

The Teacher

Teaching American Government*

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Teachers of the introductory course in American Government and Politics have pondered the question of what to teach for many years. Today the problem is becoming more complex as increasing numbers of students enter college, in the words of the *Times Mirror* survey, “knowing less and caring less about politics than any other previous generation.”¹ The new political ignorance and apathy, something most of us see in our classrooms every day, comes when the United States is losing its position as the globe’s dominant economic power. Changing global economic conditions make it clear that this nation cannot afford to ignore changing political and economic realities.²

The demands of the introductory undergraduate American politics class are many. In some institutions it serves as an introduction to political science. In others it functions as a gateway to upper-division electives. And, in still others, its primary function is to fulfill a general education requirement. The possibilities are as varied as the number of departments and schools. Yet, however diverse the function of the introductory course, one thread runs through all approaches: for the majority of students it is, as Marjorie Hershey states, “the last time we have a chance to direct their attention in a systematic way to central issues in our political life.”³

The American Political Science Association responded to the growing concerns over curriculum issues in 1991 by collecting course syllabi to aid curriculum development. Edited by Marjorie Hershey, the volume on American Government and Politics

surveys different approaches used in teaching the introductory course. Hershey concludes that “[p]erhaps it is time to loosen our grip on the list of details we feel our students ought to be able to repeat before passing Introduction to American Government, and concentrate instead on conveying a few central ideas—ideas capable of provoking independent thought—about each of the major aspects of American democracy.”⁴ We agree.

Typically, the undergraduate introduction to American politics is structured around the traditional subfields of graduate training and professional research: Congress, the presidency, the courts, parties, voting, interest groups, etc. This approach best serves those who integrate their knowledge of these institutions and processes with real, concrete political issues. Unfortunately, many of today’s students do not connect what they learn in class with contemporary problems affecting their lives, problems such as future job prospects, inadequate health care, and so on.

We think there are inherent problems with the traditional approach to teaching American government which parallel the criticism of Colarulli and D’Lugin on the weaknesses of the general political science curricula. They observe, “The irony of treating an undergraduate major as a watered-down or pale reflection of a Ph.D. curriculum is that the undergraduate student too often ends up with discrete bodies of facts that are of little use intellectually or pragmatically and often does not know what the discipline she or he has studied is all about.”⁵

Motivated by the *Times Mirror*

survey and the ongoing debate over higher education curricula, we decided to approach the issue of what to teach by surveying students who had just completed an introductory course in American government on what we believe are three salient areas. (1) What do they know about the major periods of domestic policy development such as the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Reagan Revolution? (2) What do they know about the current distribution of income and wealth? (3) What do they know about social welfare, labor and workers’ rights, and quality of life indicators in the United States as compared to other industrial democracies?

Underlying our choice of issue areas is the belief that students should have a critical understanding of the American political system and how it affects their lives. We believe that the issue areas selected provide a reasonable barometer of a citizen’s understanding of the patterns of American political development and how the United States compares to other industrial democracies with respect to these policy areas. In short, we believe that the three dimensions provide a standard to measure students’ understanding of American government and how it affects their lives.

To test students’ knowledge of these three issue areas we developed a 29-item questionnaire (see Appendix). Ten questions explore major periods of domestic policy development. Our intent here was to determine the students’ awareness of public policy responses during key twentieth-century periods of government change. Another nine questions

examine the students' understanding of basic economic distributional patterns in the United States. Our goal here was to determine student awareness of the distribution of wealth and poverty over time. Our final 10 questions attempt to identify what students know about labor, social welfare, and quality of life indicators in the United States as compared to other industrial democracies. We thought that this dimension might shed light, not only on knowledge of the facts, but also on the knowledge essential to understand and evaluate our political system.

We surveyed 282 students in seven different introductory American government classes at two public four-year colleges in New York State and one in Colorado at the end of the spring 1992 semester. The three public colleges are similar in a number of ways. Admission requirements are all characterized as "competitive" by Baron's *Guide to Colleges*, and they are all medium-size institutions with a primary focus on undergraduate education.

Average verbal SAT scores are close, ranging from 426 to 479. Each of the classes surveyed was approximately equal in size, and each was taught with a traditional process-oriented approach that emphasized the structures and procedures of American political institutions. Lowi and Ginsberg's *American Government* text was the primary reading for almost two-thirds of the students; the remainder read either Schmidt, Shelley, and Bardes, *American Government and Politics Today*, or Lineberry, Edwards, and Wattenberg, *Government in America*.

Since we made no attempt to develop a random sample representative of all higher education, we do not claim that our findings speak for all students or higher education institutions. Our targeted sample was selected because the chosen schools typify a large number of colleges in the country, and given our resources, was convenient. Additionally, this is but a preliminary step for a larger future work.

