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## A Study of Ungrading in Upper-level Political Theory Courses

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents results from qualitative student reflections from three upper-level courses taught using the “ungrading” pedagogy. This is a pedagogy that emphasizes student learning and self-evaluation by omitting quantitative grades, replacing them with a structure where students evaluate themselves and define their own grades for the course. This work draws on comments taken from student reflections and personal accounts of the course design and outcomes presented as a comprehensive reflection on the pedagogy. The goal of these reflections is to present the advantages and challenges of using such a system and a firsthand account for instructors who are interested in alternative grading schemes. Overall, students found ungrading to be initially worrying, but ultimately rewarding. Student work improved and individual students reflected on the innovative nature of the class, providing concrete suggestions for future iterations.

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## Introduction: Why Ungrading?

“*Start by trusting students*” — Jessie Stommel (2016)

The lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic for education have shown the limitations of mainstream pedagogy. The rapid switching between modalities of teaching, from in-person, to online, to hybrid systems, bring to the fore how much of our standard modalities were not designed with student learning in mind. Instead, teaching strategies in higher education are either based on traditional forms of teaching passed down from advisor to advisee or designed within the pressure cooker of tenure requirements, the expanding administrative institution, and various forms of educational technology constraining choice and limiting pedagogical options. Ungrading is an alternative.

Ungrading is a pedagogical structure that adopts a radical, nonhierarchical approach. While the details of an ungraded classroom are unique to each practitioner, ungrading begins with a simple, standard observation: Grades are not fair (Blum 2020, 11). There are a number of ways this could be accomplished, including other “alternative” classroom structures such as contract grading, specifications grading, or standards-based grading.<sup>1</sup> The important thing that ties these approaches together is that in an ungraded

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class, students only receive qualitative feedback on assignments and are not assigned quantitative grades throughout the course. In my courses I engage in consultative grading, which might be seen as the most extensive form of ungrading. Throughout this course, students only receive written qualitative feedback on assignments and engage in several “consultations” in the form of self-evaluations. At the conclusion of the course, students complete a self-evaluation and assign themselves a grade based on their own perception of their work. In an ungraded classroom, the instructor does not engage in any form of grading. In my view, the best approach is to view ungrading as a comprehensive philosophy, structuring the overall approach to the class (a class designed without individual grades). While ungrading can be used piecemeal and can easily incorporate exercises and approaches that further de-hierarchize the classroom by ungrading one assignment or one category of assignments, de-emphasizing grades, or incorporating self-evaluations, I had the most success when treating ungrading as an approach to the structure of the classroom experience as a whole and using it as the superstructure for a whole host of other interventions.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, ungrading is quite simple: You do not assign students grades.

Strict, quantitative grades have been shown to decrease student interest in learning, creating an incentive structure where students are not encouraged to explore and learn but to shortcut the process and take the path of least resistance to getting an A (Kohn 2011). Quantitative grades create imposed, extrinsic incentives that motivate students into performing well to be rewarded and meet the demands of the instructor, rather than to foster an innate sense of curiosity and a desire to know more (Ryan and Deci 2000). Counterintuitively, grades have even been shown to be less effective than other methods of assessment, like pass/fail options, even in high-leverage situations where specific education is critically important, like medical school (White and Fantone 2010). Medical students learned more when freed from the pressures of specific grades. Additionally, despite the hysteria around cheating and academic integrity in the pandemic-created online learning environment, it has been shown that quantitative grades incentivize cheating (Anderman and Murdock 2011). This reinforces the idea that cheating is fundamentally a pedagogical problem and can be solved with pedagogical tools (Lederman 2020; Lang 2013; McCabe, Butterfield, and Treviño 2012). As Murdock et al. have shown, cheating can be tied to both classroom goal structure and pedagogical competence (Murdock, Miller, and Goetzinger 2007). Classrooms focused on individual, competitive performance and plagued by poor instructor pedagogy lead to cheating.

