

# “History Has Its Eyes on You”: *Hamilton* and the Introductory American Government Course

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how the musical *Hamilton* can be used as a way to bring students to a new understanding of American government at the introductory level. As a recent pop-culture smash, *Hamilton* has brought to the fore the possibility of a new civic conversation about our political beginnings. With many citizens lacking a sufficient understanding of American political culture at this fraught time, the introductory American government course is the ideal place to enhance civic understanding. This article discusses how music from the *Hamilton* cast album, as well as videos about the show, were used during two semesters of the introductory American government course at a regional public university. Doing so encouraged discussion and active learning about key concepts and critical moments in American history that have shaped politics through the present day.

In the American government course, students are introduced to the basics of their government and to the research behind their lessons (e.g., the collective action problem). Instructors convey the importance of participation and why students' voices need to be heard (Schachter 1998). There are numerous ways to teach the course, including lectures, discussions, and active-learning techniques (Baranowski and Weir 2015). With citizens lacking in their understanding of politics at this fraught time, the American government course is an ideal place to enhance civic understanding.

I argue for using the musical *Hamilton* as a teaching tool. As a cultural smash, *Hamilton* has stimulated conversations about our political beginnings. I discuss how music and videos from *Hamilton* were used during two semesters of the introductory American government course at a regional public university to encourage debates and active learning through in-class discussions and short writing assignments.

The article first briefly reviews the relevant literature on active learning in the American politics classroom. The second section describes how *Hamilton* was used in various units of the course to enhance student participation. It concludes by examining additional materials from the *Hamilton* universe that could be used in the course.

## ACTIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING POLITICAL SCIENCE

Studies of active learning emphasize the need for techniques that hold students' attention while engaging them in the material. Some incorporate debates into the classroom (Oros 2007) which

is useful both for learning the material and for giving students the experience of choosing and defending a perspective. Another popular method of encouraging active learning are simulations that make students adopt a particular role in the classroom (Bernstein 2008; Blanton 2013; Glazier 2011; Horn, Rubin, and Schouenberg 2016; Woessner, Winters, and Kopko 2017). Bromley (2013), however, argued for diversifying our teaching techniques beyond simulations to appeal to different types of students, mixing case studies, small-group work, and in-class writing exercises. Particularly relevant are efforts that incorporate fictional material, using television shows such as “The West Wing” and movies about politics to enliven concepts and provide useful reference points (Holland 2016; Valeriano 2013). These studies show how fictional representations of politics are helpful in demonstrating the real-life consequences of our political choices. No studies of which I am aware, however, examine using musical theater in our courses.

## HAMILTON IN THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT COURSE

The goal of using music and videos from *Hamilton* was to connect potentially abstract ideas with something to which students can relate. *Hamilton* speaks to a variety of issues discussed in the course, while also making the material more enjoyable. The musical's relevance to American politics in this period, as well as its cultural currency, allows it to be easily integrated into the flow of coursework as part of in-class discussions and debates as well as short writing assignments.

## American Political Culture

As part of the discussion regarding the Declaration of Independence and its impact on American politics, students read the “remember

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the ladies” exchange between John and Abigail Adams, the Seneca Falls Declaration, and “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The students were then shown a YouTube video of “The Schuyler Sisters,” performed at the White House in January 2017,<sup>1</sup> which contains several politically oriented verses; for example:

[ANGELICA]

I’ve been reading Common Sense by Thomas Paine  
So men say that I’m intense or I’m insane  
You want a revolution? I want a revelation  
So listen to my declaration:

[ELIZA/ANGELICA/PEGGY]

“We hold these truths to be self-evident  
That all men are created equal”

[ANGELICA]

And when I meet Thomas Jefferson  
I’m ‘a compel him to include women in the sequel!<sup>2</sup>

Women were reading works such as *Common Sense* and demanding their rights. Students were asked to discuss the “sequel” to the Declaration that Angelica demands—the Seneca

plan, assumption of state debts, and creation of the National Bank.<sup>5</sup> The debate (in the form of a rap battle) between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson presents an opportunity to discuss issues of federalism and national power, as follows:

[JEFFERSON]

But Hamilton forgets  
His plan would have the government assume state’s debts  
Now, place your bets as to who that benefits:  
The very seat of government where Hamilton sits.<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson echoes a common refrain that one region should not benefit at the expense of another. Hamilton responds that the nation needs “a new line of credit, a financial diuretic.”<sup>7</sup> Students engaged in a short in-class debate, examining which side they agreed with and why.