The results of the survey indicate that most students know little about any of the major issue areas. Indeed, most students possess little knowledge of the issue areas that affect

their lives daily. Overall, the mean and the median number of correct answers was approximately 12 out of 29 questions, or only 41%. Only four of the 29 questions were answered correctly by more than 65% of the respondents.

The question most likely to be answered correctly concerned the New Deal. However, only on the most general level was their knowledge of the New Deal good. While 87% of respondents knew that social spending grew during the New Deal, when they were asked more specific questions the percentage of correct answers plummeted dramatically. Only 60% knew when social security, unemployment insurance, and relief became law, and about one-third (36%) knew when workers gained the legal right to organize. Some 20% of the students believed unions gained the right to organize in the 1960s or 1970s.

Interestingly, the closer the historical period the greater the ignorance, even when the question required a general level of knowledge. Only 50% could accurately say that during the Great Society of the 1960s government social programs increased; less than half (43%) knew that Medicare and Medicaid became law during the 1960s. Less than half the respondents (43%) knew when most environmental legislation passed, and only 25% could accurately state that most public interest lobby groups originated in the 1970s. Sixty percent could accurately say that during the Reagan Revolution spending for social programs decreased.

In the area of economic distribution and trends, results were mixed. A large number of students answered questions on income and wealth distribution accurately. For instance, 84% of the students knew that in the United States the income gap between the rich and poor is growing. Better than three-quarters (79%) knew that poverty had increased since the 1970s, and 69% of the students knew that the federal tax burden increased for most people during the Reagan years.

Other distributional questions suggest that students understand the trends but tend to exaggerate them. Only about one-third could accurately identify wealth and income dis-

tributional patterns, but the majority of incorrect answers overstated the growth of economic inequality. There were some exceptions to this pattern. For instance, 45% are unaware of the fact that real income has declined over the past 20 years. In fact, one-half of the incorrect respondents believed that real average income had increased during this period. The remainder of the incorrect respondents believed income remained the same. About 46% of all respondents did not know that the middle class was shrinking, and only 30% of the students knew that the percentage of workers belonging to unions has declined since the 1950s. In keeping with their general perception that unions are becoming increasingly powerful institutions, more than half of all students (59%) believe that union membership is increasing.

Students gave greater numbers of incorrect answers when asked comparative questions on labor unions. Overall, their performance on questions requiring comparative knowledge was the lowest. Since most courses on American government typically avoid discussion of other nations, this was not surprising. Only 12% knew that the rights of workers in the United States were not as strong as workers' rights in other Western democracies. Strikingly, two-thirds believed that American workers had stronger legal rights than their foreign counterparts, and only about a quarter (24%) knew that American workers received less vacation time than workers in other industrial democracies. Eighty-two percent were unaware of the fact that the United States was the only industrial democracy without a major socialist or labor party. Two-thirds did not know that the United States developed its social security programs later than other industrial democracies, and about half believed that the United States developed these programs before the others.

In keeping with the belief that the United States is in the forefront of social welfare programs, less than half (46%) recognized that welfare programs were less extensive in the United States, and 82% did not know that the United States is the only industrial democracy without a national health care system; a clear

majority (57%) thought that Americans pay higher taxes. Some 89% did not know that life expectancy in the United States is shorter than in most other industrial democracies; about two-thirds (64%) of all respondents thought life expectancy was actually longer. Yet, some 55% could correctly state that infant mortality rates in the United States were not as good as in other Western industrial democracies.

We tested to see if there were any statistically significant differences among those who participated in the survey. We tested for differences by comparing gender, age, state, income, religion, voter participation in the last election for those eligible, grade point average, party affiliation, political ideology, class standing, and whether they were taking the course as an elective or to fulfill a requirement. While there were a few statistically significant differences, we believe none are particularly meaningful; virtually all groups failed to score a passing grade of 60%. We will be happy to provide the data to anyone interested.

Conclusion

The data generally support the *Times Mirror* findings. The students questioned possessed little information on key substantive policy issues. Even after completing a basic one-semester course in American Government and Politics, they know very little about the historical development of such significant periods as the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Reagan Revolution. Their understanding of the status and rights of American labor is abysmal, in fact, even distorted. And, while a larger percentage grasp the rising economic inequality in the United States, they are almost totally ignorant of how the United States compares to other industrial democracies.

Students' inability to accurately compare socioeconomic trends and policies in the United States to other industrial democracies suggests that those surveyed lack the requisite information to evaluate the society they live in. But, as the data suggest, not only do they lack the comparative knowledge to evaluate their society, their marginal understanding of

specific policies, general trends, and the historical development of public policy in the United States is likely to hinder their ability to evaluate American politics and government. In short, after completing a basic course in American Government, they are still ignorant of key issue areas and lack essential knowledge to evaluate the limited information they do possess.