Ungrading can work to eliminate these elements that drive students toward cheating. An ungrading strategy focused on mastery of the material rather than competitive performance, and driven by sound pedagogical principles, undercuts the drive to cheat. By eliminating stresses over strict deadlines and allowing students to recognize that they don’t have to jump through unnecessary hoops for a grade, they suddenly find that they don’t need to cheat, and instead can focus on the material in the class itself.

From a more theoretical level, we see that strict quantitative grading pedagogies reinforce the hierarchical structure of school, placing students into what Foucault describes as “a constantly repeated ritual of power” (Foucault 1995). This hierarchical classroom, with the instructor at the top ruling over a collection of subordinate students, reinforces the otherizing nature of higher education and reinforces the aims of

modern higher education by turning the classroom into a transactional experience instead of one of learning and exploration.

Inspired by the works of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and others, ungrading is a pedagogical style that pushes back against these tendencies, seeking to reclaim a classroom that acts as a site of resistance (Freire 2018; Hooks 2014). Made famous by educator and scholar Jesse Stommel, the practice of ungrading creates an open dialogue between students and teachers, encourages an environment of mutual respect, allows students to explore their own thoughts and perspectives on issues, and turns the classroom into a place of common learning rather than following what Freire describes as the “banking model” of education. The banking model is a metaphor for education where the instructor makes a “deposit” of knowledge into the student, seeking to “withdraw” it later in the form of exams or other assessments. One additional advantage is that ungrading allows students to experiment, take risks, and fail gracefully. Ungrading allows students to experiment with ideas, stretch their capacities, struggle, fail, and persevere without a sword of Damocles hanging over their final grade. This makes ungrading a good strategy for instructors interested in a more open, equitable, and exploratory learning experience (Feldman 2018). However, de-emphasizing grades does not mean that the course does not require effort on the part of the instructor. Assuming that ungrading is an easier option that traditional grading is a recipe for disappointment and discourage. The work is more rewarding, but it remains work.

There has been little work discussing the use of ungrading in practical terms within the field of political science. Books, articles, and blog posts argue for why we might want to do ungrading, but not how it might work within the context of the political science classroom. Kirsten Taylor (2022) provides one example of ungrading in an upper-level foreign policy course, showing that this approach is not limited to political theory courses. Here I aim to help close this gap by providing an account of several ungraded political science classes, including student responses. Each instructor is different, each classroom is different, each student is different, and so the ungrading strategies must also be different for each situation. Respecting this need for difference, I purposely stop short of offering anything in the way of specific “best practices” for ungrading. Instead, I present a study of observations and systematic reflections of experiences in my upper-level political theory classroom. In doing so, I don’t aim to find any generalizable conclusions, but I do recognize several patterns that emerged from my experiences. When presented with the ungrading systems, my students felt both excitement and trepidation, underscoring the need to be up front about the rationale for the pedagogy and the instructor’s commitment to the ungrading method. However, by the end of the course, my students identified the experiences as both instructive and rewarding, while also showing a deep and subtle knowledge of pedagogical practice, offering useful suggestions and reflections.

Political theory provides an ideal use case for ungrading. Political theory, in its broadest interpretation, is the study of texts to get a perspective on a particular problem (Gunnell 2011). This problem may be historical in nature, like an investigation of Plato’s concept of the Forms, or leveraging these texts to understand modern problems. Ungrading naturally intersects with an interpretivist understanding of texts. If we understand the goal of reading texts and engaging in political theory as aiming to

understand ourselves and our world better, then it flies in the face of objective assessment. If scholars over thousands of years cannot agree on the meaning of Plato's texts, why should we expect this of our students?<sup>3</sup> Instead, why don't we open these texts and their interpretations to our students and invite them to participate in this debate themselves? Political theory has a major advantage in that the discussion of facts is minimal; we are not faced with teaching students mathematical equations that must be used correctly. Instead, we can focus on ideas and big questions and can open these questions up for student interpretation. However, even in other subfields, the ungrading approach detailed below fits well. As an example, ungrading works especially well with a simulation approach that may be used in international relations, as students are already primed to engage organically with material and reflect on their experiences (Asal and Kratoville 2013). Developing a learning-first approach is not exclusive to political theory.