### Voting and Elections

Students listened to “The Election of 1800,” which provided an opening to a class discussion about our earliest elections and tropes about campaigning. The song begins, “John Adams shat the bed,” and is not competitive, whereas Burr has “his own

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Falls Declaration of Sentiments of 1848—as part of a short in-class writing assignment on the Declaration’s relevance across American history and in modern political debates.

### The Constitution

Students were assigned reading selections from the Federalists and Anti-Federalists and then were asked to watch a video of the musical’s opening song, “Alexander Hamilton,” which was performed at the 2016 Grammys.<sup>3</sup> This provided background on Hamilton and the Founders. Students also listened to “Non-Stop,”<sup>4</sup> which contains an exposition by Aaron Burr about Hamilton writing 51 of the *Federalist Papers*. The song also includes a dialogue in which Hamilton implores Burr to assist him. Despite being inaccurate—because Burr likely opposed ratification (Isenberg 2007, 100–102)—this interchange reflects divisions that the nation experienced. As historian Joanne Freeman (2017) points out, despite its errors, *Hamilton* allows us to engage with the real Hamilton and notice how portrayals of the Founders change. Especially noteworthy is the lack of people of color in the musical, despite its cross-racial casting (McAllister 2017; Monteiro 2016). Students were instructed about these issues and asked to complete a short writing assignment on how differences between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists persist to this day in American politics.

### Federalism

Students watched a video of the song “Cabinet Battle #1,” which was filmed at the White House, regarding Hamilton’s financial

faction” (despite being Jefferson’s running mate).<sup>8</sup> In the end, James Madison sings “It’s a tie!” in the Electoral College and the race goes to the House. The song portrays Hamilton as the tie-breaker, representing his role in encouraging Federalists to support Jefferson. Jefferson references the push he and the Democratic-Republicans make for the 12th Amendment (Wills 2005, ch. 7), eliminating the problem Jefferson and Burr experienced in being vice president to their rivals. Other tropes about elections are mentioned—for example, candidates acting like the common man when one voter exclaims how much he likes Burr because “you could grab a beer with him!” Public campaigning also is mentioned, with Burr “going door to door.” Burr’s actions are one move toward our current open campaigning (Ketcham 1987; Tulis 1987).

### Congress

Students watched “I’m Just a Bill” from *Schoolhouse Rock*<sup>9</sup> and then listened to “The Room Where It Happens,”<sup>10</sup> after which they were asked to write a short in-class paper about which they found more compelling as a description of lawmaking. For context on the “Dinner Table Bargain” between Hamilton and Jefferson, students also watched a clip from the documentary “Hamilton’s America” featuring former Secretaries of the Treasury Henry Paulson and Tim Geithner.<sup>11</sup> The exercise was designed to force students into a false choice between the mechanics of the legislative process (from “I’m Just a Bill,” albeit simplistic) and back-room deals (“Room”), allowing them to examine how both have aspects of truth. The narrator of “Room” is Aaron Burr, noting that

the regular legislative process is not working in choosing a capital. The role of the president in pushing for his agenda is noticed: “[Burr]: Did Washington know about the dinner? Was there

that “history has its eyes on you,” students were encouraged through in-class discussions, debates, and short writing exercises to see how today’s disputes echo those from the past

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presidential pressure to deliver?” Burr’s complaint is that he wants to be in on the deal making (like most politicians):

I  
Wanna be in  
The room where it happens  
The room where it happens...

According to “Room,” you “hold your nose and close your eyes” and the average person is “in the dark.” Students were asked to examine this type of lawmaking and its implications for democratic government.

