Why Do They Tax Dogs in West Virginia? Teaching Political Science Through Comparative State Politics

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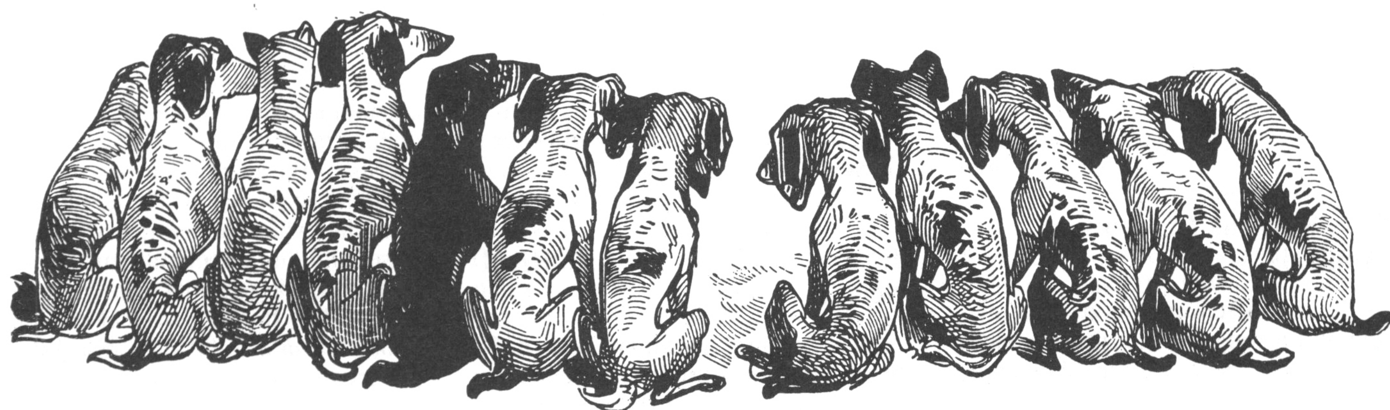

Why do they tax dogs in West Virginia, but not in New Jersey?[1] Why do only Democrats win elections in Massachusetts, but Republicans are usually elected in parts of Ohio? Why did Texas execute dozens of murderers in 1997, while Wisconsin didn't even allow the execution of Jeffrey Dahmer? Questions like these often arise for undergraduates when they move out of state for the first time to attend college, or even just when they take a trip during spring break. Their worlds open up as they venture away from home and encounter the diversity of the states. And many of the differences among the states that they see can be important to them (but perhaps less dramatically so since the standardization of state legal drinking ages in the late 1980s). In my U.S. state government course, I tap into students' natural curiosity about these differences to inspire their interest in the study of state politics, and in political science generally (Kolb 1984). As it turns out, comparative state politics makes an ideal subject with which to introduce students to political science.

The Course

"State Government" (or "State and Local Government") is one of the undergraduate service courses most commonly offered by political science departments in U.S. colleges and universities. It is often specifically required of political science majors focusing on American politics, as well as of education, journalism, and social work majors, among others. In addition, it is typically offered as an optional requirement for many other majors, and may be taken in partial fulfillment of a university's breadth requirement in the social sciences. Consequently, state government courses, particularly at large public institutions, tend to be full of students with diverse backgrounds and interests.

There are many ways to teach a state government course with such a mix of students. One can teach it as an introductory American government course, working through political behavior and institutional topics with a civics book approach. This is most valuable for students who have taken no government courses since high school. For a student who has already had even the most basic university-level political science course, however, this approach will likely convince her that political science is truly dull. Alternatively, one can teach the course as the study of the government of the particular state in which the university is located. Some states even require that such a course be taken by all or most undergraduates. But at those universities with a significant number of out-of-state students, this approach can make the course seem irrelevant to a large portion of the class. A third option is to take a current events or experiential approach, with students learning about state government through field observation and guest speakers. This approach can be very stimulating to highly motivated students but is difficult to pull off outside of a state capital. Further, speaker quality can be highly variable, and the instructor often lacks the control over content needed to provide course continuity.

Upon arriving at West Virginia University in 1990, I was faced with the problem of having to teach large

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sections of an undergraduate state government course for which none of the above approaches was optimal. About half of my students came from out-of-state, most had already taken an introductory American government course by the time I saw them, and the university was at least three hours from Charleston. My question was, "How can I teach state government to these students in a way that is interesting, useful, and takes best advantage of the strengths of the subject matter and the student body?" The answer to my question arose quite naturally from my own research—I would lead students in a comparative study of state government.

