with 33% only somewhat agreeing), and that they considered themselves politically informed (87%, though 39% only somewhat agreed). Nearly all students (88%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they brought up politics often in their class, and only 8% somewhat agreed to that statement, indicating that students generally avoided bringing up politics in their course or pursuing a political topic.

For the most part, this trend held true in the qualitative data as well. Few students reflected at all on their political role in class, and most of the students (5 out of 6) chose not to bring up politics in any form or fashion in their courses. The exception was Josh, who was in a social media themed course and chose to study political disinformation on social media. All three of the “Political-Neutral” and “Student Perception of Self” codes in Table 1 were from Josh’s interview. As I will discuss later on, Josh didn’t believe his political beliefs played a role in his research and writing. He told me, “Whenever it comes to writing specifically, I try to quarantine my political thought. I try my best to write as balanced as possible.” For the most part, then, the
students interviewed either avoided politics or tried to be as objective as possible when engaging with political topics.

**Instructor Perceptions of Students**

A substantial majority (77%) of instructors disagreed that their students brought up politics often, with 46% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. These results seem to indicate that instructors saw the majority of their students as apolitical in their FYC courses, though (as I will discuss below), there’s a difference between the instructor and student responses in this regard. A majority of instructors (55%) somewhat agreed with the statement, “My students usually agree with my political opinions,” with 64% overall either agreeing or somewhat agreeing with that statement. One instructor (9% overall) strongly disagreed with that statement. The fact that a strong majority (73%) either somewhat agreed or somewhat disagreed with the statement demonstrated ambivalence or neutrality overall. When asked the inverse—whether they usually agreed with their students’ opinions—the results were even more ambivalent, with 83% either somewhat agreeing (67%) or somewhat disagreeing (17%). The mean Likert values for both of these data points are 3.6 and 3.5 respectively, which is the exact middle of the scale.

Combined, these two data points support the trend in the qualitative data: many instructors simply didn’t get a sense for their students’ beliefs, which shows up as a wash in the data. Mandy told me, “I haven't necessarily gotten as much of a sense of political background [on my students] this semester, with the exception of the few who have focused on politics for their…papers.” Even when some students specifically chose to discuss politics in (or after) a class session, those students seemed to be in the minority. Amy noted one particularly striking political discussion that she had with her students:
Some of them hung back in a Zoom room on the day of the election—they chose to because they wanted to ask me just, off the record, what I thought. And I didn't really speak a whole lot in this session—it was mostly them ranting. But all who were the ones who held back were very liberal…. But, y'know, that's four out of fifteen, so another eleven were not interested in doing that.

As teachers, these instructors saw a range of perspectives from their students, including both apolitical and political ones. While instructors like Donna had students with political perspectives to offer—two of her students chose to pursue political topics for their papers—she said her students were generally “sick of talking about politics.”

Except for those students who specifically decided to write on politically charged issues, then, instructors generally didn’t get a sense for their students’ political perspectives. Even CJ, who taught an explicitly political course topic, said, “I’ll have a lot of students who, through their responses, will make sure to throw in, I don’t really care about politics…. It tends to be [that] most of the students seem like they're disinterested or disengaged or tired of [talking about politics].” That made determining students’ political perspectives difficult, since that conjecture was largely based on individual students. What political encounters instructors did have with students were often negative, evidenced by the 22 concurrent codes of “Perception of Students” and “Political-Negative.”

When instructor interviewees did venture a guess on their students’ political beliefs, the results varied drastically depending on the instructor. One instructor, Donna, believed that her students were a mix of political affiliations; that is, she thought there was a fairly even distribution of students from across the political spectrum in her class. Three instructors believed—with caveats—that their students leaned more in a liberal direction, chalking it up to their generational influence. Another three instructors believed that their students were largely conservative based on the university’s location in Tennessee, a Republican-dominated state. In
other words, the lack of consensus in the qualitative data seems to confirm the survey results—instructors are mostly uncertain about their students’ political beliefs, and what assumptions they do have may rely more on conjecture or extrapolating from individual interactions with students.

Instructors seemed to appreciate that their students were politically diverse, however, even if they disagreed about which population was in the majority. 92% of instructors at least somewhat agreed with the statement, “I think the students in my class(es) have a lot of different political opinions,” including over two-thirds (69%) who agreed or strongly agreed to the statement. Only one instructor disagreed. In the qualitative data, instructors generally focused on specific students who engaged political topics, but most of them still hinted at or explicitly stated that their students brought multiple different perspectives to the course. As Amos said, “I think if I were to survey them, I think they would have a diversity of political opinions.”

When asked about students’ comfort (or discomfort) with political discussions in class, instructors somewhat agreed that their students seemed comfortable with such discussions (67% agreed overall), but with a mean Likert value of 3.4, which may demonstrate that, as with students’ political opinions, instructors are unsure of their students’ perspectives on this matter. In the follow-up interviews, instructors thought that students might be uncomfortable for two reasons: self-censorship and “political fatigue,” a phrase that Josiah coined.24

Self-censorship seemed to be connected to fear of what one’s classmates or one’s professor might think if a student showed their political leanings. CJ said,

The students are uncomfortable talking through their political views probably for the same reason that I am—except for the ones who are like, I’m out and proud, left or right—because I think they’re worried about how their classmates will perceive them or how I'll perceive them…. So I can tell that people are holding back a lot of the time, especially in the more public groups.

24Most of this reasoning seemed to be speculative; only Josiah and Deborah named specific instances where a student was uncomfortable or could have been potentially uncomfortable.
This phenomenon of “holding back” seemed primarily connected to conservative students, which may be why it never came up in the student interviews. Josiah connected this phenomenon to the trope of the liberal college professor. He said, “I feel like a lot of times many students, especially from a moderate to a conservative background, will be a little afraid to explore topics that are often labeled as politically conservative at the university.” From Josiah’s perspective, many of his students had an upbringing where they were taught (rightly or wrongly) that liberal college professors were going to challenge them on their conservative beliefs. He went on to say:

Some of the more conservative-leaning students might have viewpoints on stuff, but they're scared to bring it up because they're afraid that it's gonna be held against them, that the instructor is not going to agree with them and that's gonna hurt them on the assignment, or even other students might disagree with them. And just kind of the culture in the South in general…people just, if you don't agree with somebody, you just be quiet a lot of times and just be polite and cordial and stuff like that. And, of course, that doesn't always happen, but I think that there is kind of this silent, if not majority, then silent large contingency of students who do hold moderate to conservative views in class. And I think students are a lot more conservative than it appears in these classes, a lot of times.

Josiah even named a specific instance where a conservative student thanked him for letting her explore the potentially fraught topic of Confederate statues and cultural heritage, which was something she felt like she couldn’t do in other classes.

Political fatigue was another factor in student discomfort that instructors discussed. Donna said her students were “sick of talking about politics,” and instructors like Josiah agreed that students were just tired of political division: “I don't know the exact reason behind it, but I feel like a lot of times politics are thought of as very divisive and can really highlight differences in people…. I think a lot of students just get tired of that, from hearing it all day, all over the news, and they just get tired of being enemies with everybody.” In other words, “political fatigue” seemed to be largely due to the character of political discourse as divisive and exhausting, rather than the subject of politics itself.
**Student Perceptions of Classmates**

Most students disagreed that their classmates brought up politics often, with 36% strongly disagreeing; this is borne out in the qualitative data, where 16 out of the 22 occurrences of “Student Perception of Classmates” were coded as apolitical. Students did not seem to have strong opinions on the question, “I usually agree with my classmates’ political opinions,” with 76% either somewhat agreeing (16%) or somewhat disagreeing (60%). The remaining 24% disagreed (16%) or strongly disagreed (8%), indicating that most students perceived themselves as political minorities in their classrooms. According to the students who were interviewed, this perception was mostly conjecture. Ember, for instance, stated that she probably disagreed with her classmates’ opinions. When I asked why, she said: “It's hard to tell, 'cause I don't know them. And no one ever turns their cameras on in class, so I don't really know anything. But I don't know. I just feel like, sometimes, it can feel like that. But like, for no reason in specific.” Students like Josh reiterated that they rarely interacted with their classmates. “I honestly have no real clue what other people typically write about,” Josh said.

Despite this lack of interaction, student perceptions of their classmates were not always positive. A majority of students (64%) at least somewhat disagreed that their classmates’ political opinions made their class more interesting, and of the 36% who agreed, 20% of them only somewhat agreed. Still, students generally agreed (60%) that their classmates had a lot of different opinions, though the overall mean (3.32) indicates a wide spread—24% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed, compared to 28% of students who agreed or strongly agreed. Again, these answers seemed mostly based on guesswork or extrapolation from other circumstances. Ember told me that her perception of her classmates was based on GroupMe
chats for other courses and other forms of interaction: “People just, especially like this month, people talking about the whole election and everything, the things that my roommate and I have heard other people say…just sounds so empty-headed.” It’s possible that the variety of responses on these questions indicates a polarization among the student body that mirrors the polarization of the American public. Ultimately, however, students didn’t interact with one another enough to know for sure. Josh, for example, guessed that his classmates were primarily liberal, but he said to me with a laugh, “This is me BS-ing it, this is me shooting into the dark once again…”

Comparing Students, Instructors, and Other Groups

Some of the themes discussed above reveal substantial differences between the survey and qualitative answers of students and instructors. To examine these differences statistically, I conducted a series of t-tests on Likert-scale survey results, which allowed me to quantify the differences between discrete groups. Below, I will discuss the differences between students and instructors before examining other categorical differences: modality, gender, and whether the participant has ever been frustrated by a class-related political discussion or encounter.

Comparing Students and Instructors

In the t-tests that follow, a participant’s role in the classroom (either student or instructor) is taken as the independent variable, while the Likert-scale questions are taken as dependent variables (where 1 = strongly agree and 6 = strongly disagree). Every test where \( p < .3 \) has been reported in Table 3 below, along with their effect sizes.\(^{25}\) Two results were shown to be statistically significant \( (p < .05) \), with medium effect sizes.

\(^{25}\) A \( p \)-value of .3 or lower indicates that there is a 30% chance or lower that these differences are due to chance. Effect sizes of .10, .30, and .50 indicate small, medium, and large effects respectively.
Table 3: Results of Student and Instructor T-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student Avg.</th>
<th>Instructor Avg.</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>Effect Size r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My class topic is interesting.</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think politics is important.</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I consider myself politically liberal.</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>.05</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.34</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself politically conservative.</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics comes up often in my class.</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I (instructor)/my professor brings up politics often.</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.04</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.38</strong></td>
<td><strong>.19</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.31</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I (students)/my students feel comfortable with political discussions.</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My students/classmates bring up politics often.</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I think the students in my class have a lot of different political opinions.</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.33</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.38</strong></td>
<td><strong>.02</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.40</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before discussing the results of these tests, it’s important to note what is not included in this table; in other words, there were a number of questions where the student responses and instructor responses did not vary considerably. There were no significant differences between student and instructor perceptions of how closely they followed politics, how politically informed they were, and whether they thought political references or discussions distracted from the class, benefited the class, or made class more interesting. Most striking of all, there was no significant difference between students and instructors on the question, “I consider my class topic to be political.” Now, this list does not indicate that there were no differences between students and instructors on these topics, but those differences were not statistically significant and did not have substantial effect sizes.

Among the responses listed in the table above, two are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Instructors were much more likely than students to identify as politically liberal, and they were also significantly more likely to believe that the students in their class were ideologically diverse. The first result is not particularly surprising, given the widely recognized correlation between graduate education and political liberalism, particularly in the humanities. The second result is perhaps more difficult to parse out. Given the qualitative data, however, it seems reasonable to conclude that instructors appreciated student diversity more because they interacted with each individual student to some degree, whereas students in online courses were much less likely to interact with their peers. This phenomenon is also a reasonable explanation for other, less statistically significant results, such as why instructors are more likely to say politics came up often in their course, and why instructors were more likely to say they (and their students) bring up politics often.
Two other results were notable, though they were not statistically significant. First, students were more likely to say they were comfortable with political discussions than instructors perceived them to be, with a medium effect size \( (r = 0.28) \). In addition, instructors were somewhat more likely than students to deem politics important. Though they were also slightly more likely to consider themselves politically informed and follow politics closely, those differences were minor enough that they did not yield statistically significant results or substantial effect sizes. While the similarities of student and instructor responses may seem surprising, the timing of the study may have played a role. As Matt, one of the student interviewees, put it: “I really don't seek out politics. It's almost like I'll only pay attention when it's all over the news and people are talking about it and it's in the zeitgeist. So, yeah, I guess now is when I'm more politically informed than ever.” In other words, the exigence of the 2020 election may have prompted students to stay more politically informed than they would have otherwise.

**Course Modality: Asynchronous vs. Other**

Course modality was one of the factors discussed in an earlier section on how, when, and for what reason political topics came up in FYC. Accordingly, I separated the survey results into two categories: asynchronous and “other.” Since asynchronous was the largest modality represented, I consolidated the remaining categories, which included primarily synchronous modalities (in addition to one hybrid course and one in-person course).

