"Bringing It All Back Home": The Issues Involved in Teaching a U.S. Regional Politics Course*

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To engage students more fully in the study of American politics, more needs to be done to make political science courses relevant to the world in which they live. I believe one way to do that is by offering courses on regional American politics. A high percentage of college students take an Introduction to American Government course during their college days. While many of these students are genuinely interested in the topic, many others take such a course only to satisfy university "distribution" requirements outside of political science. In either case, students coming out of these classes may have the ability to gain a deeper and more meaningful knowledge of politics, but may not always have the motivation to do so. Courses in regional American politics may excite these students about politics close to home while offering an opportunity for students already interested in politics a way to make the subject even more meaningful for them. A regional politics course provides a logical "next step" for students who have completed Introduction to American Government.

Students commonly come into political science classes more knowledgeable than they had realized about the subject matter at hand. This is especially true when the subject is political events or people in their hometown or home area. Students who normally participate infrequently in class discussion can come alive when the discussion involves politics with which they are familiar. What they lack is a systematic way of interpreting and integrating the isolated beliefs and bits of information they possess.

A course on the politics of a particular part of the United States is an excellent way to provide such structure. By seeing similarities and differences between the city and state they know best, and the cities and states nearby, students not only understand their own city and state better, but understand their region and its political context as well. Some professors teaching introductory U.S. government courses have successfully used a similar approach in their courses by providing extensive international comparative context for America's national government (Green 1992; Reitano and Elfenbein 1997), while others have used a comparative approach in state politics courses (Mooney 1998). Moreover, since Americans appear to be less cynical about state and local politics than they are about national politics and government (Zilber 1996), students may find studying regional politics relatively interesting. After all, even a state politics class is essentially a course with a national scope. That is not true of a course in regional politics, and that narrower scope can help students to maintain their interest and focus. This article calls attention to some of the issues involved in teaching a regional American politics course, with the hopes of convincing other political science teachers to develop similar courses.

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My Experience

Courses with a regional focus are not common in political science, particularly outside the South. In fact, I am unaware of anyone, besides myself, who has taught a college course on Midwestern politics. In 1996, I had the opportunity for the first time to teach a topics course. After I considered several different ideas, I settled on teaching a course on Midwestern politics. As a lifelong Midwesterner, I had both a strong sense of identification with the region as well as experience and knowledge of its different facets. Moreover, I felt I would be able to provide special knowledge about other parts of the Midwest to my overwhelmingly Ohio-native students, and, at the same time, I would learn from them as they shared their own perspectives. I believe I accomplished both of these goals.

The Issues Involved In Teaching a Regional Politics Course

Does Region Still Matter?

Given the homogenization of various aspects of American culture since World War II, some wonder if there is such a thing as "regional politics" anymore. Even if there is not, teaching a course on a particular region's politics can still be a useful way to tie together comparative discussions of the politics of neighboring states. But if regional differences truly no longer exist, a course that takes such differences as its central tenet loses its ability to describe the general, distinctive traits the states comprising the region share.

I believe that, while the political

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cultures and patterns of political competition in different regions have changed over the past several decades, distinct regional differences still exist. Many authors have identified post-World War II differences in political culture between regions in the United States (see Elazar 1984; Gastil 1975; and Lieske 1993), and Ira Sharkansky presented statistical evidence in 1970 that "regions tend to be more uniform in their political traits than is the nation as a whole.... The large majority of our regions show a degree of internal consistency suggestive of viable regional processes at work in the determination of political forms, processes, and politics" (51, 58). Other studies have focused on narrower aspects of regional political differences. A good example is James Gimpel's *National Elections and the Autonomy of American State Party Systems* (1996), which focuses in large part on regional differences in party organization and partisan identification. Similarly, one recent study of American elections found that regional differences in party support were not only still very important in American politics, but that they had been understated in some recent research (Speel 1997, 4). Regional rivalries and interests also play themselves out in policy debates and in government. Not only have caucuses been formed in Congress along regional lines, but the recent anger among Midwestern congressmen and their constituents over the effort to designate Lake Champlain as one of the Great Lakes (see Aukofer 1998; Diemer 1998; "Lakewouldbegreat" 1998; "What's So Great" 1998) is a fine example of the continuing importance of region in American politics.

Why a Regional Course Instead of a State or City Course?