The State as the Unit of Analysis

Political science is about generating and testing explanations for observed patterns of political behavior, institutions, and policy, and the states make an ideal subject for undergraduates with limited exposure to political science to do just that. The characteristics of the American states that political scientists find so attractive for research are also among those that make them uniquely suited for teaching undergraduates how to practice political science: there are a small number of familiar cases with significant but limited variation on a wide range of political variables. Other units of analysis, such as individuals or nations, do not offer these advantages. Compared with studying individuals, the states do not overwhelm students with their volume and anonymity. Also, using individuals as the unit of analysis does not allow for the study of political institutions and public policy to the extent that using the states does. Further, in contrast to nations, the states have very similar government structures, and do not have the vast differences in demographic, economic, and historical characteristics that one finds, for example, among France, Congo, and Brunei. These international differences are so great in degree and number that determining their relationship to political variation among nations is daunting for undergraduates.

The states, on the other hand, exhibit a *constrained* range of variation on a variety of interesting variables—population, voter turnout, legislative professionalism, gambling regulations, and so forth—that is intellectually manageable for students. And what is more, students have a strong base of casual knowledge of many of these state-level variations. This casual knowledge is the lever an instructor can use to raise students' interest in the study of state politics. Students often ask themselves the sorts of questions raised at the beginning of this article, and these can be used to motivate them to study state politics enthusiastically.

Easing Students Into Political Science

In my state government course, I begin with the assumption that none of my students, even the political science majors, really understand what political science is all about. Therefore, on the first day of class, I provide a brief, intuitive, and demystifying introduction to the subject. My basic argument is that political scientists are in the business of generating and testing explanations of political behavior and activities. The behavior and activities that we feel merit explanation are suggested by questions that hold some theoretical or practical importance to us. A major source of these questions is the observation of variation. For example, states have different speed limits on their highways; why is this the case? States charge varying rates of in-state university tuition; how can this be accounted for? Once such a question has been posed, a political scientist suggests an answer(s) to it (hypothesis) based on a reasonable explanation (theory) of the phenomenon in question. This explanation will involve the characteristics of the unit of analysis that could account for the observed variation, and a description of the processes at work. Finally, I emphasize the need to test the hypothesis against empirical data, and the use of these tests to modify and develop explanations.

After this brief introduction to political science, I initiate a very informal application of it, using the students' casual knowledge of variations among the states. First, I have each student write down two states with which he or she is familiar. Given the diversity of our student body, I can count on a wide range of states entering the discussion. Next, I tell them to write down any two differences between their chosen states, emphasizing that *any* differences are fair game. I write a few of these pairs of states and their differences on the board, and invite their authors to describe and offer explanations for these differences. A lively discussion usually ensues as students debate the theoretical and empirical merits of these explanations. I offer some assistance as to the actual state of affairs when factual questions arise, and guide students into formulating their arguments clearly, but I try to allow them to work out these debates as a class. As the discussion progresses, I steer it in the direction of describing and explaining *political* differences among the states. This usually involves contrasting policies, such as the death penalty or speed limits, with which the students are familiar. In this way, the first class session not only foreshadows the general themes of the course, but it also sets the tone of the classroom in terms of student participation.

My course proceeds covering the same topics in the same order as most state government courses,[2] but for each topic we spend some time systematically discussing and theorizing about interstate variation. First, there is a more thorough coverage of some basic variation among the states—demographics, economics, ideology, political culture, region, history. Covering these topics gives students a foundation for developing subsequent explanations of state-level political variations.[3] I provide students with state-level data on several of these variables to help them get a feel for the variation (see Table 1). Maps with indicators of these variables are especially useful for some students. Most state government textbooks include plenty of tables and maps of this sort, with Luttbeg's (1992) deliberately com-

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parative text and Gray and Jacob's classic *Politics in the American States* (1996) being especially rich in them. The *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, *The Book of the States*, and Congressional Quarterly Press's new annual, *State Fact Finder* (Hovey and Hovey 1997), are other excellent sources of such data.

Next, we move on to a discussion of behavioral aspects of politics, such as voter turnout, party identification, and party competition. Again, state-level data provide students with an understanding of how and where variation arises. We then turn to the institutions of state government—the legislature, governor, courts, bureaucracy, and interest groups. After a general discussion of each institution, its important and systematic interstate differences are explored, and explanations are developed. Legislative professionalism (Squire 1992), governors' powers (Beyle 1996), judicial selection mechanisms (Jacob 1996), bureaucrats' salaries (Elling 1996), and interest group "impact" (Thomas and Hrebenar 1996) offer well-documented and relatively straightforward variations to explore. Finally, we examine policy differences among the states. I have found that death penalty (Skogan 1996), gambling (Berry and Berry 1990), welfare expenditure (Rom 1996), and drinking age (using pre-1990 data) policies make accessible, relevant, and explainable subjects for discussion.

This natural progression—from basic state-level characteristics, to political behavior, to political institutions, to policy—allows students to make more and more complicated explanations of interstate political variation. It moves them naturally and easily into higher-level social science concepts such as multiple causation, intervening variables, and spurious correlation. Jumping straight into these concepts can leave students shell shocked. I find that by working through these substantive topics in this progression students themselves raise these methodological issues intuitively, and therefore come to understand them more deeply and permanently.