Every test where \( p < .3 \) has been reported in Table 4 below, along with their effect sizes. Four of the results are statistically significant \( (p < .05) \) and one of the results is highly statistically significant \( (p < .005) \), with a large effect size \( (r = 0.48) \).
### Table 4: Results of Course Modality T-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Asynchronous Avg.</th>
<th>Other Avg.</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>Effect Size $r$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My class topic is interesting.</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself politically liberal.</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself politically informed.</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My students/classmates bring up politics often.</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the students in my class have a lot of different political opinions.</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political references or discussions make class interesting.</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political references or discussions benefit the class.</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing politics in class is constructive.</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While I will not exhaustively review the questions not included on this list, the most notable absence is “I consider my class topic to be political.” In other words, students or instructors in asynchronous classes did not have significantly different perspectives on their course topic than students or instructors in other modalities, which is somewhat surprising. The variety of perspectives on whether “metacognition” (the most common asynchronous theme) is a political topic may explain why no significant differences were found.

Some of these differences seem to be inexplicable at first glance and point to potential sampling issues. For instance, participants in synchronous, hybrid, or in-person classes were more likely to consider themselves liberal. This result may be due to the fact that instructors are somewhat oversampled in the “Other” category (six out of the 14 participants). That theory may also explain the differences between modalities in “I consider myself politically informed” and “My students/classmates bring up politics often.”

The statistically significant results are the most striking and may point to modality being a more substantial factor for a participant’s openness to politics in the classroom, even though modality was not a significant factor in the actual presence of politics in a given class. Participants in alternative modalities were significantly more likely than participants in asynchronous courses to think politics were beneficial or constructive in FYC or made the class more interesting. These results may indicate that participants simply didn’t see how political topics or discussions would add value in a synchronous course. Participants in other modalities were also more likely than participants in asynchronous courses to believe that the students in their class(es) had a lot of different political opinions. Given the role human interaction plays in encountering different perspectives, this difference demonstrates that non-asynchronous
modalities opened up students and instructors to recognize the breadth of perspectives students brought to FYC.

**Participant Frustration**

One of the survey questions asked whether the participant had ever been frustrated as a result of a political discussion or encounter in an FYC course. After removing all of the “maybe” answers, I ran t-tests to see whether a person’s frustrating experience(s) seemed to influence other aspects of the study. Largely due to the limited sample size (only 8 out of the 28 participants selected had answered “yes,” including just 2 students), only two tests yielded results where $p < .3$. The results were ultimately unclear. Participants who did not express frustration with political discussions, topics, or encounters were slightly more likely to consider their class topic interesting ($p < .26, r = 0.28$) and consider themselves politically informed ($p < .27, r = 0.28$). Given the sample size of the “frustrated” category and the overrepresentation of instructors, it’s difficult to explain why these results might have occurred.

**Gender**

The final set of t-tests I ran dealt with gender. As none of my participants identified as nonbinary or gender nonconforming, only two groups were present: female and male. The results of the t-tests where $p < .3$ have been reported in Table 5, with one statistically significant result ($p < .05$) and one very statistically significant result ($p < .01$) with a large effect size ($r = 0.59$). The most striking result here, of course, is that men were much more likely than women to consider themselves politically conservative, a trend that matches political patterns in the United States broadly. Notably, this result was very statistically significant ($p < .01$) not because women
### Table 5: Results of Gender T-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>Effect Size r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I follow politics closely.</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself politically informed.</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself politically liberal.</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I consider myself politically conservative.</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.00</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.42</strong></td>
<td><strong>.007</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.59</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics comes up often in my class.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I (students) / my students feel comfortable with political discussions.</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing politics in class is constructive.</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
considered themselves more politically liberal than men did (that difference was not statistically significant) but because they disagreed so strongly with conservatism. The numerical gap between men and women’s Likert-scale averages was 1.03 on the liberalism question and 1.58 on the conservatism question.

In addition, men were generally more likely than women to say they followed politics closely and stayed politically informed. They were also somewhat more likely to say politics came up often in their class and were more likely to see political discussions as constructive. Notably, there was a statistically significant difference between men and women on whether they (if they were a student) or their students (if they were an instructor) felt comfortable with political discussions in class. Men were more likely to think that they/their students were comfortable with such discussions. This trend also held true if instructor comfort with political discussions were examined by gender. Though only two male instructors took my survey (limiting the generalizability of the results), a t-test with gender as the independent variable revealed that male instructors were much more comfortable with political discussions than female instructors, with a highly statistically significant difference ($p < .001$).

Taken as a whole, these results indicate that the men in this study tended to engage more politically, inside and outside of class, and had a relatively high comfort level with such engagement. They also perceived, more so than women, that others in the class were more comfortable. This trend was borne out in the qualitative data and may be due to the fact that female instructors and students seemed to be more attentive to the possibility of alienation and polarized arguments and were more careful about sharing their own views.26 As Donna said, drawing from her own experiences,

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26The exception here, as usual, is Deborah, who had a highly conflictual teaching style—that phenomenon will be discussed more in the next chapter.
I think I have [an] understanding of uncomfortable it can be when your instructor just assumes that you agree with everything they're saying…. I feel like it, in a way, would probably make my job a bit harder if I came in super strong with my political views, because I think that might alienate some of the students and make them resistant to the things I'm trying to teach them.

While the two male instructors I interviewed did reflect on how their students might feel alienated by political discussions, Josiah intentionally tried to create a welcoming atmosphere (in part by avoiding his own positions) and Amos had never encountered a student who was uncomfortable with a political discussion: “Although I never got the sense that any one student was triggered by [a political discussion] or made uncomfortable by the topic, I can imagine that there were some for whom that was not a comfortable discussion. I never really experienced a student being uncomfortable in a political discussion, but I'm sure it has happened.” Both of them expressed that they were comfortable with facilitating such political discussions, a view that was not always shared by female colleagues.

**Participant Perspectives on the Role of Politics in Composition**

The previous sections dealt with descriptive questions (when, how, and why politics came up in composition courses), perceptive questions (how students and instructors perceived their courses, themselves, and one another politically), and questions of disparity, examining the differences between students, instructors, and other discrete groups in the data. This section seeks to move from what politics in FYC does look like into what politics in FYC could look like, according to my participants. In follow-up interviews, I asked participants to look beyond their current experiences and perceptions to think about what FYC should be like in relation to political topics. While this topic does relate to some themes in the survey data (for instance, whether a participant thought discussing politics in FYC was constructive), to avoid retreading the data, I
will focus solely on qualitative information. Specifically, I will discuss the student and instructor interviews in relation to the code “Perception of Class (Hypothetical).”

**Instructor Perspectives on the Role of Politics**

As indicated by the results in Table 2, instructors were generally open to including political topics or discussions in their courses (13 of the 26 codes in the hypothetical category were “Political-Positive”) but they thought that such content should be limited. Five out of the seven instructors interviewed said that politics should be secondary to class concepts to some degree, though instructors disagreed as to what those “class concepts” entailed—some emphasized literacy, some emphasized research methods, and others prioritized rhetorical concepts.

Among the five instructors who said political topics should be secondary to class concepts, there was agreement that political discussions could be potentially distracting. One instructor, Amos, said, “I would be wary about the English classroom turning into a political science classroom or a current events classroom or something like that. The focus has to be on the inquiry itself, regardless of subject matter, or it just turns into the subject matter class…. [T]hat's not the main point.” This perspective was echoed by other instructors, who saw politics as a potentially useful topic or a helpful illustration, but not necessarily as a primary site of inquiry. “I don't think [political discussion] necessarily inherently belongs [in FYC],” CJ told me, though she was open to using it as a means for teaching information literacy.

Another instructor, Donna, specifically pointed out that political issues are so polarized that it made broaching political topics problematic for teaching. In today’s society, she told me, “You're kind of primed to be very us vs. them, you're primed to treat people who disagree with your views in a very oppositional way, and so I think it can just lead to a lot of discomfort and
again just take away from the things you're actually trying to teach.” While Donna occasionally used political topics to illustrate an example in class, she otherwise avoided them: “I think just the amount of energy it takes to do all that work and do it well, and then to try to do composition stuff too is just a lot.” Of the seven instructors interviewed, Donna was the only one whose view of politics in FYC was primarily negative.27

Other instructors were less hesitant. “It's a liberal arts class,” Deborah told me. “It's really hard to depoliticize it. No matter what you have them read, it's going to have a political bent.” As a result, Deborah saw the role of politics in composition as “a means for getting them to think critically and analyze multiple perspectives of something, which varies for the class topic and approach.” While most instructors didn’t share her explicitly political approach, they generally agreed that politics should be used as a means to an end in FYC—whether that be critical thinking, information literacy, or the practical and rhetorical methods of inquiry.

**Student Perspectives on the Role of Politics**

In general, students also saw a beneficial role for political discussions and topics; 10 out of the 16 overlapping codes for “Perception of Politics (Hypothetical)” were “Political-Positive,” with a scattering of codes from other categories. Though only Leo saw his class topic as explicitly political, four of the six students thought that politics was useful as a topic of discussion (especially if the topics were somewhat non-controversial). Leo said political topics gave composition more “flavor,” and Kate thought that political discussion was “a lot more interesting to me than just the normal discussions, just because it's actually relevant.” A fifth student, Josh, suggested that political topics could contribute to the development of “critical thought.” The

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27It’s worth noting, as I did in an earlier section, that Donna is also the only instructor whose definition of politics was explicitly factional, which likely played a major role in her view of integrating it in her classroom.
remaining student, Ember, wanted a more limited role for politics. All three of the “Apolitical-Positive” codes occurred in her interview. “I feel like honestly leaving them out would be completely fine,” she told me. “Some people are very passionate about it, and so [to] not create arguments, maybe leaving it out [would be fine].” By passionate, Ember didn’t just mean strong opinions and emotion; she clarified later that she was referencing conversations where no one was willing to listen to anyone else. That being said, Ember liked how potentially political topics were presented in her class: “It's good that we see them as examples,” she said.

Ember’s concern about “passionate” arguments was shared by other students. Kate said, “I mean, I think it would be very interesting to have more political conversations in class. But again, the arguments might get out of hand.” Josh was also concerned about that possibility: “Individuals who are incredibly stratified to either side of the spectrum, they can't make connections, they cannot find middle ground—no compromise, no way to move forward from the issue. It has to be my way or the highway.” While he did not experience that kind of rhetoric in his online class, he thought that it would “crop up fairly quickly” in an in-person class. Still, that possibility did not necessarily dissuade them; both Kate and Josh were open to or enthusiastic about the idea of politics in FYC. When asked what it would take to avoid arguments that might get “out of hand,” Kate suggested “an assignment or two that involves research, so that it's not just solely opinion-based and that people are able to see both sides of a discussion and actually be more informed on what they support.” In other words, Kate wanted to avoid an “opinion-based” approach to politics in favor of an approach based in research and understanding other perspectives.
Conclusion

That final quote from Kate demonstrates awareness of what Roberts-Miller (2004) would call expressive argument versus deliberative argument. Kate thought that merely sharing one’s opinion was unproductive and could lead to political arguments getting out of hand. Instead, she suggested a research-based process of inquiry. Though Kate has likely never read Roberts-Miller, she intuitively reached for the solution that Roberts-Miller proposed for a toxic public sphere: argument based in democratic deliberation.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the bird’s-eye results of my study. I have demonstrated that, though the majority of composition courses in this study were ostensibly apolitical, political topics did occasionally come up, and a participant’s political experience was at least somewhat influenced by their course theme, their modality, and their personal definition of politics. By and large, instructors and students avoided political topics, though they found politics important and thought that discussing politics in class could be productive. Students viewed themselves and their instructors as mostly apolitical; what encounters they had with their fellow students seemed to be somewhat negative. Instructor perceptions of students, of course, were more of a mixed bag. While most students didn’t engage political topics, others chose to, and demonstrated to their instructors the breadth of opinions held by their students (which occasionally led to frustrating encounters). Most instructors themselves attempted to be politically neutral in the classroom, though they were divided about whether (and to what extent) politics should be a subject for FYC. I have also shown that some key differences exist between students and instructors, between asynchronous modalities and others, and between women and men.

What Kate’s example demonstrates, however, is that merely describing these experiences, perceptions, and differences is not quite enough to understand them. Kate knew that
political topics were not in themselves good or bad in FYC; rather, it was *how* those discussions were conducted that mattered to her. In other words, these experiences, perceptions, and beliefs are tied to underlying assumptions about the nature of politics, the meaning of composition, and how a participant defines argument. Investigating and interrogating these foundations is an important next step to understanding this data, and that conversation is the subject of the next chapter.
In the previous chapter, I examined the tip of the iceberg: participants’ current experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about politics in FYC. In this chapter, I seek to go beneath the surface and examine what assumptions lie beneath those experiences, perceptions and beliefs. To do so, I will use the hypothesis codes I formulated based on Roberts-Miller’s (2004) models of discourse, as a method of revealing what assumptions my participants held about what democratic argument should look like, both in the public sphere and in FYC. As Roberts-Miller (2004) wrote, “[M]uch of our disagreement about pedagogical practices is disagreement about what it means (or should mean) to participate in a democratic public sphere. We are arguing about pedagogy because we disagree about political theory” (p. 4). By investigating these fundamental theoretical differences, composition scholars and instructors can establish stasis and begin to chart a path forward.