## Methodology

This participant-observation study occurred over three upper-level political theory courses designed for political science majors and taught across two calendar years with a total enrollment of 124 students. These classes were taught at a major public research university with a "majority-minority" student population and a "Hispanic Serving Institution" designation. The first two courses were taught during the summer terms in 2020 and 2021.

Two of these classes were accelerated online courses, titled "Capitalism, Socialism, and Political Theory," and covered an eclectic set of thinkers from Jacques Derrida to Achille Mbembe, all grappling with the question of capitalism and socialism in our contemporary society. The third was a full-term course taught in the fall of 2021 titled "Modern Political Theory: The Political Theory of Technology" and engaged with contemporary thinking about the politics of technology. Students read Frankfurt School thinkers and Michel Foucault, along with current scholars like Ruha Benjamin and Colin Koopman, who are engaging with the political impacts of technology in our society today.<sup>4</sup> This was initially taught in person but was switched to a hybrid format half-way through the course due to a Covid-19 outbreak.

In these ungraded classes, students are trusted to complete assigned readings and come to class prepared for an open and more free-flowing discussion, which nearly all of them do. I found that more students had completed more of the reading and were prepared to discuss it more thoroughly than in a traditionally delivered class. This is remarkable as we might expect students to complete less reading when the punitive mechanisms are removed, but as the student comments below demonstrate, ungrading causes students to develop a sense of ownership over the class and participate more, simply because they want to. Students also completed weekly or biweekly self-evaluations where they responded to open-ended questions about the course material and their progress in the class.<sup>5</sup> The goal of these self-reflections is to induce meta-cognition about the class and have students reflect on what they want to get out of the class and how they are making progress toward achieving their goals that they set for themselves. Self-evaluations or self-assessments are a highly studied topic within

education, although much of the research is focused on K-12 students, or on more “objective” learning outcomes, as one might find in a math class (Andrade 2019). My approach to self-evaluation is a summative focus on products, where students reflect and make judgments about completed work, rather than grading themselves on a rubric or monitoring their progress on a particular class. This summative product focus is well suited to the upper-level political theory classroom. Students were very open and honest in these reflections, freely admitting when they had failed to do the reading, skipped class, or had fallen behind. Students reported that they had been feeling “a bit lazy” or reporting that they “did not attend class during Week 2” or that their participation during the week was “5/10.” This honesty helps dispel the notion that students were merely performing for the instructor, telling them what they want to hear.

At the conclusion of the class, students completed one large seminar-style paper and received feedback from either the instructor or the TA. This feedback was purely constructive, outlining the positive and negative aspects to their work and providing suggestions on how it may be improved. Then, students completed a final self-evaluation, where I asked them to reflect on their entire class experience, the goals they set for themselves, and the content of the feedback they received and to assign and justify a grade for themselves. As required by the school, this is a traditional A/B/C/D/F grading scale. These institutional limitations are an unfortunate part of our existence. So, the question becomes, how do you meet the institutional requirements while keeping the pedagogical goals of ungrading? Students self-grading is my uncomfortable solution to this problem. As a rule, I very rarely adjust these grades, except upward. In a class of 70, I adjusted fewer than 10 grades. Some students are overly hard on themselves, and I suggest to these students that they might consider a higher grade. But even with these students, I approach the act of giving grades as part of a long-term conversation about their experience in the class, respecting their view and self-understandings. When I do adjust grades upward, I try to use my perspective to help students see their own work in a different, more positive light. This also helps to mitigate the self-efficacy problems, where lower self-efficacy leads to a lower GPA (Khan 2013). I have only lowered grades when students don’t take the ungrading process seriously and have attempted to game the system by not completing any assignments, but still giving themselves an A. However, the fact that I must report grades at the end of the term leads to ongoing questions of student motivations. I can never be sure students aren’t just giving themselves a grade that they want for external reasons. But this problem seems unavoidable, unless schools themselves also reject grading.<sup>6</sup> Self-grading is ultimately an imperfect solution to a systemic problem.

