

Teaching American Government in Comparative Perspective

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In this article, I argue that teachers of Introduction to American Politics courses can usefully integrate information from non-U.S. countries in order to more effectively present the American material to students. This approach encourages students to compare the governmental choices made in the U.S. to other alternatives, and to evaluate and consider the implications of those choices. By having alternative viewpoints presented to them, students are given a “cognitive conflict” task, rather than a simpler “intellective” task. Cognitive conflict tasks have been found by cognitive psychologists to encourage higher level thinking, and to lead to more effective learning on the part of students. In an experimental test, I demonstrate that students do, indeed, react to the presentation of non-U.S. material and internalize the material in a more effective manner than students who are not exposed to comparative information.

There are few responsibilities more universal in political science than teaching Introduction to American Government. It is a course commonly required of majors, though sometimes the class is a university requirement, or even a requirement as a matter of state law.¹ Indeed, many college-educated people have an Introduction to American Government class as their only contact with political science. Others take the course and are inspired to major in the field, and may even transition to making a career out of the

¹ Texas, for example, requires: “Every college and university receiving state support or state aid from public funds shall give a course of instruction in government or political science which includes consideration of the Constitution of the United States (Texas Education Code, Subchapter F, Section 51.301 (a)).

discipline. Given the role that Introduction to American Government courses play, it makes sense to pay attention to how we teach the subject.

In accordance with how important Introduction to American Government is, researchers have spent a significant amount of time studying ways to improve it. These studies include assessments of how the use of multimedia presentations affects student learning (Jordan and Sanchez, 1994), the implications of using online discussion groups for how often students participate (Pollock and Wilson, 2002; Pollock, Hamann and Wilson 2005), and the use of public opinion polls as teaching tools (Allen, forthcoming). This attention is understandable, since teaching the course well or poorly can have implications from the very narrow (how many majors are recruited into the discipline) to the very broad (how much large numbers of college educated citizens know about government).

Teaching and Learning

Fortunately, educational psychologists have some suggestions about the effects variation in teaching techniques can have on student learning. Though some argue that there is “little variation between teachers in terms of their impact on pupils’ progress” (Long 2000, p. 7), other researchers find that teachers vary a great deal in their effectiveness (Wayne and Youngs 2003). In particular, they find that teachers are capable, as Wenglinsky (2000) argues, of promoting higher level thinking in their students.

In an extensive study of teacher effectiveness at the college level, Bain (2004) finds that the most effective teachers “often want students to do something that human

beings don't do very well: build new mental models of reality" (p. 27). Stimulating students to formulate new understandings of how reality works, rather than simply feeding them information with the expectation that they will remember that information, is the difference between "higher level" and "surface" learning. Bain finds that effective teachers place students in situations where their existing models do not work, and then force those students to grapple with the new information.

This approach to effective teaching is consistent with how cognitive psychologists have come to regard effective learning. People are much more likely to retain information when that information is placed in a useful and interesting context that allows students to relate the information to things that they regard as important (Bransford and Johnson 1972, Symons and Johnson 1997). Wickelgren (1977) concludes: "The time you spend thinking about material you are reading and relating it to previously stored material is about the most useful thing you can do in learning any new subject matter" (p. 346).² When integrating and evaluating new material students do learn facts, but they learn how those facts fit in with their need to reconstruct their understanding of an issue.

Cognitive Conflict and Teaching

In traditional teaching, we typically ask students to learn information and test their knowledge with fact-based recall questions on tests. In the language of cognitive psychology, we give our students "intellective" tasks –tasks that have correct, verifiable

² This insight is not new. It was advanced as early as 1885 by Ebbinghaus who, based on primitive experiments, concluded that learning material without meaningful context required ten times the effort of learning meaningful material.

answers (Laughlin 1980, McGrath 1984). The problem with intellectual tasks, from a learning perspective, is that the tasks lack conflict and therefore the ability to prompt students to elaborate or reflect on the implications of what they are learning (Myers et al. 1987). Because of the lack of elaboration and reflection on the part of students, the ability of students to retain the information is lessened (Duffy et al. 1990).