As discussed in Chapter 2, these models exist on multiple spectra, and depending on where a person situates themselves or others on those spectra, they may match characteristics of multiple models. The agonistic and deliberative models, for instance, share much in common; the more a rhetor facilitates Other-centered argument and seeking contingent agreement, the more they favor the deliberative model, and the more a rhetor seeks to challenge other positions through productive (and even unpleasant) conflict, the more they favor the agonistic model. In this way, a student or instructor may exhibit characteristics of multiple models, multiple ways of approaching political discourse.

In addition to overlapping categories, however, a person may exhibit a “mutt” of multiple approaches that, on a theoretical level, are fundamentally incompatible. For example, the
communitarian model is constructivist in its conception of truth, and the liberal model relies on a universal, rational conception of truth. A person who is an avowed social constructivist may yet hold liberal assumptions or engage in liberal practices that are incompatible with constructivism. This “mutt” feature is, for instructors, what Roberts-Miller (2004) called “unreflective grounding of teaching practices in muddled combinations of different models, or the assumption of a model that has implications with which the instructor is deeply uncomfortable” (p. 17). Thus, part of this chapter will seek to explore how the underlying assumptions beneath the “muddled combinations” in the data may work against the express goals or values of the participant, particularly with instructors.

This chapter will be structured in five sections. First, I will discuss the notable absences and limited occurrences of three models of discourse in particular (technocratic, communitarian, and interest-based). Second, I will examine how my participants discussed demagoguery—a rhetorical stance that none of the participants engaged in and one that provoked a universally negative reaction. I will then investigate the pervasive presence of the agonistic code in Deborah’s interview (a code that was mostly absent from other interviews) and distinguish between the agonistic deliberative and the irenic deliberative. Fourth, I will discuss the two most common codes in the interviews and their relation to one another: the liberal model and the deliberative model (in both its agonistic and irenic forms). Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of what these trends mean and what they suggest for composition pedagogy.

**Uncommon Assumptions: Technocratic, Communitarian, and Interest-Based Models**

The three most uncommon codes in the data were the technocratic model, the communitarian model, and the interest-based model. In fact, the technocratic model—a model of discourse that
assumes that all political discourse is the domain of experts and requires technical knowledge—
did not occur at all in the data. This absence is perhaps unsurprising, given that Roberts-Miller (2004) wrote that it was “not explicitly advocated by composition theorists,” though it is sometimes “implied in some pedagogies” that focus on composition as technical or professional training, such as writing in the disciplines (p. 4). That being said, because English 101 at the University of Tennessee typically focuses on rhetorical concepts, the lack of technocratic assumptions is notable but predictable.

Of the hypothesis codes that did occur in the data, the communitarian model of discourse was the most uncommon. The communitarian model, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a model of social constructivist discourse that sees the end goal of politics as the public good, and education as the inculcation of shared values. Communitarian discourse seeks to build consensus and work toward the good of the community. Two participants—one student and one instructor—referenced political argument in a way that demonstrated some communitarian assumptions, for a total of three occurrences (see Table 6).

The emergence of the communitarian code in Abby’s interview was in reference to other students. Abby said, “I feel like a lot of people right now, they don’t really educate themselves from a political standpoint. They just [argue] based on other people's opinions rather than their own.” In her interview, Abby seemed to be communicating that some students took their opinions from their community rather than formulating those opinions for themselves. Abby's reference could also be coded as demagoguery (in which someone takes on the opinions of their specific “faction”) but either way, it expressed her own point of view, which was decidedly liberal in its assumptions.
**Table 6: Number of Intersections between Hypothesis and Magnitude Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Apolitical Neutral</th>
<th>Apolitical Positive</th>
<th>Political Mixed</th>
<th>Political Negative</th>
<th>Political Neutral</th>
<th>Political Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agonistic Model</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communitarian Model</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative Model</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demagoguery</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest-Based Model</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Model</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There was also a hint of the communitarian model in Donna's interview, most notably in Donna's implied prioritization of discourse communities (she told students to look for what “we” would find credible in a source), finding common ground with her students, and a strong emphasis on “being respectful.” Her approach to students’ political arguments was a blend of communitarian approaches (in that she emphasized consensus-building) and liberal assumptions:

I'm at a weird place, because I felt a kind of agreement with the first student who wrote the paper about the EMT. I was like, yeah, I totally get where you're going with this. And I felt like, when he first brought up the topic to me, he was a bit like, uh, how is she gonna react, you know? Which is so sad. So I like, agreed with what he was saying and thought that the points were really good points. And then I also understood where my other student was coming from and agreed with her about healthcare reform. And it's like, yeah, this is really important and a worthwhile topic. So, you know what I mean? I'm able to agree with—as long as they're being respectful and not saying blatantly terrible things, I'm able to see.

One paper was from a student who viewed himself as conservative; the other student viewed herself as liberal. In both cases, Donna emphasized the core values of respect and tolerance while building consensus on certain points that they made in their papers, which are communitarian values. As I will discuss later, however, respect and civility can also be code for liberal assumptions about neutrality and discourage affective and embodied approaches to argument.

The interest-based model was somewhat more common than the communitarian model, though the participants’ views of that approach were varied. At the heart of the interest-based model is the idea that politics fundamentally comes down to self-interest, even if one pretends to aim for rational decision-making or the common good. Political argument is then about expressing one’s opinions, which—lacking some referent for what constitutes a good argument—means that all arguments are valid and come from one’s position in the world. The participants whose ideas were coded for the interest-based model thought about it in three main ways: in terms of expressive argument, audience-centered appeals, and positionality.
Expressive argument is most characteristic of the interest-based model. The student participant Leo, for instance, made an offhand reference that was coded as interest-based, since he primarily saw political argument as expressive; while he was open to listen to other point of views, he saw no need to argue with another person’s “opinion.” In other words, Leo held to the oft-cited adage: “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion.” For Amos, an instructor, expressive argument was a source of frustration, since he saw research and writing as a process of inquiry rather than a site of expression: “I think that's where the [people at my previous college], they focused too much on English as a way to express my opinion and give it some validity, rather than as a place of inquiry that then gets expressed.”

.Argument was also seen (in part) as audience-centered by one instructor, CJ. To deal with potentially fraught situations where a student was using inappropriate, partisan sources, CJ pointed students to their intended audience:

I would just say, hey, I ran this through Media Bias Fact Check, you should know it's rated as “Mixed.” So, that means that it's not necessarily untrue, but it's probably been manipulated in some way and therefore I would consider finding a different source, because, in terms of making your argument credible to your audience, if they can easily find out that this isn't a good source, this isn't gonna be helpful to you.

While this could be coded as communitarian, the communitarian model emphasizes conformity and discourse communities, while CJ framed the students' audience in terms of what will be “helpful” for them—in other words, what will help them succeed and look credible to their audience. This emphasis on being able to “win” an argument is characteristic of the interest-based model. As Roberts-Miller (2004) explained, interest-based assumptions crop up “in pedagogies that describe the major responsibility of a rhetor as making his/her policies the most attractive, and using rhetoric that is conciliatory and pleasing” (p. 99). Of course, not all (or even most) audience-based pedagogies are built on the interest-based model. However, when audience
awareness becomes the primary reason to avoid unreliable information, audience—rather than accuracy, truthfulness, and critical thought—becomes the “major responsibility” of the writer. While CJ’s pedagogy as a whole was more nuanced than mere rhetorical bargaining, it was clear that some of her pedagogical framing did buy into interest-based assumptions.

The interest-based model is also centered around positionality. If political argument is fundamentally based in self-interest, after all, who a person is and where they came from become the major determinants of what they believe politically. A nuanced conception of interest-based positionality was at the core of Mandy’s approach to teaching her classes. Mandy’s model of political discourse revolved around a sort of inward contemplation, an examination of how one's political beliefs may have been formed by one's circumstances, culture, and background. Mandy asked her students to interrogate their own “identity politics” and understand how their identity is linked to their beliefs.

Of course, interrogating one’s position in the world is not inherent to the interest-based model. In fact, this method could go in three directions: it could be used as the basis of understanding where and how to reach across difference (deliberative), it could function as the site of being challenged by others’ perspectives (agonistic), or it could be the primary factor that determines one’s political positions (interest-based). In general, Mandy’s method emphasized self-reflection, and perhaps even solipsism, about one's position in the world, and thus was most characterized by the interest-based model. Mandy wanted her students to “take that [insight] farther” and understand how they were “important participants” in our democracy. That phrasing seemed deliberative, and perhaps Mandy was reaching toward the deliberative model, but she never explored what taking it “farther” meant. The implications for political discourse stopped at
self-reflection; Mandy seemed to assume that understanding who one is and where one comes from automatically led to certain political positions.

A similar conception of positionality cropped up in Amy’s interview. While Amy was reflecting on the beliefs of her students, she said that some of her students are likely conservative because their families are conservative. “It's just very red state,” she told me, “and if they're from anywhere in this region, they mostly identify with their family's political beliefs, and most of those political beliefs are gonna be pretty conservative.” This unit was initially coded as communitarian and then as demagoguery, since it implied a certain level of relational belonging connected to policy positions. However, what it really revealed is that Amy saw political beliefs as at least partially deterministic, connected to one's cultural and economic position. As such, it implied some level of the interest-based model of discourse (though there is certainly room for the subjectivity of one's position in the communitarian and deliberative models).

A Culture of Demagoguery

One of the most pervasive codes in these interviews was demagoguery—political discourse that turns policy issues into identity issues, pitting “us” versus “them.” As Table 6 demonstrates, however, no participant actually advocated for this point of view, though many of them brought it up of their own accord. In each case, demagoguery was something that others participated in, and functioned as a primary reason why the participants were hesitant about engaging politics in FYC.

In CJ's interview, the demagoguery code was frequent, and it primarily applied to conservative student discourse. It was particularly striking in an interaction with a student who had failed an assignment because of his passionate defense of a cable news celebrity
(identification with an in-group figure being a classic case of demagogic rhetoric). The student, who had not fulfilled the primary purpose of the assignment, then accused CJ of politically motivated grading. Resistant students like him substantially shaped how CJ approached the classroom. CJ presented herself as neutral in the class, not because she thought she could be neutral or because she believed it was the role of the professor to be neutral, but because she believed her students would be “irritated” if they knew her political identity. Because demagoguery thrives on “identity” politics, particularly party politics obsessed with labels and in-group/out-group argument, CJ’s fear was that her students would react to her with demagogic rhetoric.

Like CJ, Josiah’s references to demagoguery were primarily concerned with conservative students. But unlike CJ, Josiah didn’t see conservative students engaging in demagoguery; rather, he believed they feared bias or retribution on the part of their classmates or professors if they spoke up with their opinions. “Persecuted is a strong word,” he said, but there was “fear of being vilified to some extent or at least challenged. They just don't want to deal with being challenged in a public forum, or they don't want to deal with having to potentially lose points on their essay from some sort of bias or agenda from their instructor.” In other words, Josiah perceived that his students feared a wider culture of demagoguery, where they thought would be “vilified” because of their political beliefs.

Deborah explicitly combated this kind of rhetoric in her classes. “We're at this horrible point,” she said, “where we see politically sides as the same as we see sports teams. We won, you lost, get over it. Our team won, well, that's everybody…. We're really the same team. I tell them, look, you can't just go, they're crap and they're lying and that's it. You have to recognize that this is valid for them.” Deborah’s solution, notably, was somewhat expressive: recognizing
that other perspectives were “valid” was the first step to recognizing that everyone was on “the same team.” What exactly counts as “valid” was left unsaid, as I will discuss in the next section.

Demagoguery also emerged at several points in student interviews. Josh, for instance, critiqued our current form of argument: “Individuals who are incredibly stratified to either side of the spectrum, they can't make connections, they cannot find middle ground—no compromise, no way to move forward from the issue. It has to be my way or the highway.” He saw this as the primary kind of argument in the public sphere and found it frustrating and limiting. Ember, another student, agreed: “I don't really like to get into politics, because usually it just leads into an argument, and no one's ever willing to listen.” It’s notable that, in this quote, Ember conflated arguments with being unwilling to listen; in a culture of demagoguery, argument itself becomes a negative term.

In sum, the pervasive presence of political demagoguery led to frustration, fear, and discomfort in both students and instructors. Instructors generally didn’t want to bring up political topics or their own perspectives for fear of backlash; while students were more open to political discussions, they too were concerned that, without proper boundaries and a culture of listening, political arguments could get out of control.

**Agonistic Composition: Clarifying Conflict**

As stated in Chapter 2, most political discourse lies on a spectrum of irenic (conflict-avoiding) and agonistic (conflict-embracing). The belief that political conflict can be a good thing was a consistent theme across several interviews and represented an agonistic approach. Agonism is a “conflictual” approach to argument, aiming to disrupt consensus and potentially oppressive rhetoric, without being the “verbal free-for-all of interest-based discourse” (Roberts-Miller,
2004, p. 5). For some instructors, conflict represented a site of exploration. As Amos said, “Everyone has a perspective on [politics] that they can bring to the table, even if that is a disagreement and is something that you can explore further.” This awareness of multiple perspectives was important for Josiah’s pedagogy as well. Josiah said, “I think my goal is if students are critically engaging more with content, which I would probably define as cultivating multiple perspectives and understanding different positions... then I would call that success.”

