



# #politicalcommunicationsowhite: A Call for Considering Race in the Undergraduate Political Communication Course

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**Keywords:** political communication, race, course design, undergraduates

**Abstract:** The field of communication has been working to reconcile its historic omission of race from research (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and pedagogy (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). The subfield of political communication has begun this process in its research (Freelon et al., 2023) but has yet to consider the implications of race missing from pedagogy. This essay offers an argument for including race in the political communication course, in the form of more focus on race in course content and more work by scholars of color. We offer reasons for these inclusions, ways for instructors to begin this incorporation, and what considerations instructors must be mindful of throughout the process.

## Introduction

Problems of race and citation politics have gained considerable attention recently. The #communicationsowhite movement gained momentum with evidence offered by Chakravartty and colleagues (2018) that journals underrepresent and authors undercite work from scholars of color. This underrepresentation of race manifests in student experiences and the larger academic literature. Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) analyzed graduate communication theory syllabi and found race was largely absent from the coursework experience. Since many academics rely on their coursework as a foundation, and this coursework largely ignores the work of scholars of color and thorough discussion of race, it is unsurprising that related research has shown little regard for either of these subjects. Ultimately, these trends lead to a reinforcement of structural discrimination that omits both the labors

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of scholars of color as well as lessons about race overall. These two practices are distinct, but both contribute to larger racial inequity in the field.

Digging deeper into the communication discipline, we want to focus our attention on political communication for this essay. As a field, political communication focuses considerably on the foundations of political behaviors and expression. Work has shown the role of identity in political behavior, but race has been the subject of less investigation, despite its foundational influence on our political system (Coles & Lane, 2023). Freelon and colleagues (2023) documented that political communication journals were less likely to include substantive discussion of race than generalist and critical communication journals. Academic discussions have been sparked about how to settle this issue at the level of research (e.g., Brown & Searles, 2023) and discussions of these subjects have occurred at the graduate level (Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020). This essay extends this discussion to undergraduate coursework and concludes by providing ideas for a path forward.

## Race in Political Communication

Calls to consider race in political communication have been made for a variety of reasons. The first major reason is segregational. By underciting or not citing relevant work from scholars of color, academic domains disregard their labor and award it less importance than White scholars' work. This practice is worsened by the expectation that scholars of color should be the sole voices of racial advocacy and change (Chakravartty et al., 2018). These practices make academia a hostile, unwelcoming environment for scholars of color, and their work, because it can create barriers of entry and limit upward mobility if potential and current scholars of color see their labor and contributions sidelined. Further, discriminatory practices can lead to siloed knowledge, with unconnected academic domains that are not in conversation with one another. Creating silos diminishes scholarship and its ability to provide comprehensive knowledge.

This leads to the second reason, which is epistemic. Coles and Lane (2023) keenly note, "Despite the centrality of race and ethnicity in social and political life, they are often absent from studies of the urgent questions in contemporary political communication research" (p. 367). Scholars such as Bohman (2007) and Kreiss (2022) have argued that inclusiveness is essential to truth-seeking. Accounting for race provides a more thorough understanding of political communication actors who are considered crucial to a course on the subject (e.g., the role of media, see Brown & Harlow, 2019). In turn, failing to recognize the critical role of race in political communication could result in incomplete and even faulty knowledge. Therefore, continuing to not grapple with this omission could also result in the discipline losing contemporary relevancy. A holistic understanding of our political landscape must account for the impact of race or it cannot be comprehensive.

As Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) argue, this incomplete experience is present in the classroom as well with course syllabi. They note that a syllabus "powerfully represents the field to future scholars" (p. 2). Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) argue that syllabi socialize graduate students and provide "implicit and explicit messages about what constitutes model work—and which scholars do that work" (p. 101). In turn, the syllabus is a "social document" that familiarizes students with new academic communities (Parson, 2016) and provides standards for those communities. In addition to contributing to power dynamics in terms of who and what gets included, syllabi also assert professors' authority and power of assessment, as well as symbolize, in part, how a professor has cultivated their professional identity (see

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Parson, 2016). Research has found that professors from underrepresented backgrounds assign a higher number of readings from scholars with underrepresented backgrounds, suggesting they may be more aware of issues around representation and power (see Smith et al., 2020). Thus, syllabi constitute a rich site of study that communicate more than the practicalities of the classroom.

