

ASU course inspires students from different majors to engage with government

Public Service and American Democracy educates thousands of students per year

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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On a brisk January morning, about 50 students file into a classroom on Arizona State University's Downtown Phoenix campus.

Many of the students are majoring in journalism or nursing but they are here for a different subject — Public Service and American Democracy, offered through ASU's School of Public Affairs.

On this particular day, the PAF 112 class is taught by Professor of Practice [Bill Gates](#), executive director of ASU's [Mechanics of Democracy Lab](#), who served as a Maricopa County supervisor, Phoenix City Council member and lawyer before joining ASU last year.

According to him and other faculty members who teach PAF 112, educated citizens are the cornerstone of a flourishing democracy. However, reductions in K–12 civics education have created a knowledge gap wherein young people struggle to understand the differing functions of local, state and federal governments, and don't know how to engage with elected representatives and public servants.

All students, regardless of their chosen field, need to know how to engage with the government and its services, said [Shannon Portillo](#), director of the [School of Public Affairs](#), which is part of the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#).

Portillo believes higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure graduates have the necessary tools to be successful both as professionals and as citizens to effect change.

With that in mind, the School of Public Affairs wanted to make PAF 112 as accessible as possible for all majors across the institution. So the course was redesigned to meet ASU's new [American Institutions general education requirement](#), which went into effect in fall 2024.

The goal of the requirement is to ensure that ASU graduates, no matter their major, understand the nation's history and Constitution, allowing them to effectively participate in their communities and engage in civil discussions.

The lesson in Gates' section of PAF 112 is focused on the structure and powers of the federal government.

"What is a constitution?" Gates asks his students.

Several volunteer answers: guidelines for the government, definition of powers of the government and rights of individuals.

Then he asks, "What's important in a constitution?"

"The right to free speech," calls out one student. "The right to vote," says another. A student toward the back proposes, "The right to bear arms." A fair judicial system and freedom of religion also get mentions; it's a list that mirrors the U.S. Constitution.

These 50 or so students are just a fraction of the ASU population enrolled in PAF 112 this academic year. Throughout the spring, summer and fall semesters, more than 3,500 students will partake in these lessons across campuses, online and through [ASU Universal Learner Courses](#).

With large class sizes, faculty use class polls, small group discussions, role playing and mock elections to keep students engaged. Guest speakers and current events are integral to the curriculum.

This semester's guest speakers include Luis Heredia, state director for U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly; Anna Maria Chávez, executive director of Arizona Community Foundation, who also held numerous posts in President Bill Clinton's administration; and Jeri Williams, former Phoenix Police chief.

Change requires knowledge

When Americans think about their power and responsibility as citizens, they often fixate on voting and paying taxes, said [Margaretha Bentley](#), clinical associate professor and associate director for the School of Public Affairs, who helped redesign the course to meet the AMIT requirement. But there are other mechanisms to influence government policies and decisions.

"You can't change the world if you don't know how it works," she said.

One common misunderstanding is the distinction between local and federal governments, Bentley said.

Despite the overwhelming media coverage of actions in Washington, D.C., most government employees work at the local level, supporting water resources, street maintenance, park management and other services that impact citizens daily, she said.

Throughout the semester, professors teaching PAF 112 guide students through the differing roles of federal, state and local governments in the United States so that students are better equipped to practice civic engagement.

[Alberto Olivas](#), professor of practice in the School of Public Affairs whose resume details a long career in local, national and nonprofit public service, teaches a section of the course at the Tempe campus. He sometimes likens his lectures to a “Defense Against the Dark Arts” class, referencing the popular “Harry Potter” series.

For citizens to know how to protect themselves, they need the knowledge to navigate government processes, the skill to critically analyze current conditions and the confidence to represent their interests, Olivas said.

“If you are not educated about the government, it is still going to make decisions that affect you,” he said. “Many community members find out about a decision after it's been made, which is too late. That's why citizens' views on government are so cynical — they don't understand it.”

Policies, including ones that affect civil liberties, are being decided by courts, presidents and legislators at all levels of government, Olivas said, and ASU students need a basic vocabulary and understanding to begin to dive into these complex issues.

Current events contextualize documents

This year, the United States will celebrate its semiquincentennial, also known as its 250th anniversary. Many of the nation's founding documents are approaching the same age. When Gates teaches his students about the U.S. Constitution, which was drafted in 1787, he uses current events to highlight its relevance today.

“In my opinion, this course has probably never been more important than it is right now,” Gates said. “I use a real-world perspective when teaching. Sometimes I take things that happened the day before and work them into class.”

This semester, he is planning to incorporate U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement deployment and actions in Minnesota into his immigration lesson, and he also plans to talk about the War Powers Act and the Insurrection Act.

Last semester, Bentley's section followed the Kyrene School District's school closure plan from its initial proposal to the final decision.

Current events help students connect to the content and demonstrate how the system isn't “static,” Bentley said.

“We look at separation of powers, federalism, court systems and different types of laws. Once you teach these things, then you can bring in current examples to show that separation of powers, for example, isn't static. Power shifts over time,” she said.

Faculty agree that students become more comfortable with concepts of government throughout the semester, with the mix of majors, international students and veterans leading to interesting class discussions.

“A couple of my students last semester made a point of telling me that they think everyone should take this class,” Bentley said, “because it gives a foundation for understanding how things work.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



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