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Teaching American Government: An Alternative To Ogg and Ray

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If textbooks provide a reliable indication, the introductory American government course follows much the same format almost everywhere, and has changed very little since Ogg and Ray's classic *Introduction to American Government* was published in 1922.¹ The order in which topics are considered may vary slightly from text to text, as do emphases and theoretical approaches, but American government textbooks are more alike than they are different. These texts (and, we believe, most of the courses in which they are used) focus on institutions and processes, studied sequentially, often in great detail.

Until 1991, "American Politics and Institutions," a course at Centre College, was the very model of a traditional format. But as we gathered information from our students for a departmental self-study, we confirmed what we had already strongly suspected: American Politics and Institutions was not, to put it gently, a peak experience in their undergraduate education. We instructors sympathized, because we were not very fond of the course either. As we began to think about alternative ways to introduce our students to American government,

we concluded that, whatever its merits (and we admit that there are many), the traditional approach has some serious deficiencies.

What's Wrong?

We certainly are not the first to criticize the traditional American government course, and we agree with many of the criticisms. With no claim of originality, therefore, here is our own bill of particulars.

1. *The traditional approach presents a piecemeal view of American politics.* ("Do we have to know anything about the president for the midterm?"—*student inquiry*) The one-institution-at-a-time approach compartmentalizes the political process. Students are often left with a miscellany of disjointed facts rather than an overall understanding of how those institutions interact to produce public policy. Some textbooks try to overcome this problem by using a central theme or approach, but the organization of the course around slices of the political system makes this difficult to accomplish. Others make no attempt at change. After reviewing several high school civics and college American government texts, a panel

of political scientists concluded that, "Many of the books are largely disembodied expositions of principles and facts. . . . If these books are representative of how government is being taught, then government is a dead subject." (Carroll, *et al.* 1987, iv)

2. *The traditional approach presents an incomplete view of American politics.* ("A thousand circumstances . . . facilitate the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States."—*Alexis de Tocqueville*) The traditional approach fails to convey adequately the context within which American politics takes place. Minimal attention is given to the economic, social, demographic, intellectual, and technological realities that shape the issues these institutions are required to resolve. The role of political ideas is rarely emphasized (except in the broadest sense—American "democratic values," for example) and is too often almost completely ignored.

3. *The traditional approach presents a static, snapshot view of American politics.* ("[Departments] should . . . encourage instructors to treat adequately the historical dimensions and aspects of topics covered in their courses."—*Wahlke 1991, 53. Emphasis in the original.*) Any historical context provided in the traditional

course is probably incoherent to the average student because it is presented institution by institution. Students have no way of putting current practices or problems into any sort of historical perspective—for they all appear to be *sui generis*. In addition, the traditional approach is limited in its capacity to explain change, particularly broad systemic change. A recent survey of students at three public colleges after they took the introductory American government course revealed that they knew very little about substantive policy issues, and had trouble explaining terms like “New Deal,” “Great Society,” and “Reagan Revolution” (Luger and Scheuerman 1993)—a finding which is not very surprising.

4. *The traditional American government course presents a needlessly detailed view of American politics.*

(“This course could have been fun, but it wasn’t.”—comment on a course evaluation) Factual detail forced upon students—even if learned and remembered after the final examination—is not particularly useful for most people, and the longer they retain it, the more likely it is that it will be wrong. The “facts” are constantly changing, as any ten-year-old American government textbook will demonstrate. In addition, the fact-filled traditional American government course is just not very interesting for many students (to say nothing of their instructors). This takes on added significance in an age when students enter college with little interest in politics.² We agree with Hershey (1992, 543), who argues 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. . . , and concentrate instead on conveying a few central ideas—ideas capable of provoking independent thought—about each of the major aspects of American democracy.”

An Alternative Approach

In an attempt to remedy these shortcomings, we tried an entirely new approach.³ Our two most fundamental decisions were, first, to present politics in the United States historically rather than institutionally, and, second, to build the course

around primary sources and academic writing rather than a textbook. The vehicle for introducing the course material to our students is a simple model that treats the American political system as the product of the interaction of three interdependent factors: context, values, and institutions.

We define “context” broadly: those factors that influence the operation of political institutions, shape the meaning of political values, or give rise to problems that a society sees as requiring authoritative, common solutions. We include, *inter alia*, economic conditions, social structures, demographic patterns, and intellectual trends—including, but not limited to, the theories and pre-

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In our model, “values” are the three fundamental principles of liberty, equality, and democracy. Like the Framers, we do not consider these values to be, in all instances, fully compatible with each other. Nor do we understand them to have retained fixed or consistent meanings across time.⁴

By “institutions,” we mean the political mechanisms that form the subject matter for traditional American government courses. We emphasize three central principles of American constitutionalism: popular sovereignty, separation of powers, and federalism. Our focus, however, is not so much on the analysis of

discrete institutions, but on patterns of interaction over time. This allows us to incorporate the concepts of stability and change into our presentation of American government.