Social Science Concepts Illustrated

The comparative approach to teaching state politics thus offers an excellent opportunity to illustrate to and ingrain in students a range of important social science concepts. To this end, I conduct the following exercise at least once in each section of my course. An interesting variable is raised by me or in the readings—for example, interparty competition or the extent of governors' powers—and I assign the class the job of explaining states' variation on it. The first concepts that students taking up this task must master are theory and hypothesis development. Most students have a gut-level ability to explain their ideas about relationships in abstract terms, but they need to be encouraged to do so in a clear, explicit, and self-conscious way. Formal statements of hypotheses make the discussion more concrete for students, and help clarify their thinking. Consideration of theory naturally leads students to the concepts of causation and correlation. Causation is often invoked too lightly in students' explanations, and observed correlations can sometimes mislead them. But the distinction usually becomes clear when, for example, a student tries to justify her hypothesis that "region" (e.g., the South) "causes" states to execute prisoners. The issues of multiple causation and *ceteris paribus* also arise here, as students work up lists of explanatory factors for a given dependent variable and discuss their independent and complimentary effects. The result of this exercise is a series of more or less well-justified hypotheses posited to explain the variable under consideration.

After developing a list of theoretical explanations for a given phenomenon, my students check their hypotheses using the multiplicity of comparative state data available. At this point students always raise concerns about measurement in class discussion. I find that beginning the semester with familiar conceptual variables enhances students' curiosity about what gets used as a measure, and how and why measures are developed as they are. For example, how did Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993) measure state-level ideology? What are their measure's pros and cons? How could they have measured it better? What alternative measures exist? I find that Elazar's (1984) political culture characterization is especially provocative because it is attractive theoretically, but suspect empirically, for many students (as it can be for researchers).

Once a satisfactory measure of the dependent variable of interest is agreed upon, empirical "testing" of the hypotheses can proceed. Students do not need to be encouraged to do this or convinced that it is important, but they do often need to be guided through the subtleties involved in testing hypotheses. My approach is to provide students with state-level data on the dependent variable under discussion, and to call for informal evaluations of the hypotheses. Do Traditionalistic states appear to have the lowest legislative professionalism? Or is it the poorest states? Do heavily Democratic states tend to give governors the most power? Students' hypothesis testing is facilitated by the provision and discussion of data on basic state-level variables early in the semester, supplemented by students' casual knowledge and the course readings. Listing the states in rank order on a dependent variable can facilitate interpretation. Sometimes coarse measures are best to use in these "eyeball" tests, especially measures that place states into categories. For example, Kurtz's (1992) categorization of state legislatures into "Red," "White" and "Blue" levels of professionalism is often easier for students to understand than Squire's (1992) interval level measure. Since these tests are for pedagogical purposes, the problems of coarse measures need not concern us. (However, when the weakness of such categorization does arise in class discussion, it provides an excellent opportunity to explain levels of measurement in a relevant way.) More systematic testing using bar charts and line graphs can introduce these techniques to students while at the same time limit pointless debate about different students' interpretations of the raw data.

In addition to (usually) substantiating some of the students' hypothe-

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TABLE 1
Examples of State-Level Variables Useful for Comparative State Politics Discussions