A more effective approach to improving students' understanding of material is to place them in situations where the questions that they are asked to consider do not have simple, correct answers. By confronting "cognitive conflict" tasks, students are asked to resolve different viewpoints and come to a reasoned conclusion. The conflict requires more effort on the part of the student to internalize the information, as the student must relate it to their own priorities, values, risk acceptance levels, etc. By resolving the conflicts that arise in their minds, what they have learned is more thoroughly considered, and therefore more resistant to memory decay (Zwinn et al. 1995, Springer and Borthick, 2007).

Using Comparative Examples in American Government

How can we integrate this approach into our Introduction to American Politics courses? Often, the way we teach Introduction to American Politics does little to encourage this kind of thinking. Textbook chapters are ordered by topic, and tests reward students for remembering informational details like that fact that amending the constitution requires a two-thirds vote of support in both houses of Congress, rather than a simple majority or three-quarters vote. In order to get students to wrestle with the

material, it would be useful to compare the institutions and politics that exist in American government to some competing alternative.

Fortunately, political scientists have access to a large body of work that can challenge students to reevaluate their understanding of government and politics, and to place American government and politics in comparison with other alternatives. By using examples from comparative politics, students can see not only how government in the United States works, they can see how it could work –that is, they can see how other democratic countries have made choices about governing that differ from those choices made in the United States. By integrating institutions and processes from other nations into our presentation of the institutions and processes in the United States, students can be presented the opportunity to challenge or justify the way things work in the U.S. And in doing so, the information we ask them to learn becomes an active part of their efforts to decide if the U.S. has made the right decision in having, for example, a Senate, geographically based representation, or a process for amending the Constitution.

One easily accessible way to make use of a non-U.S. example to highlight the U.S. information is to teach the parliamentary system alongside the teaching of Congress. In showing how many democratic legislatures concentrate power, enforce party discipline, and contain the executive power, students can be challenged to think about whether or not Congress is a better or worse system than an alternative. Compelling arguments for the parliamentary system include a relative lack of gridlock in the legislature and clearer lines of responsibility when it comes to assigning credit or blame for policy. It is one thing to ask students to understand that party discipline is relatively weak in the U.S. Congress, it is another to ask them to weigh the costs and benefits of

changing to a parliamentary system. A student who is defending or criticizing the rules and norms of the U.S. Congress is marshalling facts in the interest of advancing an argument, and is engaging in the kind of deeper thinking than would be the case if what he or she was learning was a series of facts about the government.

Another possibility for incorporating a non-U.S. example is when we teach elections. In addition to teaching about how elections are held in the U.S., a teacher could present an outline of how some countries use non-geographic proportional representation systems in electing members to their national legislatures. When students are asked to compare the two approaches to elections, they have the opportunity to make decisions about the importance of constituent-representative links, coalition governments, and what representative bodies should represent. The facts about the U.S. are not important to the student in isolation, but become important when they think about what a representative body should look like, and how the U.S. system of elections conforms to or challenges those preferences.

These examples, of course, are only two possibilities for integrating comparative material into an Introduction to American Government course. Table 1 presents a list of topics commonly found in American Government textbooks, and suggests non-U.S. examples that may prove useful to teach alongside the American material. It also outlines reasons that the suggested country may prove to be particularly useful as a comparison.

There are benefits to integrating non-U.S. examples into the teaching of Introduction to American Government that go beyond how students learn. It can help departments to participate in “internationalization” initiatives of the curriculum being

advanced by many Universities. It also may draw greater class participation from international students who find that they have little to contribute to a conventional American Government class. A final benefit of integrating comparative examples into our Introduction to American Government classes is that it brings more of the things we care about to the classroom. We did not become political scientists to march through descriptions of interest groups and public opinion. We were drawn to the unanswered questions and controversies in political science. When a lecture on the Presidency grows into a lecture on how the President stacks up against other more and less powerful executives, students can discuss the probable consequences of reforming or changing the office, and we open up the issues that political scientists debate. This is especially true for those in comparative fields who find themselves teaching American Government as part of their department responsibilities. But for all political scientists, comparison is the key to learning more about how politics and government works. If nothing else, it should make us more interested in the material we teach, and teacher enthusiasm is not just good for teachers, it is associated with student success (Cruickshank, Jenkins, and Metcalf, 2003).