Though Chakravartty and Jackson (2020) and Smith et al.'s (2020) analyses focused on the graduate level, we argue their points also extend to the undergraduate experience. Before an individual decides to become a formal educator, they are first a student, and their experiences in the classroom are crucial to developing a sense of who and what are deemed legitimate and worthy of inclusion. Underrepresenting work on race and scholars of color on the syllabus perpetuates the problems of segregational pedagogy and implies racial issues, and the work of scholars of color are not essential enough to be included in a course. These omissions are dire as a student's coursework is one of their most formative pedagogical experiences. Further, for students of color, a lack of descriptive representation in course materials may signal to them that they do not belong in academia and inhibit their ability to progress into future scholars. This lack of representation may potentially feed the "leaky pipeline" scenario and help explain the lower rates of faculty of color (Asare, 2019). Just as children of color need to see thoughtful depictions of people of color in pop culture, students of color need to see scholars of color in their classrooms and syllabi. Doing so also socializes students of all backgrounds to understand that diversity is valuable.

## A Way Forward

There is an undeniable difficulty in getting scores of academics to recognize a problem and incorporate bodies of scholarship in the classroom when such discussions or scholarship were not a formative part of an academic's pedagogical experience. However, this is no excuse for perpetuating the practices we have discussed. As scholars, we should be constant students with no endpoint to our learning. We need to continue to update our pedagogical approaches, materials, and conversations in the classroom to ensure that we are being comprehensive and reflective of the contemporary field. Needed change does not translate into easy change so it is important to acknowledge the difficulty that comes with addressing this problem and find ways to start implementing a multipronged approach to change in a rigorous way. This essay is not just a critique of our existing political communication pedagogy, it is a critique that comes with proposed solutions. Some of these solutions have been previously suggested by other scholars such as Brown and Searles (2023), we rearticulate them here, in addition to our own offerings, to provide clear steps forward.

Before one begins making changes, we recommend being mindful of several risks and pitfalls. The first risk is overly taxing or retraumatizing students of color. An insensitive incorporation of race can cause students of color to be immersed in traumatic situations. For example, instead of offering a "content warning" before showing a graphic video in class, such as the death of a person of color, instructors should question whether such depictions are truly necessary for a meaningful pedagogical moment. Could other, less graphic depictions, such as an image of the mirror casket during the BLM protests, be employed instead? Second, be wary of adopting a White savior mentality that sidelines voices of color. Professors need to be cognizant of their positionality and know when other voices need to be elevated and heard to help "destabilise the normalised politics of knowledge production" (leurs, 2017, p. 145). For example, White faculty should avoid offering a lecture on race without incorporating perspectives from people of color. Third, instructors should be cautious of using the material in a way that reinforces existing racial problems rather than helping to solve them. To address this concern, we recommend

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looking at literature on difficult conversations (e.g., Chen & Lawless, 2018) to find ways to ease the friction of these conversations and make them manageable.

With these three considerations in mind, we suggest faculty begin by taking stock of your syllabus and assessing the racial makeup of the authors. This plays the crucial role of bringing conscious awareness to the problem and its severity. To do so, resources such as [syllabusdiversity.org](http://syllabusdiversity.org) (Millard-Ball et al., 2021) can help instructors check the authorial composition. This can also serve as a meaningful moment for self-reflexivity, noting how one's syllabus came to be this way and why. Such answers may help faculty better identify contributing factors and seek to mitigate those for future syllabi.

