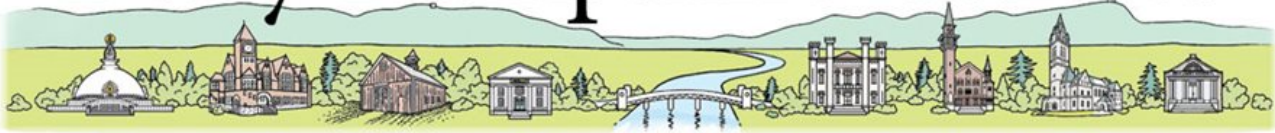


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‘Democracy is in real danger’: Ex-White House staffer gives political pointers in talk to UMass class



Advocacy journalist and former White House staffer Bob Weiner speaks to the U.S. Constitutional History class Thursday afternoon at UMass Amherst. STAFF PHOTO/DAN LITTLE » [Buy this Image](#)

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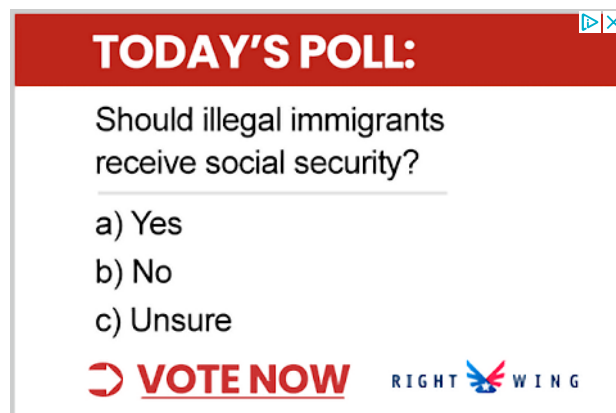
By [BRIAN STEELE \(/byline?byline=By BRIAN STEELE\)](#)

Staff Writer

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AMHERST — A former White House and congressional staffer who gained national attention for his minor role in the Monica Lewinsky investigation, and for his more recent efforts to promote the work of young journalists in major newspapers, told a UMass Amherst class on Thursday that the existence of American democracy is in peril, but there is still time to change course.

“Yes, democracy is in real danger, and more than ever since the Civil War. It could be dying to the point we will not recognize it and other countries will no longer take our lead,” Bob Weiner, an advocacy journalist who earned a history degree from the university in 1974, said to the U.S. constitutional history class taught by professor Daniel Gordon.



“You are the generation that can make a difference,” Weiner said, “literally save the country, and save our democracy.”

Weiner’s afternoon talk at Herter Hall inspired questions from the students about the wisdom of limiting presidential authority after former President Donald Trump’s effort to retain the office, changing the structure of the Supreme Court in response to recent decisions, and whether Democrats and Republicans are equally to blame for a general lack of bipartisanship in national affairs.

A resident of the Washington, D.C., area and a regular radio and TV commentator, Weiner covers the White House and Congress in op-eds published throughout the country. He was the Democratic nominee for Congress for western Massachusetts in 1986, losing to incumbent Silvio Conte.

Weiner told the class about his time as the youth voter registration coordinator for the Democratic National Committee and his work for U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy’s 1970 campaign, which he won despite withering headlines about the Chappaquiddick scandal in which Kennedy was behind the wheel of a car that plunged off a bridge, leading to the death of Mary Jo Kopechne.

During the 1972 Watergate hotel break-in that ultimately sank Richard Nixon’s presidency, Weiner worked at the DNC office inside the building.

After attending UMass, Weiner worked for congressmen including Ed Koch, Claude Pepper, Charles Rangel and John Conyers. He later became the spokesman for the House Narcotics Committee, the House Judiciary Committee and the House Government Operations Committee, among other roles, and served as spokesman for the White House Office of Drug Policy from 1995 to 2001.

In 2016, Weiner won the prestigious National Press Club President's Award for his program recruiting young journalists as op-ed writers in major papers. He said the program has produced more than 1,000 op-eds for which the young writers are listed as co-authors.

"I've always been inspired by the vision and energy of young people," he said after the talk, describing a "bold" and "fearless" generation that has produced many talented thinkers and writers.

According to contemporary media reports, special prosecutor Ken Starr in 1998 subpoenaed Weiner to testify before a grand jury investigating President Bill Clinton's sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Weiner had called political officials in Maryland to urge them to ask questions about whether another person involved in the scandal, Linda Tripp, had broken the law by recording phone calls.

Weiner displayed the framed subpoena to the class. Political commentator James Carville, he said, dedicated "an entire chapter" of a book to Weiner's ordeal, writing that he had been targeted for "phoning some friends on Super Bowl Sunday."

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He and his allies "made fun of" Starr in the media, Weiner said, and "got the better of him" when Clinton was reelected in 1996 amid the Whitewater investigation that Starr also led.

Weiner told the students that he has "respect" for past Republican presidents, including Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, even though he disagreed with their policy of cutting taxes on the rich. New members of Congress, he said, should be taught the history of bipartisanship in Washington so that it can infuse their own thinking.

Trump, according to Weiner, is a bigot, "disloyal" to the United States and tried to illegally retain power after the 2020 election. On the topic of classified documents seized from Trump's home earlier this year and the ensuing Department of Justice investigation, he said it is clear that the ex-president

had “stolen documents” by subverting a legitimate process to declassify them.

At the same time, Weiner said he approves of the approaches that Trump took with China and North Korea during his time in office.

“I’m not partisan on the issues. I’m issue-driven on the issues, but don’t tell me, if one side is right and one side is wrong, that I should be bipartisan on it,” Weiner said in an interview. “No. Not if they’re saying ‘election rigging.’ That’s B.S.”

He provided a brief history to the class of far-right figures from the 20th century, including George Wallace and Charles Coughlin, and historical travesties such as Jim Crow laws, before speaking against the Senate filibuster and in support of new laws that address conflicts of interest among justices on the Supreme Court.

“From the Civil War to Watergate to Ken Starr during Clinton, to Trump, we have backslided and corrected, backslided and corrected,” Weiner said. “It’s been worse and worse each time, and Biden is, of course, the American people’s course correction from Trumpism, just as Gerald Ford was from Nixon.”

Challenged by Gordon on a perceived imbalance in the talk, in which Republicans took most of the direct blame for the state of national politics, Weiner said he had criticized the actions of Democratic senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, and acknowledged that policies can do as much harm as politicians, but, on an issue like whether Trump actually won the 2020 election, “There aren’t two sides.”

As part of the effort to preserve American democratic institutions, Weiner argued, voters need to turn out in large numbers and volunteer their time on political campaigns.

“Organize and target races. Contact the (Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) and ask which races are the target ones where you want us on your phone banks,” he said. “Write op-eds in your local paper.”

Asked by a student how to convince one’s political opponents to change their minds, Weiner said the only method he knows is “rational argument.”

Besides his political accomplishments, Weiner is a former vice chair of the Amherst Democratic Town Committee and ex-president of the Sugarloaf Mountain Athletic Club.

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