An Experiment

In order to test the idea that the integration of comparative material into the study of U.S. politics will improve student learning, I conducted an experiment in the summer of 2006. During the course of an Introduction to American Government class (with an enrollment of 60 students) I randomly divided the class into two groups at three different times during the semester. Early in the semester, half of the class left the lecture hall and

watched a film related to the course while the other half attended a lecture on American Federalism. The next class period, the two groups switched places, but the new lecture group got a lecture not just on American Federalism, but one that placed American Federalism in a comparative context (with Mexico, Argentina, and Russia used as examples of other relationships central governments can have with geographic sub-units within a country). The procedure was repeated twice during the semester, when randomly created treatment groups received lectures on Elections and lectures on Congress that used comparative examples to provide contrast to the American Case.

In addition to the treatment and control environments students received during the lectures, the treatment and control conditions were repeated for homework assignments. Students were asked to write short answer responses to questions on the subjects under study here. There were Federalism, Elections, and Congress homework assignments for all students. However, using WebCT course management software as the environment in which students received and completed their homework allowed for those assignments to reinforce the treatment and control conditions from the classroom. Students in treatment groups were asked to discuss the comparative aspects of the topic under study, while students in control groups were asked to discuss the American case alone.

Each of the three topics were featured on one of the three exams given to students during the course of the semester. I used standard questions from a test bank of American Government exam questions, and created a measure of how successfully each student answered the questions related to the topic under study. I used the information from the experiment (whether students were assigned to the treatment or control groups of each experimental trial, and how each student fared on the Federalism, Elections, and

Congress questions on the exams scheduled in the course) to determine whether or not students were more successful at answering questions about American government when they learned the material in the context of comparative information.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of a difference of means test from the first trial. The results show that 26 students were assigned to the treatment group, and 30 students were assigned to the control group. The means of the two groups are dramatically different, with the treatment group scoring a 65.39% on Federalism-related questions on the exam, while the control group scores a 47.78%. The significance test confirms that these two averages are significantly different, suggesting that the conditions under which the treatment group learned the material led to significantly better learning on the part of students. This conforms to the idea that comparative information, taught alongside the material traditionally taught in an American Government class, gives students more to think about and leads to better retention of the American material.

Unfortunately, the results of the second trial failed to produce similar results. When the treatment and control group means are compared (see Table 2), one can see that the means are not only very similar, but that the control group actually slightly outperforms the treatment group. The difference in how successful the treatment and control groups fared on Elections exam questions is not statistically significant, suggesting that the difference cannot be attributed to a systematic factor other than sampling error.

Table 3, on the other hand, suggests that the results from the first experiment were not accidental. Once again the treatment group's mean (this time on questions related to the U.S. Congress) was significantly higher when the information being tested was presented in contrast with something else, rather than presented as information in isolation.

Discussion

These results are surprisingly strong, and lend a great deal of evidence to the argument that creating cognitive conflict tasks for our students can help them learn more effectively. One result that requires further discussion is the non-finding when teaching Elections in comparative perspective. One possible reason for this is that there may be something about elections that make them particularly difficult to explain comparatively. It is possible that first-year college students are so unfamiliar with elections and voting that the comparative information about proportional representation and party-based voting failed to make an impression. It does not seem possible, however, that Federalism would be a more accessible topic to those same students, and the Federalism experiment worked very well. Another possibility, that the author is a little reluctant to admit, is that there may have been an instrumentation problem with the experiment. The instructor of the class conducts his research mostly in the field of elections, and teaches upper-division courses on Comparative Election Systems. Given the instructor's enthusiasm for the topic, it is possible that the comparative lecture, itself, contained features that were not conducive to first-year college students absorbing the material. It occurs to me that just as I become somewhat bleary-eyed when my budgeting-expert colleague discusses those

things that particularly interest him, perhaps my students do the same when I was enthusiastically explain the details of the single-transferable vote. An important lesson here may be that introductory level classes may find *too much* comparative detail a hindrance to learning.