Next, assess the role of race in your syllabus's existing topic areas: Is it present? How is it present? What voices and experiences are being privileged? What more can be done to expand the scope or voices included, add more nuance, provide more historical and/or contemporary context? Depending on your answers, you may consider one or more of the following five strategies:

1. Introduce a dedicated unit in the course that focuses on race. One example here might be to include the role of race in media and political behavior. This approach highlights race as a part of the course material, but it may also connote that race is a topic that can be easily bound and gives race less attention than other approaches on this list. As such, it would be advantageous to combine this approach with others below to create a more integrated approach to race in political communication.
  2. Interlace race throughout the course as a lens for examining and discussing a range of topics. For example, use identity as a lens for understanding different topics in political communication, such as representation or issue publics.
  3. Introduce assignments and activities that encourage students to grapple with the role of race in political communication contexts so students are active in the desegregating/decolonizing process. Doing so is a pivotal part of interracial communication and can offer a more applied and pragmatic strategy that teaches students how to navigate race in politics. One assignment for students could include having them help generate topic areas inclusive of race. Instructors can leave spaces open in their syllabus, then have students work in groups to develop what questions they have concerning race and political communication. The instructor and students then work together to refine the list (e.g., grouping similar ideas), and the instructor can incorporate diverse readings, lectures, and discussions covering these areas. Taking this approach could help ensure the course stays in step with contemporary issues and reflective of students' perspectives, which may generate more engagement.
  4. Consider the role of methodology in this reflection. While the field of political communication leans quantitative, this methodological slant may be insufficient for revealing the underlying issues of race in our political system (Coles & Lane, 2023; Delli Carpini, 2013). Freelon and colleagues (2023) noted that many critical journals were more likely to offer discussions on race, thus incorporating them in a syllabus, offers another opportunity to equalize the citation gap and address some of the methodological siloing that occurs in the field (See Delli Carpini, 2013). Another approach might include other methodologies that consider race beyond a demographic category (e.g., Grover & Kuo, 2023). Doing so requires unpacking work that captures identity in deeper manners than the traditional approaches in quantitative methodologies. Additionally,
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instructors can offer students multiple definitions of politics and show how one's definition of politics affects what we consider to be political behavior. Combining this approach with rhetorical, social scientific, and critical perspectives on political communication could offer a more holistic view of the field and how race exists within our political realm.

5. Consider offering a course on politics and race. This approach offers a pedagogically richer opportunity, though we recognize it must be considered in consultation with departmental policies and local politics. Introducing courses can open a bureaucratic labyrinth, and state legislation banning discussion of race-based issues can further complicate this solution. Despite these hurdles, a course like this would provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay of politics and race. Further, pulling on resources for difficult conversations (e.g., Chen & Lawless, 2018; Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019) can provide instructors with additional tools for facilitating discussion on topics as they apply to race. Unfortunately, these resources are still underdeveloped for covering topics on political communication and race. As we discuss below, if scholars can assist each other by submitting their resources to these online repositories for others' consideration, it would help lift our academic community.

To assist with these changes, we also recommend that relevant academic organizations create spaces dedicated to furthering these practices. Two such examples include the National Communication Association's Teaching and Learning resources and the American Political Science Association's Educate initiative. Both resources have begun consolidating syllabi and recommendations for effective practice, but neither of these archives have resources for political communication courses and extraordinarily little exists for incorporating race. We call on fellow educators to provide these materials for their peers and suggest these spaces as a starting point.

Before we conclude, it is important to highlight that the path of progress should not be paved only by scholars of color or students of color. This essay serves as one response of many to the call from Chakravartty and colleagues (2018) that scholars of all identities should begin to incorporate race into communication scholarship in a more inclusive way. Marginalized scholars should not bear the unequal burden to "do" diverse scholarship or "be" markers of diversity; rather, what is required is a collective engagement with work that addresses racial antagonisms as central features shaping modern communicative practices. As such, while it can be valuable to invite scholars of color to deliver guest lectures (e.g., increasing descriptive and scholarly visibility), such decisions need to be weighed against how this creates more labor for these scholars and may "outsource" the practical labor of putting together thoughtful materials, as well as outsource the emotional labor of engaging in potentially difficult conversations. To create change, we must all do the work.

## Conclusion

Race is a foundational part of our political life, and it should play a foundational part in our pedagogy. Our proposed changes require labor, said labor requires effort, and said effort requires conviction. While individuals can and should take up this effort, we hope that it feeds into a collective effort across our field to correct what has been incorrect, and unjust, for far too long. Scholars start their careers as students, and pedagogy shapes a student's view of the things they decide to study. If we want to improve our field, the classroom is an ideal starting point.

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