Courses on the politics of a state or even a city can also be valuable. Universities in California and Texas, for example, have long offered courses on the politics of their states. Such courses share with regional politics courses the advantage of focusing on relatively familiar material. A regional course, however, offers special opportunities. Focusing on a region instead of a state or city greatly expands the range of available readings. Few cities have had enough written about them over the years to complete an entire course syllabus, and, except where books are specifically written to fit a market (as is done in Texas and California), much the same can be said of many states. Taking a regional approach also expands the range of political issues that can be discussed. Finally, there are "most similar systems" comparative advantages of using regional units. One can compare how similarly situated cities or states took different approaches to the same problem. For example, all Midwestern states faced serious economic development challenges in the 1980s, when their industrial and farm economies faced difficulties. Seeing how different governments handled the same sorts of issues that the students' home cities or states faced can give them new insights they could not have gained by looking at their city or state in isolation. One can also see what is common to all of a particular region's politics by comparing practices in one region to those common in other parts of the country. The device of region provides powerful context that is difficult to get in any other course format.

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Defining a Region

Any good cultural geographer knows that defining regions can be a contentious process. From the international scene, where regions are struggled over by rival powers, to the city level, where different blocks may struggle to be considered a "real" part of a fashionable neighborhood, defining regions can often lead to political conflict and tension. While deciding the scope of the region to be covered in a regional politics class should not be *that* contentious, it is important to be clear about who is included.[1] The borders that define a region will help determine what cultural traits are said to define that region, and will set the parameters for what places will be examined in a regional politics course. In some regions, these issues pose little difficulty. There is little disagreement over what states are part of New England, and the boundaries of the South are only slightly more contested.

Clearly defining the Midwest, or as some term it, the "Middle West," is much harder. For example, cultural geographer James Shortridge, in *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*, noted that the label "Middle West" "is inherently vague, and, as such, has been applied in different places and in different ways," and that its definition may even shift over time (1989, 13). In fact, over the years, some have defined the Midwest as lying completely west of the Mississippi River, while others have defined it as almost entirely east of it (1–7).

In arguing that the true Middle West is centered around Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, Shortridge named pastoralism the defining trait of the contemporary Middle West. This not only led him to conclude that Ohio no longer belonged in the Middle West but also that states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Indiana were in the "fringe" of the Middle West (chaps. 5 and 6). By contrast, John Fenton's 1966 classic *Midwest Politics* stays out of Shortridge's Middle Western core and covers Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The most ecumenical and widely-used

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definition, however, may be what Shortridge referred to as the "twelve-state" definition of the Midwest that is frequently used when dividing the nation into a West, Midwest, South, and East. Carolyn Lieberg's *Calling the Midwest Home* (1996) is one recent book employing this definition, which includes North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. I adopted this as the working definition of the Midwest for my courses.

To readers without geography backgrounds or interests, this discussion may seem like academic hair-splitting of epic proportions. But in teaching a class about a region, there is no more critical task than that of defining the region, for all of the organizing principles of such a course—what areas to study, what to read, the themes to be highlighted—are all derived from that definition. This issue is also the first one I ask my class to confront. I believe any other course on American regional politics should do the same.

As the definition of the region is discussed by the class, part of the discussion revolves around comparisons between the region being studied and other regions of the country. Each region has political traits that distinguish it from the rest of the nation, and students learn about and discuss these differences. In the Midwest, such traits include an emphasis upon public education, the impact of the Northwest Ordinance upon politics and culture, and so forth. Once the distinctive traits of the region being studied have been identified, most comparisons in readings, lectures, and discussions highlight comparisons within the region. In my class, these contrasts include comparing the "Upper" and "Lower" Midwest, comparing different states in the Midwest to one another, comparing different parts of the same state to one another, and even comparing different cities in different states to one another. For example, my class had a lengthy discussion of why two Midwestern cities with many similar traits—Madison, Wisconsin, and Columbus, Ohio—were so different in their political behavior.

What Sort of Background Should Students Have Coming into a Regional Politics Course?

I taught Midwestern Politics as a baccalaureate topics course, and my department's policy is that such courses usually do not have prerequisites. I believe it would make sense for students to take an introductory American government course before enrolling in a regional politics course, and I also believe that a regional politics course makes an excellent follow-up to a state politics course. Courses in state or local politics would also be useful as background, but requiring these less-frequently taught classes might restrict the number of students eligible to take the course too much.

Texts

Finding relevant texts concerning regional politics can be very difficult. This, however, depends on the region. Following in the tradition of V.O. Key (1949), numerous treatments of the politics of the South are available.[2] Those hoping to examine the Midwest are not as fortunate. Good texts have been written about some individual Midwestern states as part of the University of Nebraska's *Politics and Governments of the American States Series* series (see Browne and VerBurg 1995; Gove and Nowlan 1996), as well as books of similar scope and style outside of it (see Lamis 1994), but these do not treat the region as a whole, and some may be too complicated for many undergraduate readers. There are also examples of books that address a specific aspect of politics in the Midwest but are too narrowly focused for purposes of such a course (one example is Eisinger and Gormley 1988.) A recent, solid regional treatment of Midwestern politics as a whole is missing.