That being said, Josiah also expressed hesitancy about a highly conflictual, agonistic approach:

It's becoming more and more politically normalized on the left—and I don't know if this is entirely fair—but to be a little bit more confrontational with perspectives that you deem are dangerous or toxic. So to try to more overtly convert people to certain perspectives on things, whereas I'm much more of like, engage but listen a little bit more…. And I think that a lot more people are... saying you need to be more engaged, you need to be more aggressive and take what you want. There's all of these problems inherent in the system, and you need to challenge and break parts of that system off more, you can't operate within the system the way it's currently constructed.

Given Josiah’s own political beliefs as a self-described liberal who sought “nuance” and middle ground on most issues, his hesitancy was unsurprising, but it did represent some of the concerns that other instructors had about political conflict in the classroom.

Though agonism did occur in multiple interviews, Deborah’s interview represented the vast majority of the agonistic codes; it was the most dominant model of discourse in her writing pedagogy. In Deborah’s interview, difference was an end in itself, and clarifying alternative points of view was Deborah's primary goal as a progressive instructor:

I try to keep—I mean, it's pretty clear what side of the divide I'm on, I don't think you can hide that. But I try to choose texts that challenge the idea that we just have to meet in the middle, or challenge the idea of normalcy, that this is just—white people are just normal, cis people are just normal—and get them to start thinking critically about how they perceive the world.

While this position could be perceived as interest-based, arguments for Deborah were not purely expressive; Deborah’s goal for her students was for them to look beyond their own self-interest
and think critically about their own conceptions of normative identity and behavior.28 “Let's talk about this” was Deborah's refrain—hashing out issues and clarifying one another's points of view was seen as a good in itself in Deborah’s pedagogy.

At times, the kind of agonism espoused by Deborah is similar to the deliberative model: highly conflictual and conscious of difference. Though she rarely moved from clarifying differences to reaching out across differences (a key distinction between the two models), some of her practices did reflect deliberative values. For example, the deliberative model only works if “there is equal access on the part of people with genuinely different points of view” and some level of “moderation” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, pp. 186, 191). Along those same lines, Deborah said that she aimed “to encourage discussion without enabling bigoted or hypocritical or whatever perspective[s]. And so, for the most part…it works in the classroom environment. Because they are, I've found that, all of them, across the board, the majority of them are able to discuss a lot of these things comfortably.” Encouraging students to feel comfortable discussing their views, within certain parameters, is a key element of the deliberative public sphere. In this way, Deborah demonstrated what I’ve called the “agonistic deliberative,” a contrast to a more moderated, compromise-seeking “irenic deliberative” (discussed more in the next section).

The agonistic deliberative was particularly clear when Deborah pushed back against the notion of “civility” while explaining her view of tolerance:

And I'm not saying, be nice and be civil. This isn't like Minnesota nice, where if you think about somebody who is a person of color in Minnesota, where you're in a society where “just be nice” means you can't speak up for your rights. I'm not telling them to just be civil and play nice and go, uh huh, but to critically think about their positions, where they come from, and trying not to limit the lives of others, limit the identities of others, based on their personal truths.

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Roberts-Miller (2004), it's worth noting, argued that “the interest-based model is connected to the agonistic tradition,” since both often result in confrontational or aggressive rhetoric (p. 121). She essentially saw the agonistic tradition as conflictual discourse with guardrails, in the tradition of Hannah Arendt.
In other words, political discourse has limits (not imposing one’s views on the lives and identities of others), but there is no element of “civility” that might lead to silencing a minority perspective.

As the final sentence of that paragraph demonstrates, however, Deborah’s agonistic approach became a little muddled when she discussed the idea of “personal truths” and accepting other opinions as valid. Though Deborah’s overall approach was agonistic, some of her assumptions in this area were more similar to the liberal model. To clarify these differences, I turn now to discuss how liberalism and deliberation undergird certain practices and beliefs in FYC.

**Neutrality, Diversity, and Otherness: Liberalism and Deliberation in FYC**

As mentioned earlier, the liberal model and the deliberative model have much in common. Both models assume that the “best interest” of a given society can be pursued through public argument, and both models assume that public argument should be rational. Where they begin to differ is on how they define rationality and to what extent they are agonistic. In the liberal model, disagreement exists because of faulty reasoning, a lack of objectivity, or because a rhetor is uncultured (in the sense that they have not gained intellectual autonomy through liberal education). Discussion exists so that the best arguments can be aired and the rational, educated interlocutors standing by can judge which is better—in a democracy, by voting. In the liberal public sphere, conflict is temporary, and emotions are not welcome. In the deliberative model, disagreement exists because difference exists: subjective, situated difference that comes from embodied experience, perspective, and positionality (differences that are up for debate as part of what constitutes “rational” argument). Discussion exists so that many different perspectives can
be heard—to disrupt consensus and enclave-based discourse—and so that arguments can thus be made “from different perspectives,” as opposed to being made from a “perspective-free stance” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 183).

In the qualitative data, the liberal model and the deliberative model were the two most common models espoused by the participants. In what follows, I summarize the trends in how participants drew on the liberal model before discussing how the deliberative model appeared in several interviews.

Three participants seemed primarily based in the liberal model of discourse, with one student (Josh) and two instructors (Donna and CJ). Although Josh didn't comment on or evaluate the role of the instructor, his own approach to argument was very much in the liberal line of thought. Josh believed one can set aside one's biases and neutrally and rationally evaluate a topic using just the “facts.” In an apt turn of phrase, Josh referred to this as “quarantining” his own beliefs:

Whenever it comes to writing specifically, I try to quarantine my political thought. I try my best to write as balanced as possible. I focus on, whenever I'm writing, is the truth, the facts, as they stand. Whatever perspective you can angle onto the truth and facts, that's fine, but what I focus on is that nutrient-dense, what is the actual thing that's happening, rather than just a perspective on it.

In other words, Josh understood writing as a process of learning how to think critically and neutrally about a given topic to discern the “truth.” He told me, “My perspective is, truth trumps over all. You cannot bend the truth and the facts; they are what they are.” Needless to say, such statements are characteristic of Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of truth.

Josh’s view of the role of politics in FYC classes also implied a liberal model. He told me that English contributed to “critical thought” and allowed one to see something from multiple perspectives. While seeing something from different perspectives could mean valuing diversity
(as found in the agonistic and the deliberative models), his statement seemed more connected to being able to *transcend* one’s own perspective and write autonomously.

Liberalism also characterized Donna’s approach to teaching FYC. Donna’s own views seemed strongly derived from the liberal model’s distinction between the right and the good; student autonomy and choice are her core values. “I just find it really difficult for me to tell other people what they should believe,” she told me. “I believe what I believe, and as long as people are being respectful to other people—I can think they’re dead wrong—but as long as they’re not hurting somebody, I don’t really care.” In addition, Donna valued neutrality in the classroom and tried her hardest not to bring up political topics (unless she found them helpful to illustrate a class concept).

Perhaps the strongest indication of the liberal model, however, was Donna’s sense that she didn’t have to tell her students to use the rhetorical tools they gained in her class to engage in political issues: “I don’t feel like I need to do the work of showing them that they need to transfer that to the political arena. I feel like my job is to show them how to gain that skill and then they can, if they choose to, transfer it there. But I don’t view it as my place to make that connection for them.” In other words, she viewed it as the responsibility of the student to use their rhetorical skills in public life. As such, Donna’s teaching was very much liberal “apolitical training in discourse” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 39), in which the classroom is a place for students to learn and practice rational thought.

Finally, CJ understood her role and her class in distinctively liberal ways as well. Like Donna, CJ explicitly distinguished between notions of the “right” (i.e. ethics) and the “good” (i.e. students' own political beliefs): “I feel like it's my responsibility,” she said, “to teach [my students] how to engage with material more ethically, but I don't think it's my responsibility to
change their political views. And honestly at the end of the day, I think you can have whatever political views you're gonna have as long as they're logically consistent and ethically sourced.”

Unlike Donna, CJ had other assumptions underlying her pedagogy—particularly the interest-based model—but in terms of her own position in the classroom, her assumptions were very much based in liberalism.

Though no other students or instructors relied on liberalism as their primary means of understanding public discourse, the liberal model occurred in some form or fashion in almost every interview. For example, though Josiah was under no illusions that he was neutral in the classroom—he saw his neutrality as a “rhetorical effect” to make students comfortable—he relied on the liberal model in other ways. The “self-actualization” of students was important to him, and he believed he could teach students “how to think, but not what to think.” This separation of training in discourse and the political effects of such training is a liberal move, since such intellectual training is not seen as politically formative in itself.

In general, other instructors seemed to position their conceptions of political discourse in composition courses between the liberal model and the deliberative model. Amos, for instance, saw his role in political discussions as “mediator” and thought that his students generally agreed with his “liberal-humanist” principles of social justice. The language of mediation suggests a liberal conception of that role as a neutral arbiter, enforcing a concept of “right” while being neutral on “the good.” The language of principles likewise expresses some sort of transcendent truth that can be grasped by most (if they are liberally educated). In addition, when responding to student writing, Amos pushed back against what he saw to be “enforcing an ideology” on a research question, which implied some sort of neutrality was possible.
While the liberal model was somewhat more common, the deliberative model was a surprisingly pervasive trend in the qualitative data, particularly in student interviews. For example, Ember spent part of her interview reflecting on how she stayed politically informed and made political decisions. Her approach was highly nuanced, parsing through the biases of others and her own biases (without chalking up political positions to one's place in the world, as the interest-based model would have it). She relied on primary sources, such as campaign websites, to understand how political figures speak about themselves. As such, her approach was democratic deliberation all the way down. This remarkable nuance in her own political life was contrasted with her class, which she saw as fundamentally disconnected from politics. She told me that politics could probably be left out of English composition and it would be fine. As a result, though Ember had a deliberative approach in her own life, she still made the liberal assumption that the research, rhetoric, and argument could be taught apolitically.

In addition, Kate's responses were characterized by the deliberative model of discourse; she also critiqued two other models (demagoguery and interest-based). Since demagoguery is really a degradation of the interest-based model, Kate's reference to demagoguery—political arguments that caused “hate”—was analogous to her reference to expressive, interest-based discourse. The solution to both, according to Kate, was a classroom where students could explore multiple perspectives and perhaps even do research and write from a perspective that they did not hold. In other words, Kate sought a deliberative classroom, one that was attentive to difference and the process of deliberation.

While Matt didn’t want to address controversial issues, he proposed a similarly deliberative approach to (non-controversial) political topics. He said, “I think it could be interesting to implement politics into English class, and maybe like, write, introduce a problem
and then have the assignment be, write about a solution to it.” The only problem was the possibility of running into strong disagreement. But if he knew his classmates better and if they avoided polarizing topics, Matt told me, then discussing politics in composition could be interesting and fun: “I guess there's a couple things that could make me comfortable. One, if I was just comfortable with all my peers, like if I knew my peers better. Again, like in high school, I went to a smaller school, it was only like a thirty-person class, and I knew everybody. And then, maybe just the topic of discussion, if it's about politics but it's not a hot-button topic.” In other words, Matt sought a deliberative, but irenic, classroom environment.

The deliberative model was also common in instructor interviews, though it was sometimes mixed with other models. Amy, for instance, said that politics in FYC can be useful for “looking at making strong claims and being able to support those claims.” Such assertive argument, particularly argument that functions as “thesis-driven list of reasons” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 215), assumes a universal audience and thus buys into the liberal model of discourse. Yet Amy also consciously rejected Enlightenment conceptions of individualism in her classroom, which seemed to position her in the deliberative model of discourse. She was mindful of student difference and prioritized reaching out to one’s audience when writing. Notably, she connected issues of grammar and audience to her progressive beliefs:

I tell them Units 1 and 2, I don't care about your grammar. Make sure it's readable, make sure it's appropriate and run spell-check, don't leave it in there just for the fun of it. This is more of a gatekeeping thing than anything else, and I don't focus on it in Units 1 and 2. And then I contrast that in Unit 3 and say, okay, it matters now, because you've got a different audience now. I'm not your primary audience anymore, although I intersect with your primary audience.

By teaching students to recognize audience as a rhetorical concept—particular, not universal—Amy facilitated reaching across difference toward an Other (even if by being more careful with one’s grammar).
The deliberative model was strongly represented in the approaches of other instructors. In his class, Josiah prioritized different perspectives but seemed to opt for a more irenic view of what discourse should look like (in part because he was sensitive to the demagogic atmosphere). Indeed, Josiah’s impulse toward moderation and nuance looked a lot like what Roberts-Miller (2004) referred to as mediation, or attempting to find temporary, contingent points of agreement in the deliberative process (pp. 203-204). Ultimately, the fact that he created a culture of listening in order for students to explore topics (rather than simply be challenged by alternative perspectives) meant that his classroom was ultimately deliberative:

I try to be as welcoming as possible if [my students] want to explore topics that are more conservative or even more somewhere different on the spectrum…. So I want to, I try to make it as welcoming as possible because I feel like if they’re able to explore those and talk about those, if there are any opportunities to engage with them and maybe challenge certain kinds of assumptions they have or invite them to look at it from different perspectives, they’ll feel more comfortable listening to me and listening to other people in class, because we’re more comfortable listening to them.