As larger proportions of students enter college knowing less than their predecessors, the challenge of teaching American Government increases. By itself, the traditional process-

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oriented approach fails to provide students with a picture of reality upon which they can act as citizens. Because they lack a substantive understanding of the broad nature of American society, simply focusing on how institutions work presents a dimension of politics that is often meaningless for today's students. The issue, then, is the old one of relevancy, or, in the immediate context, how to combine knowledge of process with substantive political issues and policies in an interesting and provocative way.

We believe that there needs to be a fundamental realignment of the curriculum of American Government courses. Less emphasis should be given to narrow issues of institutional dynamics and process oriented rules. A broader focus is needed on the problems, issues, and policies that affect American society. Even those textbooks which now include a section on public policy generally add it at the end of the book and fail to

integrate the substantive policy material with the earlier institutional chapters. Ideally, we would like to see a substantive policy-oriented approach integrated with an analysis of institutional procedures and structures, one that, minimally, establishes a better connection between the process and the substantive outcomes of government policy.

And those textbooks which do focus on public policy rarely present the material in a comparative or historical manner. By history we do not merely refer to an author's inclusion of names, places and dates. We refer instead to the emergence of policies in light of the debates and political struggles that shaped them. In other words, we understand the facts in light of the forces that produced these specific facts as opposed to an almost infinite set of others. We think this is important because it provides students with a way to see the value choices expressed in our policy heritage.

Greater attention needs to be paid to the pivotal periods of American policy development such as, for example, the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Reagan Revolution, the problems they confronted, the alternatives explored, and the directions chosen. This historical approach should give students a better understanding of why and how the American political system developed as it did. A greater emphasis on the basic outlines of contemporary American government policy, including budgetary priorities, environmental, health, and safety laws, and business-government relations, to name the more obvious, should also help students understand how our institutions function, what government does, and how it affects their lives.

We also believe that students might attain a better perception of American politics by contrasting important issue areas in the United States to similar areas in other industrial democracies. We recommend this because such contrasts highlight different goals and directions of public policy and, in so doing, clarify the priorities and values of the American political system. For most of us who teach American Politics and Government this represents a fairly substantial change, but one we

feel is worthwhile given the changes in the student body and the world around us.

This recommendation follows one made by the Association of American Colleges. It initiated a national review of the arts and sciences major by convening task forces from each discipline to review the purposes and practices of liberal arts majors. One of the recommendations for the political science major stresses: "That not only the introductory-level but most other *American government courses be taught in comparative fashion. . .*"⁶

In the end, we feel that the proposed changes will give students a better grasp of the substance of American politics as well as a better understanding of the institutional structures and procedural dynamics of our political system. Most importantly, we believe it will enable students to more fully comprehend the policy dilemmas facing American society and empower them to become more active citizens.

We know this proposal represents a significant departure from the dominant process-oriented approach of most political science teachers and textbooks; and we also recognize the significance of our recommendation for a more comparative approach, particularly since by definition courses on American Government focus primarily on the United States. But the world is changing. Today the United States is part of a larger global community, and within the United States cultural diversity is increasing. Indeed, multi-culturalism is fast becoming an increasingly significant part of our national and international experience. To understand where we are as a nation and as part of the global community, it is not only crucial to see how we arrived here, but also how we compare to others. Our approach tries to do this.

Pedagogically, a variety of methods may be appropriate for accomplishing these goals, with some better than others. For now our goal is to expand the dialogue on what we should teach as the United States confronts the twenty-first century. We invite your suggestions and comments.