As a result, it is virtually impossible to rely on a single text in a course on Midwestern politics. It is necessary, instead, to garner readings from many different sources. My travels throughout the midwest have helped me here, as I have long been in the habit of reading as many different newspapers in my travels as I could, as well as a wide variety of books. These years of considering the politics of different Midwestern states were useful when it came time for me to assemble a syllabus. I was also fortunate to work near the Cleveland Public Library, one of the nation's best, which carries an extraordinary range of books on the cities and states of the Midwest, many of them written on a level easily grasped by undergraduates. The library's collection of biographies and autobiographies of Midwestern political figures were particularly useful, and I assigned excerpts from several as readings.

Even without those advantages, however, others can put together a good set of course readings by using the World Wide Web to search college and public library catalogs for helpful books and magazine articles, and using interlibrary loan to order the books they find. Easier still, numerous newspapers and political parties have web sites with materials that can be useful for reserve readings. Gathering information from such a rich variety of sources has many benefits. Readings can be tailored to fit the interests of students or the professor teaching the course, and they can also be tailored to represent a diverse range of voices. Finally, they can tell more colorful stories than typical political science texts. However, gathering readings in this way places extra pressure on the professor to build a coherent whole out of these readings.

Course Organization and Assignments

As noted earlier, the first order of business in a regional politics course is deciding what the boundaries of the region are. It is critical to get students thinking about this question early, for everything that follows will make more sense to them if they can always picture what the geographical parameters are of their course. It is also important for there to be class discussion of the region, its borders, and its traits. While

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James Shortridge (1989, chap. 5) noted that people in different places define the borders of the "Middle West" in different ways, I found that even students in the *same* place came into my course with very different ideas about the region's borders and character.

A professor who seeks to find out his or her students' perception of their region may be in for some surprises. For instance, I was surprised that many students included western Pennsylvania in the Midwest, or defined the Midwest in terms of the Rust Belt, leaving out the rural states of the Great Plains while including northern manufacturing cities such as Buffalo. Others defined the Midwest more expansively, including all the territory between the Rockies and Appalachians outside of the South. Some students had never given any thought to what region they were in or which states made up the Midwest. The first assignment for my students was to write a one-page paper about what they saw as the borders of the Midwest and what they believed the distinctive traits of the Midwest were. (My course is a university-approved "writing across the curriculum" course, and such an early, easy paper also provided an opportunity for a checkup on students' writing skills.) While it is necessary to come up with a definition of the geographic scope of a regional politics course, I also feel it is important to respect the differences of opinion students will have about region. Therefore, I allowed students to select their paper and discussion topics using the widest possible definition of the Midwest.

Getting students to think about what areas should be covered in a particular region makes it possible to discuss the traits and political culture of a region. The next phase of the course focused upon these sorts of questions. Once that background was established, it was then time to move from general discussions of the Midwest to particular political aspects of the region.

From this point forward, there are several ways one could organize the sequence of readings. One could take a chronological approach and move from the past up until the current day. In a region such as the South, which has had many overall treatments written at widely varying periods of time, this approach may work well. It does not work as well, however, for a region such as the Midwest, which is lacking such narratives. Were one focusing purely upon contemporary common problems or issues in a region, a thematic method of organization grouping similar types of issues together might be effective. I opted for a third approach: geographical organization. One of the central themes of my course was comparing and contrasting the "Lower Midwest"—focused upon John Fenton's (1966) "job oriented states" of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—and the "Upper Midwest"—Fenton's "issue oriented states" of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Other parts of the Midwest were dealt with later. Since a key purpose of the course is to help the students make connections between where they live and other parts of their region, I believe it makes sense to begin with an exploration of the home state of the majority of the students and the subregion to which it belongs, and to spend more time and assign more readings on it than any of the other places to be covered. These early lectures and readings serve several functions: The students can be expected to have more interest in readings and lectures about their home area, and will want more coverage of them than other places. They will therefore be eager to weigh in with their observations about their city and state's politics. This high degree of discussion and debate early on in the course gets students in the right frame of mind to participate in class, helps build their confidence, and gives them the foundation they need for making comparisons to other places. I was careful to include a larger number of readings about our area and state than of other states, and to assign those early in the course. The students greatly appreciated this early focus on their home region, and it was not unusual to have them say that they were learning things about their city and state that they had not known before. I would encourage others teaching a regional politics course to start covering their university's "home state and hometown" as early as possible.

From that point forward, the readings proceeded to the remaining states of the "Lower Midwest," and then on to the "Upper Midwest," moving progressively to states with fewer and fewer similarities to Ohio. Such a format could work in other regional politics courses as well. Having studied their home region and city first, students felt confident making comparisons between Ohio and these other states as the course went along.

A professor who seeks to find out his or her students' perception of their region may be in for some surprises.

