

Fall 2013

The Human Side of Politics

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura and Linfield Magazine Staff (2013) "The Human Side of Politics," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 10 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol10/iss2/9

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The human side of politics

It is the first day of class, and Professor Dawn Nowacki has a question for her students.

“What are you curious about?”

This is no rhetorical icebreaker – Nowacki genuinely wants to know what excites her students.

“When you’re passionate about something, you’re curious and focused,” she says. “I want students to think and participate, and I refer back to their individual topics throughout the semester.”

Nowacki, who has shared her own passions with Linfield students for nearly two decades, was named the first Elizabeth and Morris Glicksman Chair of Political Science July 1. The appointment provides her with additional support for teaching and research.

Nowacki came to Linfield in 1994, continuing established research in post-Soviet politics and women’s representation. The events of 9/11 created questions and few answers for Nowacki and her students, resulting in a shift in the focus of her research.

“What caused this? Who are the people and groups that did this? Is it really about Islam vs. Christianity or Judaism? What’s really happening here?” Nowacki asked.

To find out, she began teaching courses on Middle Eastern politics, incorporating her extensive background in gender studies. She has traveled to Turkey and Jordan for faculty development seminars, and she led students to Turkey with Professor Bill Millar for a 2009 January Term class.

Through her research into women’s public political presence, Nowacki has found that under certain conditions violence and sexual assault are used to exclude women from politics during periods of political instability. Ironically, she says, political uprisings in the Middle East began in the name of democracy and inclusion, but the outcome for women has been exclusion and lost rights.

She describes democratization as a development process. In authoritarian states, there is stability and women can make gains in their public representation and formal rights. When revolutions occur and the leadership falls, the results can be dangerous for women. With political instability, certain elements in society violently act out their views that women should not be in politics. According to Nowacki, some men reassert their authority to compensate for loss of power in other areas of their lives.

“Sexual violence is perpetrated by several types of men, including thugs organized by those struggling for power, the police and opportunists,” she added. “Violence against women excludes them from the public sphere, and you can’t have democracy with

half the population excluded and unable to participate.”

Since looking at women’s representation in the world’s 50 Muslim-majority countries, Nowacki has found much variation in the proportion of women in parliaments, from 0-33 percent. Many of the states with high numbers have minimum electoral quotas for women. She’s looking specifically at four case studies of Muslim-majority countries with strong Islamist movements – Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey.

Nowacki said teaching about her research helps her to clarify it, and students provide insight by asking questions and sharing their own research discoveries. Using a collaborative teaching

style, she encourages student engagement and civility.

“It’s politics,” she said. “I want students to bring in alternative points of view to discuss, and also to be civil with each other.”

She asks students to bring current news items to class to begin discussions each day. She assigns readings offering multiple perspectives and incorporates videos, Ted Talks, documentaries and films that make students think.

Nowacki is known for her compassion and sincerity, according to Annika Yates ’14, who conducted research

with Nowacki in 2012 and presented preliminary findings at the Western Political Science Conference in March.

“She cares about her students, not just about our academics, but about our lives as people,” said Yates, an international relations and German studies double major. “I really clicked with her teaching style. She brings a human element of compassion to politics.”

Yates recalls when Nowacki invited to class the parents of an Olympia, Wash., girl who had been killed by an Israeli bulldozer as she protested for the Palestinians in 2003. The parents had taken the case to Israeli court, and the verdict was about to be announced. The American media hadn’t covered the story much, yet the discussion brought the situation to life for Yates.

And that is just as Nowacki intends. She hopes to help students understand that politics affects the lives of real people.

“It may not seem like someone living in a refugee camp in Sudan who doesn’t have enough water and food and whose children are dying of malnutrition and disease, has anything to do with us,” she said. “But, we are all truly connected. Suffering in one place is going to affect suffering everywhere. And we might have something to do with it – with the causes, its continuation and helping to end it.” 🌱

– Laura Davis

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– Professor Dawn Nowacki

Glicksman Chair of Political Science

Dawn Nowacki is the first Elizabeth and Morris Glicksman Chair of Political Science.

As a result of the new endowment, an American politics professor, Dimitri Kelly, has been added to the department as a fourth full-time faculty member (along with Patrick Cottrell and Nick Buccola). Kelly's is the first new political science position to be added in more than 20 years.

"This means a great deal for our students," Nowacki said. "Linfield benefits from adding new professors who bring fresh energy and knowledge to our students. Dimitri is excited about adding stimulating new courses to our curriculum and to working with students doing collaborative research on public opinion and media effects."

New upper-division courses relating to American politics might focus on Congress, the presidency, voting behavior and American political development. The new position also frees Nowacki to teach additional courses in comparative politics, her specialty.

Over the summer, Dawn Nowacki, the Elizabeth and Morris Glicksman Chair of Political Science, participated in a pilgrimage walk to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, walking 60 miles in five days. The faculty development seminar, "Modern Debates along the Ancient Way," was made possible by the Glicksman endowment. "I have really appreciated how free I've been at Linfield to pursue my intellectual interests," she said. "Linfield wants us to be fresh and curious so that our students can learn along with us."