This quote not only illustrates Josiah’s listening-oriented approach to the classroom, but it also demonstrates how his “irenic deliberative” is still ultimately agonistic, even if it’s much more nondirective than Deborah’s approach. By creating a culture of listening, Josiah created an opening to push back on unquestioned assumptions. When he encountered “implicit biases or lack of imagination” for understanding different perspectives, he could then point “that stuff out or [ask them to think] about ways that they could have a more well-rounded view on something like that.”

Like Josiah, Amos valued mediation and exploration in his FYC courses. When discussing a composition class at another institution, he described helping students think through how a controversy they were studying in largely deliberative terms. He wanted them to suss out,  

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29It’s notable that in several places, Josiah did simply acknowledge other perspectives and lacked movement toward the “Other”—a sort of “soft” agonism that reaches toward but doesn't quite make it to deliberation.
he told me, “how their lived experience touched on larger political questions and how they were inculcated in those.” The language of experience and inculcation implies certain affective modes of reasoning that the liberal model typically avoids but which the deliberative model embraces. In addition, his mediation was not, in his words, “an antagonistic back and forth” but more of a “Socratic questioning of their beliefs or their claims, trying to get them to articulate them in a way that they would have to make explicit the warrants underneath them.” Arguing about how to argue—making explicit one's warrants—is characteristic of the deliberative model of discourse. While the liberal model also prioritizes consistent reasoning, Amos was “trying to cultivate inquiry” rather than teach students to simply argue for a thesis.

Even for instructors who primarily relied on other models of discourse, the deliberative model did occur occasionally. For example, CJ discussed a positive political experience she had with a student, who approached issues of racial justice with an open mind and explored, rather than argued, the topic. “Seeing [students] form an opinion on something that they didn't really have strong opinion or policy idea of what might work has been a cool experience,” she said. While having a “strong opinion” and crafting a research-based argument centered around a thesis is a fundamentally liberal way to teach argument, CJ seemed to be referring to argument as exploration here. In this case, though CJ primarily relied on the liberal and interest-based models in her instruction, her most treasured moments from her FYC course emerged from coaching a deliberative process.

Similarly, toward the end of her interview, Donna described the kinds of arguments that would counteract demagogic rhetoric: “In order to have a good political discussion where you're actually gonna accomplish something, both sides have to be willing to be persuaded. Both sides have to be willing to admit that they're wrong. You have to have some degree of vulnerability.”
This vulnerability comes about, she told me, by being willing to go outside of the “echo chambers” one might be in. Though Donna never drew on that approach in her teaching—she preferred to keep politics secondary in her course—it remained her standard for what “good arguments” could look like.

**Conclusion: The Trouble with Discourse Models**

The discussion above demonstrates the diverse, broad, and idiosyncratic approaches that students and instructors bring to FYC. Indeed, most participants drew on multiple models of discourse (all, in fact, except Josh), as summarized in Table 7 below.

While there is nothing wrong with drawing on multiple *methods* for teaching for democratic engagement or engaging in argument, the problem is when multiple models are irreconcilably in conflict, leading to contradictions between what a person believes about political argument and how they actually approach it in FYC. I’ll start with a minor example: Amy’s approach to teaching argument (as described above), which was largely deliberative. One of the reasons that Amy found politics helpful in FYC was to help students analyze and create “strong claims” with supporting evidence. In an ideal world, the deliberative model sees argument as exploratory and invitational, partition-based rather than claims-based. The “thesis plus reasons” conception of argument is much more based in the liberal model of discourse, which presumes a dispassionate, universal audience that won’t be turned off by overly aggressive or confident rhetoric. There is a minor disconnect, then, from what model of discourse Amy seemed to rely on (the deliberative model) and the way she taught political argument.

While this disconnect is relatively small and probably contestable, the “muddled combinations” of multiple discourse models lead to much larger gaps in other interviews. To
Table 7: Number of Hypothesis Codes per Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agonistic</th>
<th>Communitarian</th>
<th>Deliberative</th>
<th>Demagoguery</th>
<th>Interest-Based</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</table>
discuss how the unreflective combination of discourse models might lead to inconsistency, I will briefly review two examples from Deborah and Josiah. Though they are largely consistent and (by my own reckoning) are thoughtful, critical instructors who care about their students deeply, these models of discourse nevertheless reveal hidden contradictions that run contrary to some of their professed values.

As discussed in the previous section, Josiah’s approach to the FYC classroom was primarily deliberative. While he saw his neutrality as a “rhetorical effect,” other portions of his interview demonstrated some level of buy-in to the liberal model of discourse. For example, he said:

I sort of see my role as an instructor in the classroom as being a facilitator and a guide and just teaching them how to think critically, how to engage with different topics, but not teaching them what to think. So how to think, but not necessarily what to think. I think their path to becoming the kind of citizen they want to become is ultimately gonna be up to them.

This distinction between the “how” and “what” of thinking critically leads to a strange disconnect in Josiah's approach. On one hand, student self-actualization was important to him, and he believed he was not teaching his students “what to think.” On the other hand, however, the practical effect of him presenting his students with diverse perspectives was that they changed their minds: they moved toward nuance and moderation. Indeed, Josiah saw this change as productive, and he was consciously trying to move them in that direction. He wanted to, in his words, “help students become more nuanced thinkers.” When talking about his pro-life students, he told me, “I get [my students] to maybe say, alright, maybe [alternatives to banning abortion are] okay sometimes. So just trying to find middle ground on a lot of stuff is what I try to do a lot of times.” In other words, practically speaking, Josiah was telling students “what to think”; he was trying to nudge his students toward a nuanced middle ground. Even if he was not trying to
get them to transform their positions, by moving students toward more moderated opinions, Josiah was shaping their political beliefs.

This tension shows up even more strongly in Deborah’s interview. In her interview, Deborah demarcated the “right” and the “good” (though she didn’t use those specific terms). Deborah rightly saw racism, bigotry, and exclusivism as something she must regulate as part of the “right,” which ensures equal access for minority or historically oppressed perspectives and people. It is, in other words, a deliberative move, because it prioritizes difference. Yet Deborah also valued student autonomy and critical thought on questions of the good, which was a more liberal assumption. This approach to the classroom was particularly noticeable when it came to her conservative and/or religious students, specifically Christian ones. For Deborah, “your truth” and “my truth” could not truly be in dialogue, except to clarify the differences between them: “I'm not trying to get you, to not, or to stop believing in what you believe,” she would tell her students, “but you have to accept that [a writer’s perception] of the creation of the world, for example, is just as valid to them as the biblical one is as valid to you. You don't have to accept it as truth, but you have to understand that they accept that as truth. And so, if you value them as a person, then you have to accept their sense of the world.” Certain kinds of truth—she named religion and identity (race, gender, sexual orientation) as two examples—were simply comparing apples to oranges and were not up for argument. In other words, these highly subjective, expressive forms of truth were outside the realm of public deliberation.

Shortly after making this point, Deborah clarified that this distinction wasn’t quite true of political identity—she critiqued Trump’s lies, for instance, after saying that her students “don’t have to not vote for Trump” to engage in her class. She told me, “Now, I look at somebody who is in the cult of Trump's popularity, and I recognize that that's valid for them, but then I'm also
concerned, because it's valid for them, and if I look at it factually, I know it's not real, a lot of it.”

As she worked to parse out the difference between validity and facts, Deborah eventually said that while one could prove Trump wrong with facts, one could not prove faith or identity wrong with comparable forms of data. “It's not so much of a religious truth,” she said, “or a racial or cultural identity and so on, but we know that a lot, or a majority of what he's saying isn't grounded in fact. And so it is a little different than other kinds of self-definition.” In creating this dichotomy, Deborah leaned on the liberal distinction between more empirical, “provable” forms of rationality and more experiential and expressive beliefs. In the liberal calculus, the latter are mere perspectives that one can hold, not opinions that one can debate (at least outside of religious settings). The problem with this assumption is that Deborah’s perspective on the right (such as tolerance and pluralism) and professed neutrality on questions of the good (such who one votes for) in fact disadvantaged religious perspectives whose conceptions of the good influenced their perspectives on the right.

In her discussion, Deborah assumed her students’ Christianity could coexist with the kind of pluralism that she is espousing. In fact, because experience and one's own identity-related perspective were an invalid form of evidence, this dichotomy created a situation where religious students could not allow their religious perspective to be a part of the conversation, and no religious perspective was better or more rational than any other.30 This problem, of course, comes squarely from the liberal model, and is addressed at length in Roberts-Miller's (2004) critique of deontological liberalism. Roberts-Miller (2004) wrote that authors like Fishman and McCarthy (1996) professed to be neutral, but their pedagogy suggested that they favor certain

30As a religious person myself—a positionality I will discuss more in the next chapter in relation to this analysis—I would like to be able to argue that right-wing Christian evangelicalism is politically and morally inferior to, say, the moderate evangelicalism expressed in publications like Christianity Today. The liberal model allows for no such discussion.
kinds of outcomes—or, as they termed it, “student change.” Roberts-Miller (2004) went on to say:

That Fishman is far from neutral is not in and of itself a problem, but it does strike me as a problem that Fishman appears not to see the contradiction between the claims of equal respect for all positions and the actual favoring of certain kinds of stances. This is exactly the criticism made of deontological liberalism—that its apparent neutrality on questions of the good in fact privileges certain philosophies, and that deeply held spiritual beliefs are disadvantaged in liberal public discourse. (p. 97)

Similarly, that Deborah was not neutral in advocating for a pluralistic approach was not a problem in itself, but because the validity of certain identity-based positions (such as religious belief) was not up for discussion, such students were disadvantaged. Ultimately, though Deborah told students she was not trying to get them to change what they believed (theologically or politically), her approach nevertheless asked them to adopt a certain kind of pluralism that did change their beliefs: that all religious perspectives are equally valid. She mentioned, for instance, a student whose “attitudes towards things had changed over time” where Deborah’s course was an “epiphany” for them. “They became sort of a super progressive,” Deborah said, concluding: “Those are often the things that make me happy. It’s not that the students agree with my perspective that makes me happy, but that students recognize the value of other peoples' perspectives.” Yet it’s difficult to extricate the two; in the case Deborah cited, recognizing the value of a certain perspective led to agreeing with that perspective, to becoming “a super progressive.” As with Josiah’s approach to helping students become “nuanced thinkers,” by exposing students to different perspectives, Deborah was asking—however implicitly—for students to change their beliefs.

If this liberal ideal of neutrality is problematic, however, what can be done to replace it? How might instructors and students move forward with political topics in FYC, given their current perceptions about the topic and assumptions of how political argument should function in
a democracy? In my final chapter, I attempt to answer these questions and chart a path forward for politics in FYC.
Chapter 5: Toward a Deliberative Composition

In my previous chapters, I have discussed the long and fraught history of politics in composition courses, from Berlin and Hairston to Duffy and Blankenship. By examining my quantitative and qualitative data at length, I have explored how instructors shied away from politics as a subject of discussion and limited the scope of political topics; how student experiences were largely apolitical (though not by choice); and how participants were remarkably open to politics in composition, within certain boundaries. In the previous chapter, I attempted to dive beneath the surface and investigate the assumptions behind these practices and beliefs, demonstrating that most students and instructors held to some combination of liberal and deliberative beliefs about politics in FYC.

In this chapter, I hope to bring each of these threads together and chart a path forward for politics in composition based on the findings of this study. To do so, I will first reflect on my own position as a researcher, a teacher, and a religious rhetor and reflect on the affordances and limitations of my own identity. I will then discuss the openness of most participants to integrating politics in FYC in some form or fashion before tackling the difficult subject of instructor positionality. Once I survey the role of the instructor, I will turn to curriculum, summarizing the implications for practice that arise from the study (as well as the tension between demagoguery and deliberation). Finally, I will conclude with suggestions for future research—most importantly, the need to hear directly from conservative students, who were often the Other in these conversations.
**Researcher Positionality and Advocacy**

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, my position as a heterosexual, cisgender, white Christian male (who favors a deliberative approach to public discourse) necessarily colored my approach to this data. At some points, it meant that I did not collect data that would have allowed for a more thorough, contextual consideration of participant positionality and motives, such as ethnic and racial information. Though I presented myself as neutral in my interviews—a necessary move to preserve the validity of the data—my neutrality concealed the fact that my ulterior motive was advocacy for my own perspective. I believed strongly (and still do) that a deliberative approach to civil discourse is the best solution to our toxic public sphere, and that FYC is a particularly useful site for exploring those deliberative values.

While that desire was not problematic in and of itself, like other belief systems, it functioned as a terministic screen. Because my eventual goal was to advocate for a deliberative, democratic, and socially just public sphere, I interpreted my data through that lens. During the coding process, for example, I noticed how I was quick to code portions of a participant’s interview that represented approaches that I found problematic—liberal assumptions about neutrality, for instance, or deterministic, interest-based ideas about how a person’s position in the world led to their political positions. Often, what I was seeking was not the authentic truth of my participants’ experiences (which sometimes challenged my frameworks and troubled my definitions), but to validate a preexisting hypothesis. In other words, I had a tendency to obscure the places where a participant would engage in deliberative practices in favor of exposing the ways that my participants drew on other models.