I received an IRB exemption to present excerpts from student feedback in this piece.<sup>7</sup> Student feedback was taken from five self-evaluations completed across the course term. All students were asked explicitly if they would like to be included in the research project and had to proactively agree to participate (they had to type “yes” in response to a question on the self-evaluations). Overall, the responses below were drawn from a collection of 507 student self-evaluations.<sup>8</sup> Student consent was obtained for each individual self-evaluation, and students are allowed to withdraw consent at any time. Student responses have been lightly edited for spelling, grammar, and readability.

## Class responses

### *Initial impressions*

At first, many students expressed hesitation or skepticism about ungrading. I spent much of the introductory sessions going over the concept of ungrading—what the expectations are for such a system and my own personal motivation for this style of grading. Nevertheless, students still expressed some hesitation or worry about the class. One student remarked, “I feel a little apprehensive because it is something that I am not used to.” This theme of apprehension because of new experiences was a common worry of students. A student quipped that they were “not a huge fan” of the system, and another said that it was “a bit odd.”

Many of these worries came from a discomfort with the lack of structure. Students commented that they relied on a class’s grading system to help structure their participation in the class, and losing this structure was unsettling. A student reflected on this idea of structure, saying, “structure is something important, and the majority of college courses operate the same, so following how the system works is part of the key to passing these courses.” Students also admitted that they got “a little anxious” when reading the syllabus because they have “built [...] study habits around that expectation of percentages.” Another student echoed that nervousness: “Honestly, it makes me a bit nervous since it’s very different than what I’m used to (I’m the kind of person who uses the grade calculators after turning in each assignment).” Nervousness was the most common negative reaction to the ungrading system, reflecting the need for the instructor to be open with students about ungrading and, importantly, the seriousness with which the instructor is taking their own commitments. Implicit in many of these comments is a worry that the rug may be pulled out from under the students and that their own assessments might be overridden or deemed incorrect. Because of this, it seems important for the instructor to stick to this system for an entire course and not revert to old forms mid-semester.

However, not all students were worried about the use of ungrading. Many students had positive feelings about the prospect, expressing excitement or even joy at the prospect of moving beyond a system of strictly quantitative grades. Students said they were “very interested,” “excited to try the style of grading,” and looked forward to being involved in something “fresh and interesting.”

One student said they were “excited to be a part of a new system that varies from my other courses. I believe due to the fact I may be less stressed about achieving a certain grade I will generate more quality work.” This response is particularly interesting because they associate a negative relationship between grades and quality work. A common worry from instructors is that ungrading might undercut the rigor of the class or lead to work that is of a lower quality than that of a strictly graded course. However, the opposite seems to be the case. Students say ungrading “makes me want to work even harder so the grade I give myself reflects the work I’ve done.” Another student appreciated ungrading because “I can already see how much more effort I personally want to put into this class [...] I want to succeed because of myself and not because of others.” Additionally, students intuitively understood how the self-reflective nature of the class would impact their own participation and work. One student expressed how



“it’s empowering to know how to be honest with oneself [...] WE know how much time and effort we put into reading and comprehension.” Similarly, another student said, “only you (yourself) can really say if you know [and] understand what was taught in this class and made the effort to apply it.” One student even expressed gratitude, saying they were “very grateful, unbelievably so. Never had a prof that took the expectations that we had for an upper-div and have it flipped on its head.”

### ***Reflections at the conclusion of class***

These reflections continued to be positive, even at the conclusion of the class. Many students expressed that they liked the grading system, calling it “very refreshing” or “very unique and personally I like it.” Some students also expressed that the grading system “made me enjoy the course a lot more than I’ve enjoyed other courses” and even “wish more of this was implemented and talked about.”

