

ical crisis and strain. The European experience of the inter-war years certainly confirms this.

Nevertheless, democracies prevail by conscious design and commitment (Linz 1978). It depends on the informed choices made by those committed to democracy in a complex world of ambiguity. One goal of teaching comparative politics ought to be to develop an appreciation of these complexities and of the almost limitless solutions to age-old questions about how to build human communities.

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Narrowing the Focus of Introductory Comparative Politics Courses

Joseph L. Klesner, *Kenyon College*

What is the purpose of the introductory course in comparative politics? I grow more and more concerned that those of us who teach introductory comparative politics courses are expected to accomplish too many goals in a single introductory course. First and foremost, I would like an introductory comparative politics course to excite students about the empirical study of political change, political processes, major political struggles, and the institutionalization of significant political ideas wherever they might occur and whenever they might have occurred. I would like to see students leave their first course in comparative politics excited enough about the empirical study of politics in places other than their own country and convinced enough of the importance of knowing about the political experiences of other societies so that they are ready to immediately sign up for another comparative politics or area studies course.

Unfortunately, most standard comparative politics courses—including the one that I taught for six years—are not accomplishing that goal. The macro-level, whole-systems approach that so many use is problematic because it is difficult to gain more than superficial knowledge of a country when four or five

countries are explored in a semester. Simple coverage of institutions of major foreign powers is usually considered dull by students. Emphasizing the comparative method, a worthy goal, by introducing and comparing interesting or important political processes, institutions, and theoretical constructs of comparative politics in critical case contexts risks not teaching the students enough about the politics of major foreign governments to ensure that they can be informed citizens.

If we survey, not the textbooks for comparative politics, but the catalogue of a publisher in comparative politics, I think we will find a principle of organization for an introductory comparative politics course that also takes introducing the comparative method seriously. When we look at those publishers' catalogues, what kinds of books catch our eye? Probably case studies that are also intended as theory-building enterprises. Certainly this is what we've mostly done as our own scholarly work from the dissertation onward. These case studies explore a narrow topic, conceptual or institutional, attempting to build or disprove theoretical constructs about that topic. In so doing, they must provide a sufficient context of a country setting, with a little about history, economic and

social structure, and culture, so that the reader can see how the political institution or process operates within a political system.

The kind of introductory comparative politics course that I'm advocating would be *restricted to one or a couple of linked topical issues*—revolution, the nature of democratic regimes, economic and social policy, nationalism and/or state-building, electoral politics and party system dynamics, and others that have motivated our scholarly interests. These are usually topical issues at the center of the discipline. Often a major work of a major social scientist is available as a book that can provide an anchor for students in the course, a book to which they can return to review the theoretical issues at stake and perhaps see how a major scholar systematically compares two or three or maybe four countries as he or she applies the theory to relevant cases.

Then the monographic studies of three or four critical or important cases can be used to introduce the empirical material from those cases. Most of these critical cases are about countries we consider as major foreign governments—the number of monographic studies of Germany, the former Soviet Union, Japan, France, China, and so forth

is very large compared to the number of studies of Costa Rica, for example.

The advantages of the approach I'm outlining are the following:

- (1) The range of theoretical/conceptual and institutional topics is sufficiently narrow so that theoretical issues can be given the depth of treatment they deserve and so that students can go with the professor into the degree of depth that enables them to appreciate how we become intellectually excited. That intellectual excitement, I know from experience, tends to be transferred to the students themselves. The complexity and subtlety of a subject are better conveyed in this way than in a couple of 50-minute lectures.
- (2) At the same time, even though a single question might be the focus of such a course, the range of arguments used to answer that question can and should include examples from the major theoretical approaches of comparative politics. Students thus can get exposure to political culture arguments, explanations that emphasize political structure and the autonomy of the state, rational choice perspectives, and arguments that stress socio-

economic determinants of political action. Politics can be a dependent or an independent variable.

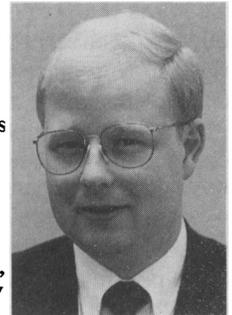
- (3) Students get to learn not how abstract frameworks are built but how arguments are constructed by social scientists. Developing the capacity to create a sustained argument about an important conceptual theme and then applying empirical material to it ought to be one of our goals as educators of undergraduates. Whether our students go on to be social scientists or to become involved in politics or government service or go into business, they need this capacity for writing a lengthy argument and marshaling empirical evidence to support it. Reading case studies is a good way to see how such arguments are made.
- (4) These topically oriented introductory courses, if the topics are chosen with any care, are about intrinsically interesting material. I think these courses can serve much better as the kind of hooks we'd like to have available to bring students into the study of comparative politics.
- (5) As I mentioned earlier, most case studies available are actually about major foreign coun-

tries, so to a significant degree the civic education function of the introductory comparative course can still be achieved, but more as a fortuitous than a planned result. The United States, as either a typical case or an exceptional case, can be used effectively as a case too.

I recommend that departments create two to four such courses that can serve to meet a comparative politics requirement for the political science major. These courses ought to be on intrinsically interesting topics that encourage students to take more in the field while at the same time introducing them to the comparative method and to empirical political science outside the American context.

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The Parable of the Frog

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In discussing the teaching of introductory courses in comparative politics with colleagues, I am frequently reminded of a metaphor that some management consultants use: the parable of the frog (Senge 1990, esp. 22–25). Management consultants use the parable to get employees to turn their corporation into a “learning organization.” Such a group is able to assimilate what is going on around it—espe-

cially changing circumstances—and react effectively to its environment.

It seems that if a frog is dropped into boiling water, it will do everything possible to scramble out and not be cooked alive. On the other hand, if you gently drop a frog into a pot of water at room temperature, it will calmly stay put. Then, if you gradually turn up the heat, the frog will still stay happily in the water, getting groggier and groggier

until the water reaches the boiling point and kills it. Those consultants tell us that far too many organizations are a lot like that second hypothetical frog.

It is my thesis that most of us who teach introductory comparative politics are too. A recent compilation of syllabi for introductory comparative politics courses reveals a subfield with a remarkable diversity in the way those courses