To conduct my research reflexively, I relied on three methods to counterbalance my own positionality and the biases that accompanied it: dialogue with other scholars, a bracketing
interview, and recoding my most troubling data. As part of my research process, I worked with half a dozen colleagues—both from writing studies and from literature by training, ranging from experienced tenured professors to graduate students—to test my codebook on some of my most difficult data (which included selections from CJ, Deborah, and Josiah’s interviews). This process revealed two things. First, by and large, the consensus of the group (which applied the codes without my input) generally matched my own coding strategies. While there was some difference on specific applications, their conclusions mirrored my own most of the time. Second, however, there was a notable departure from that trend of consistency: where I had coded Deborah’s interview as entirely agonistic, my colleagues saw her interview as characterized by both agonism and the deliberative model. To reconcile these differences, I returned to my codebook and distinguished between the agonistic deliberative and the irenic deliberative.

In addition, I relied on a lengthy bracketing interview to help me think through the implications of my work. While the practice of “bracketing” in qualitative research—using an interview to set aside or challenge researcher biases when a researcher has a personal connection to their study—is methodologically varied (Tufford & Newman, 2010), I worked with my interviewer to be consistent with the assumptions in my own methodology. I wanted to avoid a liberal-style method of bracketing that meant I would “bracket” my own opinions and separate them from my analysis so that I can be “objective.” Rather, I wanted to be productively challenged by others’ perspectives so that I could analyze my data in a way that is fair and nuanced (rather than detached and neutral).

The results of the bracketing interview indicated that I, too, worked from liberal assumptions some of the time; despite my empathic, affective, dialogic framework, I often analyzed my data from a highly cognitive perspective and—outside of the informed consent
process—never addressed my position as the researcher with my participants. I tacitly assumed that I could be apolitical in the research process (despite conducting my research in the aftermath of the 2020 election). Yet, as my interviewer brought up, I was unable to recruit conservative students. Although I assumed it was simply an issue of sampling—only three conservative students had originally agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview—the absence begged the question whether I, as a researcher in the Department of English, was implicitly coded as “liberal” and thus potentially hostile. Researcher positionality can lead to the allowance or denial of access, as Cope and Ringer (2014) note with religiously inflected research. In this case, my lack of consideration of how participants might perceive me as a researcher may have closed the door to conservative perspectives or may have affected the responses of what participants I did interview.

These two challenges to my assumptions—coding my data with other scholars and exploring my research through a bracketing interview—led me to my third method of counterbalancing my positionality: recoding my interviews. As part of the process of listening well to my participants, I spent a lot of time rethinking and reviewing my hypothesis codes. Some interviews were recoded two or three times as my underlying assumptions were revealed and as my codebook evolved. At times, I meditated on my interview transcripts as one might explicate a poem or exegete a religious text, attending to the specifics of language, nuance, and emotional inflection in search of better understanding.

It may seem that exploring this reflexive process is more appropriate for a methodology discussion or better left out of an academic text altogether. However, I reflect on this process here to intentionally foreground the subjectivity of my own perspective as I draw conclusions from my data. The discussion at the end of the previous chapter, for instance, was only made
possible by extensive contemplation on my own positionality. Deborah’s interaction with a conservative religious student was difficult for me as a researcher and as a religious rhetor, especially since she occasionally used negatively coded language to describe the interaction: the religious student had “gotten his tail-feathers ruffled” by the text, she told me. As a colleague pointed out, at one point, I had been that student as a freshman in college, and my prior experiences led to what Catherine Pavia (2015) called Burkean identification with a research participant. Yet my ethical obligation as an empathic, deliberative researcher was to portray my participants in terms consistent with how they would see themselves. I wrestled with how to do this; I pored over Deborah’s interview transcript for hours. I left it and pondered my own emotional reactions to her statements; I returned to it and recoded it again. It was only until I felt like I understood Deborah’s approach—however imperfectly—that I was able to code that section effectively and begin to write about it. The analysis required that I respected her position and recognized her love for her students; in Blankenship’s (2019) terms, I had to begin with “changing” myself, “with listening, with trying to understand the personal and political factors that influence the person” (p. 20). I had to start with myself—with reflexive listening—before I was able to engage her perspective.

I am trying to say, in other words, that my positionality and my conclusions from my data are inextricable. It is my hope that, by reviewing my own biases and the ways I have attempted to be thoughtful and reflexive about this process, my conclusions have been challenged and refined by other perspectives. Indeed, many of my takeaways below are drawn directly from my participants, rather than from my personal perspective alone. At the very least, my reader should be empowered to understand where my conclusions come from and how they might be ideologically inflected.
Openness to Integrating Politics and FYC

One of the biggest takeaways from the quantitative and qualitative data is the openness on the part of students and instructors to integrating politics in FYC. Though instructors were hesitant about how political topics could be integrated, students were more open to these ideas. Eleven out of the 13 participants interviewed had at least a mixed-positive view of integrating politics in FYC in some form, and both of the remaining participants (Donna and Ember) thought that political examples could be useful as illustrations or examples. Notably, though instructors almost universally believed (with the exception of Deborah) that politics should be secondary to course concepts, students saw politics as a potential topic for discussion (Abby, Kate, Leo), if a noncontroversial one (Matt), or a means of developing critical thinking (Josh). In other words, students were more open than instructors to integrating politics into FYC in a variety of ways.

With the caveat that no conservative students were interviewed, these results indicate that students may be more willing to engage with politics as a class topic than most instructors believe. Though Donna said that most of her students were “sick of talking about politics,” I wonder whether they were, like Ember, sick of particular method of talking about politics. Ember, as noted in the previous chapter, conflated argument with hateful or polarizing discussion; while she was somewhat open to limited political examples, she was hesitant because of her own experiences: “I don't really like to get into politics, because usually it just leads into an argument, and no one's ever willing to listen.” Ember and Donna both saw “politics” in polarized ways; in fact, such polarization was at the core of Donna’s professed definition of politics. Perhaps what they were sick of was not politics itself, but of demagogic politics.

What is necessary, then, is not to throw out political topics altogether, but to clearly define how to argue about politics—to explicitly name toxic forms of argument and regulate
them. Given the openness of the other students interviewed, and the tendency to conflate demagoguery with political argument, a productive path forward seems to revolve around teaching political topics with guardrails and a culture of listening. If instructors of FYC are to productively engage in political topics in their courses, ensuring that students are on the same page about what constitutes an “argument” and prioritizing an atmosphere of listening are paramount. In other words, work needs to be done on the stasis of definition: once “good arguments” are clearly defined and limitations to political arguments are in place (to ensure equal access and participation), both students and instructors might find themselves willing or even eager to engage in political topics. This possibility, at any rate, is what students seem to be open to.

The Role of the Instructor: Neutral Arbiter or Fair Facilitator?

If instructors take on political topics, however, they must wrestle with their role in the classroom and how they propose to address their own political beliefs. To “quarantine” one’s political thought (to quote Josh’s turn of phrase) is to buy into the liberal assumption that attempting to be unbiased is both possible and desirable. Yet most FYC instructors don’t consciously believe that they can be unbiased; “social constructivism remains hegemonic” in writing studies, as Roberts-Miller (2004) observed over a decade ago (p. 161), and it shows no signs of going away. Berlin (1988) and his social-epistemic theories are mainstream concepts in writing studies. As Josiah told me, “I think neutrality is pretty much impossible when it comes to almost anything—everyone has a position, everyone has a rhetorical perspective.”

Despite the hegemony of constructivist epistemologies in writing studies, most of the instructors in my study saw politics as somehow separate from a rhetorical education. (Deborah,
as always, remains an asterisk to this claim. Rhetorical education? “That’s politics, all of it,” she remarked.) Three out of seven instructors interviewed saw themselves as apolitical in their instruction, and five out of the seven instructors saw their role in the classroom as primarily neutral. One of the remaining instructors primarily connected their political role to their LGBTQ identity, rather than any political positions. In other words, a substantial number of instructors saw their roles as apolitical, and most of them conceived of themselves as neutral arbiters in the classroom, even if their classes were political to some extent.

Seeing politics as “secondary to class concepts” (as most of the instructors did) required seeing the class concepts as apolitical in themselves—abstract rhetorical principles (or literacy practices) that can then be applied to political situations. A rhetorical education is, in other words, “apolitical training in discourse,” the foundation of the liberal model (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 39). Yet, as I demonstrated in Chapter 4, even teaching students “how to think” while consciously avoiding telling them what to think has a political effect, especially for religious students (see, for instance, Anderson, 1989; Ringer, 2013).

If seeing rhetorical education as fundamentally apolitical is untenable—and I believe it is—then instructors must formulate ethical ways to approach a classroom that is, in Berlin’s (1988) terms, “always already ideological” (p. 477). Such an approach doesn’t have to mean that the instructor must take a political stand in the classroom, as some critical pedagogy adherents advocate. As Donna put it, “If they’re just, your instructor just, sipping their coffee, talks about their own politics, that's probably pretty jarring [for students].” The deliberative model offers an alternative to the untenable neutrality of the liberal model while avoiding the blatant advocacy that led to objections from past generations of instructors like Hairston (1992).
The choice between neutrality and open bias, as Roberts-Miller (2004) noted, is a false dichotomy; it “obscures the other options that instructors have, such as being fair” (p. 207). Neutral, she argued, implies some sort of epistemological claim about how one thinks; in contrast, fairness is “behavioral…describing how one treats students” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 207). In other words, instructors in the deliberative model do not have to be objective or neutral to be fair; they need only consider that “the instructor’s voice always carries more power” in the classroom and carefully strategize about how one might create an environment of “equal respect” where “a set of grading criteria are applied to all students equally, and...the same discursive demands” are made of all students (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 207).

To explore what “fairness” versus “neutrality” might look like, I’ll use an example from two instructors. Several instructors that I interviewed used similar tactics with potentially sensitive political situations, which I termed “redirection.” The core of this strategy is to avoid engaging politically with a student; when inappropriate political content is raised, the instructor redirects the student back to the assignment prompt. Two of these instructors—Amy and CJ—had striking similarities when they applied this tactic. Both Amy and CJ were liberal, if not progressive; both of them had course themes with political overtones (social media and information literacy); and both of them used the same redirective approach to deal with students who inappropriately brought in their political views. In both cases, the student had raised a potentially polarizing right-wing objection and didn’t answer the prompt. That strategy worked for Amy—her student removed the content—but it backfired for CJ: her student just ignored her feedback and sent her an angry email after she gave him a low grade.

In part, it seemed like the difference was the prompt. CJ’s prompt was explicitly political: find good sources to disprove right-wing conspiracy theories. Amy’s prompt was not political;
she wanted them to write annotated bibliographic entries for their sources, and the student's political opinions didn’t fall in the realm of “summary.” The student in CJ’s class seemed to disagree with the premise of the prompt, whereas the student in Amy's class accepted the premise of the prompt. In other words, CJ’s professed neutrality belied the political nature of the prompt, which might be seen as discriminatory or biased by conservative students. It certainly asked them to think about source material in ways that they might not be accustomed to, particularly if they distrusted the mainstream media. When the student’s assignment received a failing grade, it seemed that the student’s suspicions were confirmed, and he accused her of politically motivated grading. From CJ’s perspective, she was being politically neutral and never took a side; from the student’s perspective, she was biased and unfair.

The solution that the deliberative model suggests is to ensure “equal respect” and the “same discursive demands” for every student (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 207). In other words, the deliberative models requires that instructors (and other rhetors in a democracy) “give reasons that people from a different perspective will consider valid” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 203). In the case of CJ’s student, the situation might have been avoided if CJ discussed with the student the underlying premise of the prompt and had given the student an opportunity to contest the fairness of the prompt itself. If CJ had been able to unpack some of those assumptions—asking the student, for example, to differentiate between what arguments get made and how they get made—the situation may not have backfired.

In other words, I am proposing here that instructors reflect on the underlying premises of their courses. What sort of discourse is valued? Does this discourse ask students to become certain kinds of rhetors or citizens? Is it possible that these values may conflict with some of the values students bring into the classroom? If so, revealing the premise of an assignment or
discussion may be an important practice when students object to the assignment itself. As Roberts-Miller (2017) noted, rhetors work against demagoguery when they conduct “arguments about how we should argue…especially if those arguments concern whether the rules are being applied to all participants equally” (p. 15, emphasis original). In a situation like CJ’s, where a student was engaging in polarizing and potential demagogic rhetoric, making the terms of an assignment up for argument might work to counteract otherwise problematic encounters. Students must, however, feel like they can voice such objections; an atmosphere of openness and listening is required.

**Deliberative Argument as a Solution to Demagoguery: Suggestions for Practice**

I turn now to curriculum. Now that I have surveyed what politics in FYC currently looks like, what could it look like? How might we avoid what Roberts-Miller (2004) termed inconsistent “eclecticism” and articulate “which political theory we are using” as instructors (p. 223)? What implications might this study have for responding to the “political” turn?

