



■ G. Bingham Powell, 2009

G. Bingham Powell, the Marie C. Wilson and Joseph C. Wilson Professor of Political Science, is an avid observer and analyst of political systems—with a particular taste for tensions and disputes and the divergent paths they can take.

And teaching, he says, is a way to impart his curiosity to others.

“I was drawn to political science by my interest in conflict,” Powell explains. “Teaching is a chance to share my interest in and enthusiasm for political science.”

As incoming president in 2011-12 of the American Political Science Association and a highly regarded expert on comparative politics and European politics, Powell nonetheless works day to day with Rochester students just dipping their toes into the field with the course Introduction to Comparative Politics.

“It’s an opportunity to argue to them that there are a lot of ways to run a political system—the way we do it isn’t the only one,” he says.

Coauthor and coeditor of a leading undergraduate comparative politics text, *Comparative Politics Today*, Powell aims to give the course a narrow focus, such as how citizens use elections to influence politics, while familiarizing students with basic political science theories and concepts.

“I’ve found, historically, that if I try to do everything, it satisfies nobody. The course becomes a welter of unconnected facts and concepts.”

In his upper-division undergraduate courses, Powell focuses on how democracies work and how conflict functions within them.

“Disagreement in politics is everywhere,” he says. “Sometimes the disagreements are expressed through institutions. And sometimes things boil over.”

He tends to concentrate these courses on a handful of countries. “When I’m feeling brave, which is most of the time, I let the students choose one of the countries. Sometimes it’s one I know well, and sometimes not. Then I have to go to the books.”

That plunge into new information—studying the development of democracy in South Africa, for instance, or the political workings of India—are “fascinating. They pull me out of my comfort zone, which is European democracies.”

Even in large courses, Powell aims to foster dialogue with students. “Political science is in some ways straightforward,” he says, “but it’s more subtle in its concepts than students often realize. Discussions can help them make their way through that.”

“In so far as there’s a common denominator” in what appeals to him about teaching, “it’s sharing something you care about,” he says.

“It’s always seemed to me that politics is intrinsically interesting. And most of the students find it so, too.”