Student Research Papers and Discussions

Much the same issue I faced when assembling readings for the course also confronted students when they embarked upon their research. I encouraged students to use the web to read about political issues in other states, and I wrote an annotated guide for my students listing selected Midwestern newspapers with web sites. Many of my students found these resources useful, and may well continue to find these newspapers of interest long after the class is done.

The emphasis upon comparisons in readings and lectures also helped to set up the required research paper for the course. I allowed the students to write about nearly any topic concerning Midwestern politics, whether contemporary or historical, so long as it was in some sense comparative. Students were asked to either make comparisons between similar or different politicians, policies, cities, etc., or to dis-

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cuss a political topic with a focus upon historical progression and change.

Many students approached their papers somewhat nervously, lacking confidence in their ability to make such comparisons, or not knowing where to begin. However, as they gained more knowledge through the course, they gained confidence as well. While many students wrote papers that focused heavily on the Cleveland metropolitan area, many others explored different areas. Popular topics included contrasting approaches to state welfare policy, comparisons of different Midwestern mayors (whether in the same or different cities), different Midwestern members of Congress, and stadium issues in different cities. Many students took advantage of the wide range of published material about Chicago to compare aspects of its politics with those of their own city. The students were required to turn in an abstract of their paper, and I made copies of each of them and handed them out as required reading for the class. Then, for the final four classes of the quarter, when students' confidence level was the highest, I organized discussion of the papers by topic (papers concerning Midwestern mayors went together, papers about Midwestern members of Congress were in another group, and so forth). Each student discussed his or her paper for three to five minutes, and then the floor was thrown open for discussion. Having students read the abstracts before coming to class served to make the discussion thoughtful and lively, and seating students in a circle for this segment of the class may also have helped to spur discussion.

Can a Regional Politics Course Work Elsewhere?

I am confident that a regional politics course can work in many different places. In many regions, such as New England or in the South, it would be easier to do than it is in the Midwest because of these regions' greater sense of identity and the greater variety of literature available about them.

Using the Regional Approach in an Interdisciplinary Course

Components of a regional politics course also easily could be used in an interdisciplinary course. Geography is one of the most likely disciplines with which such an approach could work. Taking a political culture approach, one could use the geographic literature on regional culture, such as the effects of migration and regional economies upon particular regions, to demonstrate how political activities are affected by such factors. The geographic readings for such a course could start from broad-based works on cultural geography such as Wilbur Zelinsky's 1973 classic *The Cultural Geography of the United States* to works more specifically focused on a particular region. The scholarly literature on the cultural geography of the Midwest is very rich, and such a course could include readings from John Borchert (1987), James Shortridge (1989), and Robert Ostergren and Thomas Vale (1997). Many of these works explicitly link regional culture to politics and would even be useful in a noninterdisciplinary course.

Another possibility would be an interdisciplinary course with English on "voices of a region." Many regions of the country have their own distinctive literary traditions, and one could use these traditions to cast a new light on community and politics in a given region. In a class on "Voices of the Midwest," for example, one could contrast the views of small-town Minnesota communities presented in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920) and Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985) to spur discussion of the nature of community and the political and personal values of Midwesterners. Considering that some writers such as James Shortridge have argued that pastoralism is key to an understanding of the culture of the Midwest, such books might have special value. But such a course could also offer contrasts to the political aspects of urban communities depicted by Midwestern writers, such as Richard Wright's novels set in Chicago ([1963] 1983; [1940] 1993) or even Les Roberts' recent murder mystery novels set in Cleveland (e.g., 1996, 1997).

History is a third likely candidate for hosting an interdisciplinary course covering regional politics. Such a course could bring in a wide range of readings, from Ronald Formisano's (1971) and Paul Kleppner's (1970, 1981) work on party systems and development, to Larry Millett's books (1992, 1996) on historical preservation and architecture in the Twin Cities, which give extensive attention to how local politics served to discourage such preservation in the past. Again, even in a noninterdisciplinary class many of these suggested readings could prove useful.

Other Options

There are ways to incorporate regional concerns in introductory American government courses as well. A semester-long American government course could include a regional unit, or regionalism could be a theme around which an entire introductory course is organized. Such a course might "hook" students into taking an Introduction to American Government course who might not have taken it otherwise. There are many ways that a focus on regional politics can help bring the lessons of American politics home for students, and I hope other professors explore them for themselves. Anyone wishing to see my most recent Midwestern Politics syllabus can find it posted on the web at www.csuohio.edu/polisci/midpolsyl.html.

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Notes

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1. On the importance of defining regions, see Sharkansky (1970, 6).

2. Recent examples include Black and Black (1987, 1992), Clendenin (1988), Lamis (1990), and Scher (1997).

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