Perhaps the most obvious implication is that instructors should consider integrating political topics, discussions, and assignments into their FYC courses, particularly if those courses are already imbricated into politics by virtue of being “rhetorical.” Though our culture of demagoguery makes political instruction a potentially fraught task, it is difficult to see how students will transfer rhetorical virtues to the public sphere—in Duffy’s (2019) terms—without applying those virtues to an analogous argumentative situation, such as a class assignment. If compositionists are to respond to the “political turn,” they may have to “get political.” But how should compositionists approach this task?
As I’ve made clear, I think that the deliberative approach is the most fruitful for countering demagoguery and toxic discourse in political argument. When I began this study, I thought that this perspective was limited among writing instructors and nonexistent among students. Like many scholars, I saw FYC students from a deficit-based mindset (recognizing their deficiencies), rather than an asset-based perspective (highlighting their strengths). One of the most challenging and surprising findings of this study was that the deliberative model was a close second to the liberal model as the most common way of approaching argument, either in practice or hypothetically. Furthermore, this approach was led by students, students who were sick of “hateful” arguments and had ideas for how to productively discuss and write about politics in FYC. While they didn’t always have the nuance or theoretical rigor of scholars in writing studies, the students in my study were far from lacking. Intuitively, they responded to demagoguery with democratic deliberation. Consider this striking passage:

Kate: I just thought of that, where, I kind of saw that there might be a lot of disagreements that might cause a lot of, like, more arguments and cause more hate than it would the purpose of the argument, or like the discussion…. I mean, I think it would be very interesting to have more political conversations in class. But again, the arguments might get out of hand, I feel like, [and] that's why I said that it wouldn't be as beneficial.

Interviewer: Sure. What would you say it would take for a political conversation to be constructive in an English class, or I guess in other classes?

Kate: …If the teacher were to ask a question and just say…oh, here's this policy, what are your, just comment your thoughts on it or something, or like which side do you support. Kind of like what you asked me earlier. Versus something that's like, um [pause] here's this policy and discuss like, what you think each side of, each, three different sides I guess, what that entails and how do you think people that support those three sides, how do you think they feel, do you agree or disagree with them, kind of just getting more specific…. I mean, basically just giving a lot more direction than just asking a question and your thoughts on it.
Here, Kate began with an offhand reference to demagoguery, which would “cause more hate” in political arguments and “get out of hand.” The possibility for hateful or polarized arguments were the main reason why Kate hesitated about integrating political topics in FYC. When I asked what it would take to have a productive, constructive political conversation in FYC, however, she pivoted from expressive argument (“comment your thoughts on it”) to argument as empathy: “how do you think people that support those three sides, how do you think they feel.” By directing students to consider multiple perspectives and empathize with other points of view, Kate told me, political conversations could be interesting and beneficial. Kate’s argument is democratic deliberation through and through, from the importance of diverse perspectives (“what do you think each side…entails”) to a highly empathic, emotionally robust form of inquiry (“how do you think they feel”).

This trend was present among instructors as well. Consider, for instance, why Josiah positioned his class as listening and exploration-oriented (i.e. deliberative):

So, my main purpose—I want to feel like it’s a welcoming place where students can explore the perspectives that they want to engage in and explore with, because I feel like a lot of times many students, especially from a moderate to a conservative background, will be a little afraid to explore topics that are often labeled as politically conservative at the university. Because they will have been told or it has been implied or maybe they will have encountered it in high school that they might receive some kind of bias or backlash from various topics that are explored that way.

In other words, Josiah responded to a culture of demagoguery (where conservative students may be afraid to explore certain topics because of how they are inflected by political identity) by creating a deliberative environment (where those students feel listened to and invited to explore various topics).

In other words, Roberts-Miller is not the only one who believes that deliberative practices represent an antidote to political demagoguery; these participants indicated much the same.
Indeed, the anecdotes above are already suggestive for how composition instructors could begin to integrate a more consistent, deliberative approach to teaching political topics. As Kate suggested, inviting as many perspectives as possible and asking students to respond to others in empathy (seeking to investigate why they might believe what they believe) is the foundation of effective, deliberative inquiry. A classroom that values diversity and empathy must first (as Josiah demonstrated) establish a culture of listening; students will only speak if they believe they will be heard, and listening allows for productive conflict. Practically speaking, this principle means setting ground rules and modeling what “virtuous arguments” should look like in class discussions and assignments about politics, as suggested by Duffy (2019).

In addition, research and writing in a deliberative classroom may look less like thesis-driven argument (at least at first) and more like exploration and investigation, what Amos referred to as “cultivating inquiry.” One of the students, Matt, thought it “could be constructive if [the class] was just learning about politics instead of maybe having a debate.” While Matt’s perspective is particularly irenic, the assumption behind it was that the process of learning counteracted the negative possibilities of “debate.” Similarly, Roberts-Miller advocated for a change to the thesis-driven teaching of argument. When we ask our students to write a thesis-driven list of reasons with topic sentences and call it an essay, Roberts-Miller (2004) argued, “we insist that students establish a certain kind of relationship with their audience. We ask that students tell their audiences things” (p. 216). Roberts-Miller instead proposed the partition, or a statement telling the audience what the paper or argument aims to do (much like I did at the beginning of this chapter). Roberts-Miller (2004) concluded, “In short, separating the thesis and partition enables a writer to imagine discourse as a form of exploration. A continual immersion
in such writing might help students (and teachers) imagine public discourse as a form of testing and exploration, rather than as a form of expression or aggression” (p. 218).

To summarize: a deliberatively minded instructor might respond to the “political turn” by teaching political topics; by cultivating an environment of listening and empathy before broaching potentially divisive issues; and by teaching argument as exploration through research and consideration of other perspectives, providing an alternative to the aggressive, expressive discourse of the post-Trump public sphere.

**Conclusion: Future Directions and Charting Possibilities**

As discussed in Chapter 2, this study is necessarily limited by the sample size, by the lack of representation from certain groups, and by the fact that qualitative research (by its nature) is suggestive rather than summative. Much more empirical research is needed, especially since in-person composition instruction was a rarity in this study. As some participants indicated, in-person coursework would likely change the frequency and tenor of political discussions in FYC. This study also primarily examined the first course of a two-course sequence, and one that was particularly rhetorical in its orientation. Future scholarship might explore how participants’ openness to political topics changes in courses that are oriented more toward academic research, writing about writing (WAW), or writing across the curriculum (WAC).

In addition, this study was almost entirely descriptive; in other words, it examined politics in FYC as they currently stand at a single public university. My hypothesis—that a deliberative approach to composition would help counteract demagogic rhetoric—has been enacted in part by some of the instructors in this study, but it needs much more testing, theorizing, and concrete pedagogical application. How might a deliberative approach change the
nuts-and-bolts of a composition course? How do students in deliberative composition classes react to this approach, and does it actually work to counteract demagoguery? What counts as “evidence” that such a rhetorical education actually works—in other words, how can compositionists seek evidence of transfer? These are important questions in need of further exploration and empirical inquiry.

The last and most striking opening for future research is the need to investigate conservative students’ experiences and perceptions of politics in FYC. Though a number of conservative students participated in the survey, none of them volunteered to be interviewed, representing a huge gap in the data. Even with this absence, conservative students were everywhere in this study, from frustrating encounters (Deborah; CJ; Kate) to students afraid to speak up (Josiah) to the perceived majority of the student body (CJ; Josh; Matt; Josiah; Mandy). As the Other of much of the composition scholarship on politics (and certainly the Other of this study), compositionists committed to rhetorical empathy and empathic research have a responsibility to listen to the perspectives of conservative students.

As I close out this study, I want to reiterate that I am under no impression that this empathic, deliberative approach to composition is fully achievable. Yet, as Roberts-Miller (2004) has noted, “If public argument is bad, perhaps there is something wrong with the teaching of public argument. Instead of replicating exactly the practice that leads to consequences we dislike, we can reflect on it, and try to enact a practice that might get us the kind of public discourse we would like to see” (p. 228).

That desire—to understand, reflect on, and change our approach to public argument—is at the core of this study: describing what’s currently happening in FYC, understanding the experiences of students and instructors in those situations, and then determining how this
understanding might help scholars of composition aim toward something better. To change our approach to teaching composition is ambitious, especially since deliberative democratic engagement “makes high demands of its citizens” (Roberts-Miller, 2004, p. 187). And to reach for the healing and transformation of our toxic public discourse is more than ambitious—it is, perhaps, a pipe dream. It is, I believe, still an ideal worth pursuing.
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Appendix A: Survey Protocol

Student Survey

[The online consent form was attached first.]

1. I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By clicking the “I Agree” button below, I am agreeing to be in this study. I can print or save a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can close my internet browser. (Yes, I agree to participate; No, I do not agree to participate [routed to end]).

2. Are you 18 years old or older? (Yes/No; if no, directed to the end of the survey.)

3. Please select your gender. (Female, male, other [open answer].)

4. Are you currently enrolled in English 101 or English 102? (Closed answer multiple choice: English 101, English 102, and “I’m not enrolled in either.” If the latter option is chosen, the student will be directed to the end of the survey.)

5. What is the modality of your class? Select all that apply. (Online/asynchronous, online/synchronous, hybrid [online and in person], face-to-face)

6. The following questions ask about your English class’s theme.
   a. Does your course have a main theme or topic? (Yes/No)
      X. (If yes): What theme or topic does your course have? Choose one of the following:
      1. Metacognition (English 101)
      2. Social Media (English 101)
      3. Fake News or Journalism & Ethics (English 101)
      4. Inquiry into Monsters/Myths (English 102)
      5. Inquiry into Food (English 102)
      6. Inquiry into Heroes/ Heroines (English 102)
      7. Other (closed answer)
   b. My class topic is interesting. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)
   c. I consider my class topic to be political. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)

7. Please respond to the following statements.
   a. I think politics is important. (Strongly Agree----Strongly Disagree)
   b. I follow politics closely. (Strongly Agree----Strongly Disagree)
   c. I consider myself politically informed. (Strongly Agree----Strongly Disagree)
   d. I consider myself politically liberal. (Strongly Agree---Strongly Disagree)
   e. I consider myself politically conservative. (Strongly Agree---Strongly Disagree).

4. If or when political topics come up during your English class, why do they come up? Select all that apply. (Because of the class theme; because of the class assignments; because of the professor’s examples; because my classmates bring them up; other, open answer.)

5. Politics comes up often in my class. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)

6. I bring up politics often. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)

7. My professor brings up politics often. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)

8. The following questions are about your classmates.
a. My classmates bring up politics often. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)
b. I usually agree with my classmates’ political opinions. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)
c. My classmates’ political opinions make class more interesting. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)
d. I think students in my class have a lot of different political opinions. (Strongly agree----Strongly disagree)
e. I feel comfortable with political discussions in class. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree.)

9. The following questions are about the class material in your English 101 or 102 class (assignments, readings, and/or discussions).
a. Political references or discussions make class interesting. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)
b. Political references or discussions benefit the class. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree.)
c. Political references or discussions distract from the class. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree)
d. Discussing politics in class is constructive. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree)

10. Have you ever felt frustrated as a result of a political discussion or topic in class? 
(Yes/No/Not sure)
11. If so, please briefly elaborate. (Short answer)
12. Any other comments or clarifications? (Short answer)

13. Thank you for completing the survey! Would you like to continue participating in the study? Continuing to participate will entail a small payment in the form of a $10 gift card, upon the completion of a follow-up interview. (If the student clicks “Yes,” they will be routed to the Consent for Continuing Participation form.)

a. I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By clicking the “I Agree” button below, I am agreeing to continue to participate in this study. I can print or save a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can close my internet browser or email the research team. (Yes, I agree to participate; No, I do not agree to participate [routed to end]).
b. Thanks for agreeing to participate! Please provide your email address below so that we can contact you regarding your follow-up interview. (Open answer)
c. In general, when might you be free to meet with a researcher for an interview? (Multiple choice grid with mornings, afternoons, and evenings, Monday through Friday.)
Instructor Survey

[The online consent form was attached first.]

1. I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By clicking the “I Agree” button below, I am agreeing to be in this study. I can print or save a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can close my internet browser. (Yes, I agree to participate; No, I do not agree to participate [routed to end]).

2. Are you currently teaching English 101 or English 102? (Closed answer multiple choice: English 101, English 102, Both, and “I’m not teaching either.” If the latter option is chosen, the instructor will be directed to the end of the survey.)

3. Please select your gender. (Female, male, other [open answer].)

4. Please select your standing in the department. (Graduate Teaching Associate, non-tenure-line faculty, tenure-line faculty (untenured), tenure-line faculty (tenured))

5. What is the modality of your class(es)? Select all that apply. (Online/asynchronous, online/synchronous, hybrid [online and in person], face-to-face)

6. The following questions ask about your English class’s theme.
   a. Does your course have a main theme or topic of inquiry? (Yes/No)
      i. (If yes): What theme or topic does your course have? Choose one of the following:
         1. Metacognition (English 101)
         2. Social Media (English 101)
         3. Fake News or Journalism & Ethics (English 101)
         4. Inquiry into Monsters/Myths (English 102)
         5. Inquiry into Food (English 102)
         6. Inquiry into Heroes/Heroines (English 102)
         7. Other (closed answer)
   b. My class topic is interesting. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)
   c. I consider my class topic to be political. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)

8. Please respond to the following statements.
   a. I think politics is important. (Strongly Agree----Strongly Disagree)
   b. I follow politics closely. (Strongly Agree----Strongly Disagree)
   c. I consider myself politically informed. (Strongly Agree----Strongly Disagree)
   d. I consider myself politically liberal. (Strongly Agree---Strongly Disagree)
   e. I consider myself politically conservative. (Strongly Agree---Strongly Disagree).