The degree to which students both understood and engaged with the theoretic underpinnings of the ungrading system surprised me. In retrospect, I should have anticipated this; students have many years of dissatisfaction with quantitative grading systems, reaching as far back as grade school (Deeley et al. 2019).<sup>9</sup> One student opined at length about the ways in which grades represent an external form of validation and its reflection of the extractive impulses of education:

“Our academic societies have been disciplined to prize a 4.0 GPA as the peak of student/human achievement. We see that in industries that hire more employees that are college-educated. When job prospects become reliant on a 4.0 GPA, people may believe that attaining that grade is necessary. Thus, the students who value job prospects lose sight of what the 4.0 GPA truly represents. The self-grading system creates an opportunity for students to give themselves a grade that they feel is best, and when the best for them is a job, what stops them from giving themselves a 4.0 GPA? It saddened me when I saw some students take this fantastic class knowing they could get an A with as little work as possible. I was sad not because those who worked harder could receive the same grade but because it showed me how messy our society’s valuation of knowledge has become. I would talk about how that same process could affect sentiments towards education (rise of populism), but I feel that is way beyond the scope of this self-assessment.”

Not all students found the experience as rewarding. Some students continued to feel anxiety over the grading system, with a number of students echoing the sentiment that “it made me a little anxious at times.” Other students worried about honesty, recognizing that “it does require the honest behavior of students that operate under the reinforced idea that their GPA is a determinant of value, so results might be skewed.” The idea of grade accuracy is a hard ideology to shake, for both students and instructors, leading to some students wanting a “minor grade” to “help establish whether the grade we give ourselves is accurate.” This question of accuracy is the very thing that ungrading is pushing back against, but it is still worth remembering that students may not be as invested in our pedagogical systems as we are.

One of the most surprising elements of student feedback was a persistent desire for more work. Many students, when asked what they would change about this class, mentioned a desire for more consistent work throughout the semester. Given the uncertainties with returning to in-person instruction for the “Political Theory of Technology”



course, I simplified the workload and focused on a singular final paper that students would develop over the second half of the course. I thought this would help take some of the pressure off, but I was surprised to find that students wanted varying levels of additional work. One student suggested adding “a short critical analysis paper at the end of each section of the class,” which would help “provide guidance and clarity,” as well as a “tool box for students to use on the final paper.” This sentiment was echoed by several other students asking for additional assignments to keep themselves on track.

This feedback showcases several things that are important for both development of ungrading and for pedagogical practices more generally. First, it pushes back against the idea that students are lazy or unmotivated. In fact, when students are invested in the course and want to succeed on their own terms, they are willing to accept more work. This is especially true if they can see how it helps them meet their overall goals. It also shows how tuned in students are to the pedagogical forms being used in the classroom. Students provided specific suggestions for the types of assignments and made a convincing, collective case for not only the need for additional assignments, but also for how the assignments should be structured and what goals they should accomplish. This is a crucial reminder that students are more sophisticated than we might initially think. They are aware of the ins and outs of their educational experiences and are willing to put in effort when they see value in the outcome. Importantly, this value transcends mere grades, as students did not want more work to increase their grades, but instead as a way of motivating their participation and helping them either read more thoroughly or write more effectively. This feedback proved immensely valuable, and I will adjust my future courses to account for this development.

## Personal reflections

Overall, I found the experience of ungrading within political theory classrooms to be incredibly rewarding, while still being challenging. However, ungrading isn’t without its own mental hurdles for the instructor. One of the more difficult things for me to get over is the idea of students deserving grades. As instructors, we develop a type of intuition about student work and effort. Through this intuition, you can tell what grade a student might traditionally receive. You can quickly read through a paper and imagine what grade you might give a student, even without a rubric or other clear criteria. This might not be a perfect metric, but it gets you within a ballpark. But this means it is even more important to recognize that the ideology of grades and grading as a reflection of student worthiness is not something merely embraced by the students; it comes to inhabit instructors as well. This has been the most difficult mental block for me to push past, coming to the end of a term and recognizing that I might not agree with students about their self-assigned grades simply because I have an inbuilt intuition about what that student deserves. The extensive literature on bias within grades points us toward the hard-to-avoid conclusion that our ideas about what students deserve is fundamentally flawed (Malouff and Thorsteinsson 2016; Lavy and Sand 2015; Chemaly 2015).