Appendix

DIRECTIONS: Enter what you believe to be the correct answer on the computer sheet with a number 2 pencil. All answers are confidential. Do not put your name on either the computer sheet or the question page. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. During the New Deal of the 1930s government social programs
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
2. During the Great Society of the 1960s government social programs
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
3. During the 1980s government social programs
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
4. Social security, unemployment insurance, and relief became law during the
 - (a) Populist era of the 1890s, (b) Progressive era of the early 1900s, (c) New Deal of the 1930s, (d) Great Society of the 1960s, (e) 1970s.
5. Medicare and Medicaid became law during the
 - (a) Populist era of the 1890s, (b) Progressive era of the early 1900s, (c) New Deal of the 1930s, (d) Great Society of the 1960s, (e) 1970s.
6. Most environmental, health, and safety legislation was passed during the
 - (a) Populist era of the 1890s, (b) Progressive era of the early 1900s, (c) New Deal of the 1930s, (d) Great Society of the 1960s, (e) 1970s.
7. Most public interest lobby groups were started during the
 - (a) Populist era of the 1890s, (b) Progressive era of the early 1900s, (c) New Deal of the 1930s, (d) Great Society of the 1960s, (e) 1970s.
8. Workers obtained the right to legally join unions during the
 - (a) Populist era of the 1890s, (b) Progressive era of the early 1900s, (c) New Deal of the 1930s, (d) Great Society of the 1960s, (e) 1970s.
9. Since the 1950s the percentage of workers who belong to unions has
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
10. During the Reagan years funding for environmental, health, and safety programs
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
11. During the Reagan years the total federal tax burden for most people
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
12. Compared to other Western industrial democracies the legal rights of workers in the U.S. are
 - (a) not as strong, (b) about as strong, (c) stronger.
13. In the U.S. there is no major socialist or labor oriented political party. Compared to other industrial democracies, the U.S. is
 - (a) the only nation not to have one, (b) one of the few not to have one, (c) among many not to have one.
14. Compared to other industrial nations, the U.S. developed social security programs
 - (a) earlier than most, (b) about at the same time as most, (c) later than most.
15. What percentage of the nation's wealth is currently owned by the richest 1% of families?
 - (a) 1%, (b) 10%, (c) 20%, (d) 30%, (e) 40%.
16. What percentage of the nation's wealth is currently owned by the poorest 20%?
 - (a) 1%, (b) 5%, (c) 10%, (d) 15%, (e) 20%.
17. What percentage of annual income is currently earned by the richest 1% of American families?
 - (a) 1%, (b) 5%, (c) 10%, (d) 15%, (e) 20%.
18. Currently in the U.S. what percentage of annual income is earned by the poorest 20% of American families?
 - (a) 1%, (b) 5%, (c) 10%, (d) 20%, (e) 30%.
19. During the past 20 years in the U.S. the gap in income between the rich and the poor has
 - (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.
20. Compared to other industrial democ-

racies today the gap between the rich and poor in the U.S. is

- (a) smaller, (b) about the same, (c) greater.

21. During the past 20 years real income for the average person in the U.S. has

- (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.

22. Compared to the mid-1970s the poverty rate in the U.S. today has

- (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.

23. Over the past 15 years the percentage of Americans defined as middle class according to income has

- (a) decreased, (b) remained the same, (c) increased.

24. The tax burden in the U.S. compared to other Western industrial democracies is

- (a) smaller, (b) about the same, (c) larger.

25. Compared to other industrial democracies welfare state programs in the U.S. are

- (a) less extensive, (b) about the same, (c) more extensive.

26. The U.S. does not have a nationalized health care system. Compared to other industrial democracies the U.S. is

- (a) the only nation without nationalized health care, (b) one of a few nations without nationalized health care, (c) one of many nations without nationalized health care.

27. Compared to other industrial democracies life expectancy in the U.S. is

- (a) shorter than most, (b) about the same, (c) longer than most.

28. Compared to other industrial democracies infant mortality in the U.S. is

- (a) lower than most, (b) about the same, (c) higher than most.

29. Compared to other industrial democracies American workers receive

- (a) less vacation time, (b) about the same vacation time, (c) more vacation time.

Choose the answer that best applies to you.

30. Gender:

- (a) female, (b) male.

31. Age:

- (a) 18 and under, (b) 19-20, (c) 21-22, (d) 23-30, (e) over 30.

32. Race:

- (a) Asian, (b) Black, (c) Hispanic, (d) Native American, (e) White.

33. Religion:

- (a) Catholic, (b) Jewish, (c) Protestant, (d) other.

34. Parent's income:

- (a) 0-\$20,000, (b) \$20,000-30,000, (c) \$30,000-50,000, (d) \$50,000-75,000, (e) above \$75,000.

35. Were you old enough to vote in the last election?

- (a) yes, (b) no.

36. Did you vote in the last election?

- (a) yes, (b) no.

37. Which political party do you identify with?

- (a) Democratic, (b) Republican, (c) other, (d) none.

38. The political ideology you most identify with:

- (a) conservative, (b) liberal, (c) moderate, (d) other, (e) none.

39. I am taking this course

- (a) because it is required, (b) in order

to fill an area requirement, (c) as an elective.

40. Your cumulative grade point average:

- (a) 1.00-1.99, (b) 2.00-2.50, (c) 2.51-2.99, (d) 3.00-3.49, (e) 3.50-4.00.

41. Class standing:

- (a) freshman, (b) sophomore, (c) junior-senior, (d) graduate student, (e) other.

Notes

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1. Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, *The Age of Indifference* (Washington, DC, June 28, 1990).

2. Lester Thurow, *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Competition Among Japan, Europe and the United States* (New York: William Morrow, 1992).

3. Marjorie Hershey, *Political Science Course Syllabi Collection: American Government and Politics* (Washington, DC: APSA, 1991), p. 13.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

5. Guy Colarulli and Victor D'Lugin, "The Political Science Major and the Baccalaureate Reform Movement: I," *The Political Science Teacher*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1988, p. 18.

6. John Wahlke, "Liberal Learning and the Political Science Major," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, March 1991, p. 53 (emphasis in original).

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