9. If or when political topics come up during your English class, why do they come up? Select all that apply. (Because of the class theme; because of the class assignments; because of the examples I choose; because my students bring up politics; other, open answer.)

10. Politics comes up often in my English class(es). (Strongly agree---strongly disagree.)

11. The following questions are about your experience in teaching your English class(es).
   a. I bring up politics often in my English class(es). (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)
b. I usually express my political opinions in class. (Strongly agree---Strongly disagree)
c. I feel comfortable with political discussions in class. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree.)
d. My students usually agree with my political opinions. (Strongly agree----Strongly disagree; “I’m not sure” option.)
e. Do you bring up politics in your English class? Why or why not? (Open answer)

12. The following questions are about your students.
a. My students bring up politics often. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)
b. I usually agree with my students’ political opinions. (Strongly agree----Strongly disagree; “I’m not sure” option.)
c. I think the students in my class(es) have a lot of different political opinions. (Strongly agree----Strongly disagree; “I’m not sure” option.)
d. My students seem to feel comfortable with political discussions in class.

13. The following questions are about political content in your class(es).
a. Political references or discussions make class interesting. (Strongly agree---strongly disagree)
b. Political references or discussions benefit the class. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree.)
c. Political references or discussions distract from the class. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree)
d. Discussing politics in class is constructive. (Strongly agree----strongly disagree)

14. Have you ever felt frustrated as a result of a political discussion or topic in your English class(es)? (Yes/No/Unsure)

15. If so, please briefly elaborate. (Short answer)

16. Any other comments or clarifications? (Short answer)

17. Thank you for completing the survey! Would you like to continue participating in the study? Continuing to participate will entail a small payment in the form of a $10 gift card, upon the completion of a follow-up interview. (If the student clicks “Yes,” they will be routed to the Consent for Continuing Participation form.)

d. I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By clicking the “I Agree” button below, I am agreeing to continue to participate in this study. I can print or save a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can close my internet browser or email the research team. (Yes, I agree to participate; No, I do not agree to participate [routed to end]).
e. Thanks for agreeing to participate! Please provide your email address below so that we can contact you regarding your follow-up interview. (Open answer)
f. In general, when might you be free to meet with a researcher for an interview? (Multiple choice grid with mornings, afternoons, and evenings, Monday through Friday.)
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

The interviews for this study were conducted in a semi-structured interview format. Many of the specific questions for follow-up interviews were constructed based on participant-specific survey responses and general trends across the data. However, the questions listed below formed the basis of the interview protocol, and Questions 1, 3, 5, and 8 were asked in every interview.

1. Before we get started, I wanted to clarify a key term for this study. Almost all of the questions you answered in your survey had to do with “politics.” How would you define that word, personally? What idea did you have in mind when you completed the survey?
2. In this survey question, you stated ________. Can you say a little more about that?
3. In your survey, you mentioned ________ about your political values. Would you elaborate on that?
4. In your survey, you stated that the students in class mostly agreed/disagreed with your political opinions. Why do you say that?
5. What role, if any, do you think politics should play in English classes? Why?
6. How do you think x answer affected y answer?
7. In this question on the student/teacher survey, the majority of students/teachers said ______. What is your reaction to that?
8. Tell me about a time when you felt like a political discussion in class went especially well.
   a. On the other hand, were there times when you felt that a discussion was particularly tense, heated, or awkward?
Appendix C: Codebooks

The following codebooks (which are descriptive and hypothesis coding, respectively) were paired with magnitude coding (Saldaña 2016) to gauge how students and instructors evaluate political experiences and beliefs and either critique or affirm them. The magnitude codes were used as follows: Political-Positive, Apolitical-Positive, Political-Negative, Apolitical-Negative, Political-Mixed, Apolitical-Mixed, Political-Neutral, and Apolitical-Neutral.

The following codebooks have been condensed for clarity.

Descriptive Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Perception of Classmates</td>
<td>This code refers to how students perceive their classmates as political actors. To fit this code, the codeable unit must feature a student reflecting on the political beliefs or actions of their classmates. If this code refers to interactions outside of class, this code cannot be applied.</td>
<td>“I mean, sometimes, there is a sense where you can interact with a [fellow student], even online, and get a little bit of a sense for, oh, they probably believe more on this side.” —Abby, student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Perception of Instructor</td>
<td>This code refers to how students perceive their instructor as a political actor. To fit this code, the unit must feature a student reflecting on their instructor’s political beliefs or actions. If the unit refers to instructors in general, this code cannot be applied.</td>
<td>“This semester I have not had any interaction with any teachers, like politically.” —Abby, student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Perception of Self</td>
<td>This code refers to how students see themselves as political actors. To fit this code, the unit must feature a student reflecting on their own political beliefs or actions. If the unit occurs in the context of a student comparing their beliefs to the other students in their class, “Student Perception of Classmates” may be applied.</td>
<td>“I did not talk about politics at all, at least in my writing.” —Matt, student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“[In my paper], I did talk about how, just, overcast in general, how do political parties utilize false information, false news, misinformation to get, to forward their political agenda.”
| Instructor Perception of Self | This code refers to how instructors see themselves as political actors. | To fit this code, the unit must feature an instructor reflecting on a) their own political beliefs or actions, or b) how their own political beliefs intersect with their teaching. If the unit primarily addresses course content, this code cannot be applied; the code may be “Perception of Class.” | “I definitely think [my political identity] intersects in the way that I grade [my students] on conventions and style in their writing.”  
—Amy, instructor

“I really try hard not to make it incredibly apparent what my political views are.”  
—CJ, instructor |
| Instructor Perception of Students | This code refers to how instructors perceive their students as political actors, including the student papers and assignments. | To fit this code, the unit must feature an instructor reflecting on their students' political beliefs or actions, including their writing. If the unit primarily features self-reflection, even if student political perspectives are included, this code cannot be applied. | “In my experience, students have, in the past, brought up politics often. It's something they're interested in writing about.”  
—Amos, instructor |
| Perception of Class | This code refers to how both students and instructors view the current class content as political or apolitical. | To fit this code, the unit must feature a student or an instructor reflecting on the current course content as political or apolitical. If the unit refers primarily to specific actors in the class, rather than to the content of the course, this code cannot be applied. If it applies to potential content in the class, it may be “Perception of the Class (Hypothetical).” | “We did an assignment where I had given them like five internet conspiracy theories, and this was working on like fact-checking and source validity. So they had to go through and look at the viral news article and then find a more reliable article related to that source and then evaluate which one was more reliable basically.”  
—CJ, instructor |
Perception of Class (Hypothetical)

This code refers to how both students and instructors view hypothetical political or apolitical class content, particularly in reference to the ideal role of politics in FYC.

To fit this code, the unit must feature reflection on potential situations in FYC, not current ones. This especially means reflection about the role of politics in FYC or evaluation of implementing/avoiding political topics in a hypothetical situation. If the unit refers to a current class, classmate, or instructor, this code cannot be applied; it is strictly hypothetical.

“So as a place to explore political opinions, I think English class works. It's, especially the way we teach it [here], it's asking people to learn and deploy different methodologies, and as I said before, political subject matter is a good area for that.”
—Amos, instructor

“I mean, I think it would be very interesting to have more political conversations in class.”
—Kate, student

Hypothesis Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Liberal Model | Assumes that a rhetor can use rational discourse to discern a policy in the “universal” best interest; prioritizes individual autonomy, neutrality, and transcending one's own perspective. Governments make no judgments about the good, only about the right. | To fit this code, the codable unit must feature one or more of the following: a neutrality that transcends one's own position; the value of objectivity and/or rationality; “banking” pedagogical methods; writing argument as a thesis-driven list of reasons; student autonomy as an ultimate goal. If the student or instructor emphasizes neutrality with caveats, then this code cannot be applied. If rationality includes affective modes of argument as valid in an exchange, the codeable unit is deliberative, not liberal. | “Whenever it comes to writing specifically, I try to quarantine my political thought. I try my best to write as balanced as possible. I focus on, whenever I'm writing, is the truth, the facts, as they stand.”
—Josh, student |
| **Technocratic Model** | Assumes that policy questions are best left up to the experts; either experts make all of the decisions, or the general public makes the decisions after gathering information from the experts. | To fit this code, the unit must conflate public discourse as technical discourse and thus see composition courses as technical training for either becoming an expert or making political decisions based on information from experts. If the unit implies the “technical skills” of composition are apolitical training in discourse, then this code cannot be applied; it may be the liberal model instead. | There were no occurrences of this code in the data. |
| **Interest-Based Model** | Assumes that political discussion is fundamentally based in self-interest (rather than universal principles), and that the role of the government is to balance competing interests. Political discussion becomes expressivist as a result, because each person has their own perspective based in their own self-interest. | To fit this code, the unit must feature one or more of the following: argument that sees catering to the audience as the primary consideration; expressive argument; self-interest or positionality as the primary way one (functionally) decides political stances. In addition, if the unit addresses expressive argument or self-interest in a way that is explicitly factional, it is demagoguery, not the interest-based model. | “It's just very red state, and if they're from anywhere in this region, they mostly identify with their family's political beliefs, and most of those political beliefs are gonna be pretty conservative.” —Amy, instructor |
| **Agonistic Model** | Assumes that confrontation is the best way to address injustice and prevent authoritarianism; it prioritizes ongoing disagreement and sees unresolved conflict as helpful, not problematic. Productive agonism requires some level of listening. | To fit this code, the unit must emphasize the presence and value of conflict, confrontation, or adversarial argument about a political topic, or see conflict or argument as a productive tool for clarifying positions. If the unit does not imply that reconsideration is a possibility (rather than a betrayal of one's position), or if the unit emphasizes factional conflict, it may be demagoguery. If conflict does not seem to be | “I try to choose texts that challenge the idea that we just have to meet in the middle, or challenge the idea of normalcy.” —Deborah, instructor |
| **Communitarian Model** | Assumes that individuals, communities, and their values are socially constructed and thus not neutral; argument is aimed toward the common good and should promote community engagement and consensus-building. The goal of education is acculturation into shared democratic values. | To fit this code, the unit must emphasize one or more of the following: consensus-building to avoid ongoing conflict; civility as a primary value; the need for students to learn the values or language of a community in order to join it. If the inculcation of character is aimed toward individual autonomy rather than the common good, or if democratic values are universal values rather than socially constructed norms, this unit is the liberal model, not communitarianism. | “You see how certain things, it might not be the most credible 'cause it's like a blog post or just written by Joe Schmo or whatever. See if you can find an article that we would consider credible that's saying the same things.” —Donna, instructor |
| **Deliberative Model** | Assumes that argument is neither particular (expressive) nor universal (liberal), but should rely on an expansive definition of rationality, one that includes affective modes. Rhetors must move beyond their subjectivity but not ignore it. Difference is the key to successful deliberation, and attending to the difference in one's audience is what sets the deliberative model apart from the liberal model. | To fit this code, the unit must feature one or more of the following: exploratory argument (rather than thesis-based); fairness as the role of the teacher (not neutrality); affective argument as valid for discussion (while neither particular nor universal); difference as key for refining public discussion, but requires a culture of listening and be ultimately aimed toward communication. It may also feature mediation in some form or the desire to find temporary points of agreement. If the codeable unit features ongoing conflict that is not aimed toward moving beyond one's subjectivity and using the words or language of the intended audience, it may be agonistic. | “I think that doing research for that too, maybe in the assignment [it] could say, you have to do research for a left, middle, and a right wing on one topic, just to see all three sides and compare your [thoughts] on that. I feel like that could be, that would be a good way to represent politics.” —Kate, student |
| Demagoguery | Assumes that political argument is an ongoing conflict between factions, where the good guys are “us” and the bad guys are “them.” Policy issues are about identity, and politics thus becomes a zero-sum game where a win for one side is a loss for the other. Demagoguery can be either irenic (strictly enforcing the party line) or agonistic (aggressively shutting down dissent from outside the faction). | To fit this code, the unit must feature one or more of the following: highly polarized communities or rhetoric; the perceived simplicity of truth (i.e. black-and-white thinking that adheres to political factionalism); constructions of “need” that blame an outside group for the problem; accusations of bias that allow an argument to be dismissed on the basis of identity; aggressive rhetoric that sees political deliberation as a zero-sum game. If the unit emphasizes conflict, even emotionally charged or offensive conflict, but does not imply a rhetoric of “us vs. them,” it is agonism, not demagoguery. | “What I’ve been afraid of and what I’ve tried to avoid is the idea that any pushback that they get, in terms of their grade being penalized, is rooted in my political opinions.” —CJ, instructor “I think with the society we have today, you’re kind of primed to be very us vs. them, you’re primed to treat people who disagree with your views in a very oppositional way.” —Donna, instructor |
Vita

Jacob (Jake) Buller-Young is a sixth-generation Kansan, a windowsill gardener, a birder, and a Graduate Teaching Associate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. After moving two dozen times in his first eighteen years of life, he attended Abilene Christian University, where he was a University Scholar and received a Bachelor of Arts in English and Biblical Text before going on to graduate school at University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is currently studying English with a concentration in Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics (RWL) and plans to continue his education by entering the RWL PhD program in Fall 2021. His research interests center broadly on the intersections of composition pedagogy, religious rhetoric, and civil discourse.