But of course, grades are not fundamentally a question of justice; they are an expression of power and the creation and transfer of knowledge about the student, from the

student to the instructor for the purpose of classification (Foucault 1995). Overcoming these predilections is crucial for the ungrading process to work. Students do not “inflate” their grades in an ungraded classroom; they respond to the variety of pressures placed on them and attempt to operate within an imperfect system. The idea of grade “inflation” implies a deviation from an “natural” or “correct” position, the very thing that ungrading denies. If there is no “correct” position, there cannot be a deviation from it. Comparing grade distributions between graded and ungraded classrooms is playing into the false idea of objectivity in grading systems and arguing that the legitimacy of an ungraded classroom comes through its conformity to the biases of a graded one. We must realize that undermining traditional classroom hierarchies and empowering students also means that we must deconstruct our own preconceived notions of what teaching is. It is a continual process of creation and reflection. Engaging with this work has also revealed how little work there is on ungrading within political science. Political science is methodologically diverse; this diversity should be reflected in our pedagogical structures as well. My hope is that more instructors experiment with ungrading in their own classrooms and work to expand the literature on ungrading and alternative grading within political science. Ungrading is a pedagogical structure that encourages customization, so it is my hope that more work emerges reporting on the usage of ungrading in American government, comparative politics, and other political science classrooms. A rising tide will lift all pedagogical boats.

## Notes

1. Contract grading is a grading format where students are graded on the number of assignments they complete and are not assessed on specific content. The instructor sets out the number of assignments required for each letter grade and the students decide how many assignments they want to complete. Specifications grading, or specs grading, is when an instructor establishes the specifications for each assignment, and a student receives credit when they meet the specifications. These are then bundled together to make up a student’s final grade. Standards-based grading is a similar approach, where student work is evaluated based on the standards established for the assignment.
2. I have included a full guide for instructors wishing to undertake ungrading in the [digital appendix](#).
3. I freely admit that this is a particular interpretation of a methodological approach to political theory. More historicist or Straussian approaches to political theory argue that there may be a real or true interpretation of particular texts. However, I think my general point still stands; even if we believe that there are true interpretations, the actual context of these interpretations remains the subject of scholarly debate. My desire is not to settle these debates, but instead to argue that we should extend this debate into the classroom and allow students to engage with it, not subject them to a multiple-choice quiz about texts, with the presumption that we can easily know the true or correct interpretations.
4. Full syllabi for all classes can be found in the [digital appendix](#).
5. The self-evaluation prompts can be found in the [digital appendix](#).
6. This may not be as radical as it might seem. Many universities have rejected standardized admissions testing in recent years—why not extend this to grades as well?
7. IRB Number: HS 21-134. It was determined that the material collected does not meet the federal definition of human subjects research.
8. I drew student responses from two of the three total ungraded classes. I was not able to get student consent for one of the “Capitalism, Socialism, and Political Theory” classes, as the class had concluded before I began this project, so I did not use any responses from that class. I collected the responses, anonymized them, and then categorized responses into broad

thematic groupings. I then picked representative quotations from these groupings. The total number of responses and the similarities between them suggest that these comments I present below are very representative of broad student attitudes. Many students said very similar things, so I indicated below where there seemed to be a broad consensus.

9. “Grade school” as a moniker seems to take on a new light when contrasted with ungrading.

## Notes on contributor

**E. Stefan Kehlenbach** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on the intersection of technology, power, and politics, asking how the vast collection of data, used to fuel technology such as AI and machine learning, becomes invested with discourses of power and shapes our political futures. This develops a new critical theory of technology focused on data and datafication—the process of turning many aspects of our daily lives into data to be analyzed. He is currently working on a book manuscript titled *The Age of Data: A New Critical Theory of Technology*. His pedagogical research interests include ungrading, the impact of technology in the classroom and combining political theory research and teaching.

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