### The Presidency

Two songs from the musical speak to presidential power. Students first listened to “Cabinet Battle #2” regarding Washington’s Neutrality Proclamation. The tone is different from the Pacificus–Helvidius debates between Hamilton and Madison (Frish 2007), but ideas are retained. Washington states that “my decision on this matter is not subject to congressional approval. The only person you have to convince is me.”<sup>12</sup> Madison, writing as Helvidius, disagreed with this presumption; students were given excerpts from Helvidius to demonstrate that unilateral presidential authority should not be assumed. Jefferson sings about our alliance with France, but Hamilton disagrees; Washington sides with Hamilton, ordering him to write a “statement of neutrality.” Students then watched a “Saturday Night Live” cold-open parodying the song “I’m Just a Bill.”<sup>13</sup> President Obama pushes “Bill” down the capitol steps in favor of “Executive Order,” who says, “I’m an executive order, and I pretty much just happen,” referring to Obama’s Deferred Action for Parents of Americans order.<sup>14</sup> The videos gave students some context on unilateral presidential actions (Mayer 2002) and provided an opportunity to discuss this issue in more depth during class.

Students also watched “One Last Time,” recorded in January 2017 at the White House (with meaningful cutaways to a term-limited and soon to be ex-President Obama), about Washington’s decision not to seek a third term.<sup>15</sup> The song provided an opening to discuss that moment with students, FDR’s breaking of the two-term norm, and the passage of the 22nd Amendment. Students also were asked to read Washington’s Farewell Address, sung together in part in “One Last Time” by Hamilton and Washington. The song mentions themes that Washington explored, including warnings against “permanent alliances” and excessive partisanship.<sup>16</sup>

### CONCLUSION

This article suggests using *Hamilton* as a new lens for teaching the American government course. Drawing on the idea

and to engage in those questions themselves (Carp 2017). Historians and economists (Rousu and Conrad 2017) have similarly found that they can use *Hamilton* to enliven their courses.

Building on this idea could involve using material from the “Hamilton Mixtape,” such as the video for “Immigrants (We Get the Job Done),” kick-starting conversations about immigration and race in a unit on domestic policymaking.<sup>17</sup> Other songs, including “Cabinet Battle #3”—a rap battle about slavery that was cut from the show—could be used to start a conversation about slavery’s role in the founding and early America.<sup>18</sup>

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### NOTES

1. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffjFS\\_4l8c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffjFS_4l8c).
2. Lyrics excerpted from <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-the-schuyler-sisters-lyrics>.
3. Available at [www.theverge.com/2016/2/15/11010890/hamilton-lin-manuel-miranda-grammys-2016](http://www.theverge.com/2016/2/15/11010890/hamilton-lin-manuel-miranda-grammys-2016).
4. Music and lyrics available at <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-non-stop-lyrics>.
5. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1mYfsNFtGI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1mYfsNFtGI).
6. Lyrics excerpted from <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-cabinet-battle-1-lyrics>.
7. Lyrics excerpted from <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-cabinet-battle-1-lyrics>.
8. Music and lyrics available at <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-the-election-of-1800-lyrics>.
9. Video available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyeJ55o3Elo&ytbChannel=TheGreatWorker](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyeJ55o3Elo&ytbChannel=TheGreatWorker).
10. Music and lyrics available at <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-the-room-where-it-happens-lyrics>.
11. Available at <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ham16.soc.ushis.compromise/hamiltons-america-the-dinner-party-compromise-of-1790/#.WZzgFelOkdU>.
12. Music and lyrics available at <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-cabinet-battle-2-lyrics>.
13. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUDSebz2HQo&ytbChannel=Saturday%20Night%20Live](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUDSebz2HQo&ytbChannel=Saturday%20Night%20Live).
14. See Adam Liptak and Michael D. Shear, “Supreme Court Tie Blocks Obama Immigration Plan,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2016. Available at [www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/us/supreme-court-immigration-obama-dapa.html?mcubz=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/us/supreme-court-immigration-obama-dapa.html?mcubz=1).
15. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uv4UpCq2azs&ytbChannel=Hamilton%3A%20An%20American%20Musical](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uv4UpCq2azs&ytbChannel=Hamilton%3A%20An%20American%20Musical).
16. Available at [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp).
17. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_35a7sn6ds&ytbChannel=Hamilton%3A%20An%20American%20Musical](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_35a7sn6ds&ytbChannel=Hamilton%3A%20An%20American%20Musical).
18. Music and lyrics available at <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-cabinet-battle-3-demo-lyrics>.

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