State	Percent in Poverty, 1995	Ideology, 1976-88[a]	Gubernatorial Power, 1996[b]	State Legislative Professionalism, 1986-88[c]	Mean Annual AFDC Benefit, 1993
AL	20.1%	−23.1	2.8	.16	$ 684
AK	7.1	na	3.7	.31	3036
AZ	16.1	−18.2	3.4	.25	1368
AR	14.9	−18.3	3.4	.10	828
CA	16.7	−6.2	3.2	.63	2376
CO	8.8	−8.6	3.2	.30	1332
CT	9.7	−4.4	3.8	.23	2388
DE	10.3	−12.2	3.3	.13	1428
FL	16.2	−17.1	3.3	.26	1164
GA	12.1	−17.7	3.1	.13	1080
HI	10.3	na	4.1	.28	2568
ID	14.5	−27.9	3.7	.12	1344
IL	12.4	−10.1	3.8	.30	1284
IN	9.6	−16.7	2.8	.14	1056
IA	12.2	−13.5	3.8	.22	1620
KS	10.8	−15.9	3.7	.15	1428
KY	14.7	−13.2	3.5	.10	936
LA	19.7	−23.0	2.7	.19	672
ME	11.2	−14.7	3.1	.16	1740
MD	10.1	−5.7	4.1	.20	1428
MA	11.0	−0.8	3.2	.61	2304
MI	12.2	−8.8	3.8	.65	1728
MN	9.2	−12.8	3.6	.20	2004
MS	23.5	−25.4	3.2	.16	504
MO	9.4	−15.5	3.6	.29	1080
MT	15.3	−11.1	3.5	.11	1416
NE	9.6	−18.7	3.7	.19	1356
NV	11.1	−0.2	2.8	.16	1248
NH	5.3	−12.8	3.2	.04	1896
NJ	7.8	−3.4	4.0	.26	1536
NM	25.3	−16.0	3.2	.10	1248
NY	16.5	−3.1	4.1	.66	2220
NC	12.6	−20.7	2.3	.20	1056
ND	12.0	−26.6	3.8	.08	1524
OH	11.5	−10.1	4.0	.33	1368
OK	17.1	−27.3	2.7	.25	1248
OR	11.2	−7.9	3.3	.18	1716
PA	12.2	−10.6	4.1	.34	1512
RI	10.6	−2.1	3.0	.15	2172
SC	19.9	−21.4	2.7	.18	804
SD	14.5	−24.1	3.8	.08	1248
TN	15.5	−16.6	3.7	.14	708
TX	17.4	−23.2	2.5	.21	684
UT	8.4	−28.0	3.7	.08	1488
VT	10.3	−11.4	2.6	.14	2304
VA	10.2	−17.9	3.3	.17	1188
WA	12.5	−5.9	3.1	.23	2100
WV	16.7	−9.2	4.0	.13	1020
WI	8.5	−10.5	3.7	.27	1860
WY	12.2	−17.8	3.6	.06	1452

Source: Hovey and Hovey (1997, 26,104); Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993, 16); Squire (1992); Rom (1996)

[a]Mean survey response in a state to question about ideological self-identification. Higher numbers indicate relative liberalism.

[b]Index of a governor's formal powers.

[c]Index based on the proportion of salary, time, and staff resources a state's legislature has relative to the U.S. Congress.

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ses, these informal tests unfailingly yield two important results: hypotheses that are not consistent with the general patterns in the data, and individual states that deviate from the general patterns. This provides an opportunity to explore another important facet of social science, the revision and modification of theory in light of empirical evidence. When faced with evidence counter to their hypotheses, students spontaneously try to explain the discrepancy. Sometimes the explanation is simply that they were wrong; this option is easiest when a plausible alternative hypothesis has already been suggested and supported by the data. Multiple effects explanations and the concept of *ceteris paribus* often reappear in the discussion at this point, as well. Sometimes one or two of the students will have taken a research methods or statistics course previously, and the technique of multiple regression will be mentioned. I usually do not get into this too deeply for fear of losing the main point of the discussion, but I have had the occasional student take it upon herself to estimate a multiple regression model and report it to the class. This shows another advantage of the study of state politics: with only 50 cases, it is a small matter to enter three or four variables into an SPSS database and estimate a regression model. Students often make significant mistakes when doing this (principally, ignoring heteroskedasticity and underspecifying their models), but the fact that they are moved to formalize the testing of their theories is testament to the excitement that political science can generate when students are exposed to it.

Conclusion

Teaching state politics from a comparative perspective makes the class stimulating and unpredictable, for students and instructor alike. Students use their casual knowledge of state differences along with what they learn in the course to participate in class discussion, thus increasing the range and quality of student input. But perhaps more important, the comparative approach provides a unique opportunity to introduce students to political science in a way that is both intuitive and relevant to them. It encourages students to think clearly and systematically about political phenomena, to think theoretically and focus on explanation, and to understand the importance of empirical verification (with apologies to Karl Popper). These skills will serve them in good stead in other courses, as well as in their careers, long after they have forgotten most of the specifics of state politics they learned in my course. And along the way, they may be able to figure out why they tax dogs in West Virginia, but not in New Jersey.

Notes

1. In West Virginia, the state authorizes counties to assess a tax of $6 for each dog kept in a municipality and $3 for each dog kept outside of a municipality. This arises from the same personal property tax tradition that figured so prominently in the 1997 Virginia gubernatorial race. There are no indications that the dog tax will become the central issue in future state-wide elections in West Virginia. But you never know.

2. For the most recent syllabus for my course, see http://www.polsci.wvu.edu/faculty/mooney/syllabi/ps120.htm.

3. I limit discussion about the causes of these basic characteristics, as they are probably more complex than the sources of the political differences we explore, and because they are probably beside the point of the course. After all, we must always begin an explanation with something that is exogenous.

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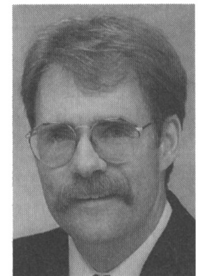
Christopher Z. Mooney is director of graduate studies and associate professor of political science at West Virginia University. His teaching and research interests include state politics and policy, and research methods. His current research involves investigating variations in morality policy among the states.



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