Conclusion

Introduction to American Government is important as both a common gateway course to our discipline and as the only class on government that many people ever take. Given the role the class plays, making the information in it compelling is a worthwhile goal. Research on teaching and learning suggests that instructors place students in a situation where they evaluate and reconcile competing information –where they engage in cognitive conflict tasks. A readily accessible and useful way to accomplish this is to confront students with alternative sets of preferences for how democracies can work. By using examples from comparative politics, and asking students to consider those examples as worthy alternatives to American political institutions and processes, teachers can provide students with a more effective learning environment that is often more enjoyable for the instructor as well.

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Table 1: Introduction to American Government Topics, and Comparison Countries

Topic	Comparison Country	Rationale
Founding	Russia	Well-documented transition. Old leadership integrates into new system. Dramatic media coverage.
Constitution	Lebanon	Designed to balance religious interests. Separate offices guaranteed to different religious groups.
Federalism	Argentina	Low population provinces have acted to prevent reapportionment based on population revisions.
Civil Liberties	Canada	Federal government and provincial legislatures can override "Charter of Rights and Freedoms" provisions under certain circumstances.
Civil Rights	South Africa	Integration of institutions. Extremist groups. Use of Truth Commissions.
Public Opinion	Turkey	Mix of European and Middle Eastern concerns. Divergence between elite and mass opinion.
Parties	Japan	Very organized party system. Parties had to adapt to dramatically changed election system.
Interest Groups	Denmark	Consociational system gives interest groups institutionalized access to the policy making process.
Media	France	Restrictive media rules surrounding elections.
Elections	The Netherlands	Non-geographic proportional representation.
Congress/Legislature	The United Kingdom	Parliamentary system, responsible party government.
Presidency/Executive	Germany	Need to manage governing coalitions. Party leader and head of government.
Courts	European Court of Justice	Moves to establish jurisdiction and legitimacy.
Bureaucracy	India	Highly organized and powerful. Prestigious positions requiring special education and exams.
Policy	South Korea	Aggressive government planning. Government establishes corporations with development goals in mind.

Table 2: Difference of Means Test, Federalism

Group Statistics

	I1 treatment group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
treatment 1 very strict interpretation	1	26	65.39	27.457	5.385
	0	30	47.78	29.923	5.463

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
treatment 1 very strict interpretation	Equal variances assumed	1.649	.205	2.281	54	.027	17.607	7.719	2.132	33.083
	Equal variances not assumed			2.295	53.808	.026	17.607	7.671	2.227	32.988

Table 3: Difference of Means Test, Elections

Group Statistics

	I2 treatment group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
treatment 2 very strict interpretation	1	26	64.74	26.384	5.174
	0	27	67.28	22.399	4.311

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
treatment 2 very strict interpretation	Equal variances assumed	1.463	.232	-.378	51	.707	-2.540	6.714	-16.018	10.938
	Equal variances not assumed			-.377	49.034	.708	-2.540	6.735	-16.074	10.993

Table 4: Difference of Means Test, Congress

Group Statistics

	I3 treatment group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
treatment 3 very strict interpretation	1	24	65.28	17.124	3.495
	0	34	55.56	17.517	3.004

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
treatment 3 very strict interpretation	Equal variances assumed	.094	.760	2.101	56	.040	9.723	4.627	.453	18.993
	Equal variances not assumed			2.110	50.372	.040	9.723	4.609	.467	18.979