

Webinar Highlights from “Strategies for Teaching *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*”

ANGIE TORRES-BELTRAN | CORNELL UNIVERSITY

On August 17, 2022, APSA provided a platform which allowed political science experts to discuss breaking news and current events from unique disciplinary perspectives. The webinar titled “Strategies for Teaching *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*,” brought together scholars with an expertise in gender, reproductive rights, law and courts, and pedagogy. Moderated by Julie Novkov (University at Albany, SUNY), the panel included Kimala Price (San Diego State University), Renée Cramer (Drake University), and Gwendoline Alphonso (Fairfield University). The purpose of this event was to address the challenges and opportunities for teaching political science during critical institutional changes in women’s political rights. The panelists offered insights on how political science can unpack the complicated dynamics that follow institutional changes on citizens’ rights, as well as practical suggestions for how to include the events surrounding abortion rights into the classroom so that instructors and scholars are better prepared to incorporate these events and issues into their own classroom and community. For the remainder of this post, I will unpack some of the key ideas that emerged from the discussion, which I organize around three important pedagogical themes that instructors can follow during this time. Scholar-educators and members of the public can provide students with accurate scholarly information about the court decision, allow themselves to discuss non-academic angles concerning reproductive rights, and help to understand the real-world implications of the ruling.

CURRENT DEBATES ON REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS

The webinar began with a discussion on the various academic debates and topics that the panelists rely on for their courses. Reproductive politics, and the themes surrounding it, continue to be a contentious and polarizing topic in American politics.



Angie Torres-Beltran is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at Cornell University. Her research interests include the comparative study of gender, violence, political participation, state-society relations, and justice.

The panelists began with a discussion on the importance of teaching not to change a student’s mind on abortion, but to give them all the necessary material in order for them to make their own decision. Indeed, the panelists were much more concerned with giving their students the freedom to craft

Strategies for Teaching *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization*

JULIE NOVKOV
University at Albany
State University of New York
Editor, *APSR*

KIMALA PRICE
San Diego State University

RENEE CRAMER
Drake University

GWENDOLINE ALPHONSO
Fairfield University

their own way of thinking about reproductive politics rather than influencing their opinion. With this idea, Renée Cramer emphasized how important it was to be in direct dialogue with one’s students versus disproportionately lecturing them. In line with providing students with unbiased academic material, the panelists also provided many course options where instructors could teach on the recent *Dobbs* decision. For example, when teaching reproductive politics, Renée Cramer teaches specific courses on reproductive rights and politics that cover very detailed topics on the subject such as the relationship between reproductive rights and slavery and what the Court actually said in *Roe v. Wade*. Gwendoline Alphonso teaches *Dobbs* in her ideas, interests, and institutions course where she situates reproductive politics between three developmental narratives of moral politics and culture wars, party politics and party polarization, and race. Within the realm of moral politics, she emphasizes a variety of factors such as changes in family structures and women’s rights over time and the increasing disjuncture between cultural traditionalists and cultural progressives. This way, she is able to demonstrate that because the cultural narrative that abortion is not deeply rooted in the nation’s tradition and history, then it is easier for citizens to be against it. Alphonso also examines *Dobbs* within the context of race and the relationship between

shifting racial orders and the use of color blindness in American politics. Kimala Price takes a slightly different academic approach when teaching *Dobbs*. She teaches it in the context of reproductive justice and how it intersects with other issues. Through her intersectional focus, Price is able to connect and examine the relationship between reproductive politics and queer-ness, criminalization, family formation, and popular culture. As the panelists demonstrated, there are a variety of academic avenues that instructors can take when teaching *Dobbs*—it can be taught in classes about institutions, introduction to American politics, the supreme court, political parties, presidency, politics of care, and specific seminars.

SUPPLYING NON-ACADEMIC CONTEXT TO AID IN UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION

Throughout the webinar, and within the second pedagogical theme, the panelists emphasized the importance that their activist, feminist, and professional roles had on their pedagogy. The goal here is not to teach *Dobbs* from a strictly activist or feminist perspective, but to complement one's academic course material with inherently political and professional experiences. For example, Price, a political scientist in a women and gender studies department, also labels herself as an activist in the classroom. She has served in her local Planned Parenthood board and clinics and has experience governing a healthcare organization and on the political committees that allows reproductive rights organizations to exist in the first place. She has credited experiences like these as changing what and how one teaches. In a similar vein, Cramer also focuses on real-life events to inform her understanding of reproductive politics. In her courses, she teaches on celebrity baby bumps, midwifery legalization, late-term abortion, pregnancy, childbirth, parenthood, and sexual education. The use of real-life experiences in the classroom helps students think through the broader impacts that the *Dobbs* decision and reproductive rights overall has on politics. On this topic, the panelists also suggested instructors to assign more digestible pieces so that students are able to grasp the content more efficiently. By doing this, the panelists offer a holistic and more thorough understanding of the *Dobbs* decision and shed light on the usefulness of non-academic perspectives in the classroom.

UNDERSTANDING THE POST-DOBBS LANDSCAPE

The final pedagogical theme that emerged during the discussion was the role of instructors in discussing the real-world implica-

tions of the *Dobbs* decision. Unlike other political phenomena, the recent court decision has the potential to affect over half of the United States population and especially those that are in their undergraduate career. The panelists all acknowledged that discussing abortion can be challenging, especially in political environments in which instructors may face external scrutiny. Although instructors want to establish a trusting classroom environment with their students and may not want to engage too much in the complex and complicated discussions that come when discussing abortion, instructors should not shy away from discussing the clear consequences that emerge (and will emerge) from the *Dobbs* decision. The panelists mentioned that in their classroom, they spoke to their students about the health complications that arise when reproductive health is under attack, bracing for the possibility for an influx of people to come into their locality (or leave their locality) to get abortions, and the overall backsliding of women's rights across the United States. Engaging with the normative dimensions of the court decision also teaches students to be aware of how encompassing one ruling may be for almost half of the population's well-being. The panelists offered a path forward for instructors to encourage students to think critically about the academic and non-academic theories and applications that impact and are a result of the *Dobbs* decision.

CONCLUSION

In sum, it is impossible to ignore the *Dobbs* decision in the classroom. It provides a valuable opportunity for instructors to discuss a topic rife with misinformation and polarization and provide students with the necessary tools and materials to understand it completely. The question-and-answer section of the webinar also provided valuable information on managing highly polarized students, potential conflicts, and the emotions that arise when discussing reproductive politics. To provide a short answer for these questions, the panelists suggested creating a humane environment in the classroom, pushing students to provide evidence for their claims rather than relying on strong opinions, and, for women instructors, to come grounded and prepared for the discussion before the class begins. Students care about this issue and want to know what is happening and what will happen because of the ruling. Instructors can help students better understand the situation by providing students with accurate scholarly information about the court decision, allowing themselves to discuss non-academic angles concerning reproductive rights, and helping them understand the real-world implications of the ruling. ■



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