We contend that once a harmonious relationship is established among the three variables in our model there is a period of political stability, although constant incremental change continues. We also argue that when context, values, and institutions are in conflict a new set of relationships—in effect, a new political system—emerges. This is similar to what Sean Kelly (1994, 165) has called “punctuated political change,” or, “sudden transformative change in a previously stable system.” In our course, the United States is not one, but an interlocking series of political systems: the system of the Founders, the Jacksonian system, the Gilded Age system, the Progressive system, the New Deal system, the post-New Deal system, and an emerging post-Cold War system.⁵

Class meetings are largely devoted to discussions of the assigned reading. The material also lends itself to other kinds of class activities: short papers, role-playing, debates, etc. We try to devise assignments which encourage students to work together and discuss the material outside of class. All of this helps students avoid waiting until the night before an examination to read the assignments. In addition, since we often ask the students to compare systems, it becomes virtually impossible for them to forget about one segment of the course when we move to another.

An Example

Our presentation of the Jacksonian system, which generally receives little attention in the traditional introductory course, can serve as an example of how we approach the subject matter.⁶ Using our model, we first establish the context of antebellum politics: westward expansion, economic development, and sectionalism. Students usually can make the connection between frontier life and a more egalitarian understanding of society than that of the Founding system they have just studied. The students read selections from

Tocqueville, Walt Whitman, Jackson's first message to Congress, and his veto of the National Bank bill to introduce the central tenets of Jacksonian Democracy: abiding faith in the wisdom and virtue of the Common Man, a conviction that the majority should direct a government that acted as the agent of the general welfare of the community, and the belief that the national government should leave individuals and the states to act for themselves whenever possible. There are obvious internal inconsistencies here: the majoritarian and egalitarian values of the Jacksonian Democrats often collided with their commitment to regionalism and individualism.

Speeches from Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun exemplify the tension between nationalist democrats and the "states' rights" forces. They also illustrate another point. The creation of national mass political parties (albeit based on a very decentralized organizational structure) and the institution of presidential nominating conventions democratized the presidency and turned the president into something Hamilton had feared: the Tribune of the People. But the focus of domestic policy-making was not the presidency; it was the Senate, where equal state representation meant sectional interests could be protected, and the most important issues could be avoided. Not surprisingly, the major domestic policy accomplishments of the period were compromises designed to preserve the Union.

Changes in values and in the political context destroyed this delicate balance. New intellectual trends, like Romanticism and religious revivalism, produced demands that democracy and equality should apply to all adults, not just white males. The possibility of introducing slavery into the newly-won Mexican territory made this more than an academic question. Orations by Frederick Douglass and excerpts from the Lincoln-Douglas debates are used to bring out the major arguments—abolition (Douglass), or at least containment (Lincoln), based on the claim of an inalienable right to individual liberty, versus localized majoritarian—Jacksonian—democracy (Douglas). The *Dred Scott* deci-

sion demonstrates the inability of national institutions, as then constituted, to resolve this conflict of values. And the "Seneca Falls Declaration" serves to remind (or, in many cases inform) students that, in the midst of the slavery debate, women were demanding equal rights in the name of Jacksonian democratic and egalitarian principles. The Jacksonian system could not survive the slavery controversy, and the Civil War and Reconstruction inaugurated the "Second Republic."

When our students complete this section of the course, we expect them to understand that political institutions are shaped as much by the realities of the context in which they function as by the Constitution. They will have examined the role of changing context and values in producing changing patterns of institutional interaction. They should understand the origins of the political party machinery which lasted until the 1960s, and the democratized presidency which persists to this day. They should be developing an appreciation for the complexity of fundamental values as they compare Madisonian and Jacksonian principles. And they eventually realize that there is a continuing Jacksonian tradition in the United States as they encounter Bryan's attack on monied interests, Roosevelt's assault on "economic royalists," and Reagan's New Federalism.

Some Reflections on Our Experience

We realize that it is difficult to make a case for such a radical departure from long-standing practice. Candor requires us to admit that our approach is not a remedy for every ill afflicting the American government course, and it has even created some new problems.

Some will undoubtedly feel that our course fails to cover in adequate detail the institutions and processes of the contemporary American system, although we have been surprised at how much of the material of the traditional American government course can be presented, and presented more meaningfully, when repackaged in historical format. Still,

in choosing to emphasize the historical development of American politics, we necessarily offer a briefer, less detailed consideration of the contemporary system. Others may claim that we are not teaching political science at all, but material better left to historians—a view shared by some of our students. We feel that by consulting the writings of historians and seeking the advice of our colleagues in history (and economics, sociology, and American literature) we have strengthened the course by integrating it more fully into the general education of our students and demonstrating to them the fundamental reality that politics does not occur in a vacuum.

From a teaching standpoint, this course is very demanding. The traditional course is conveniently organized to reflect the fields of graduate study and research specialization in political science. By contrast, the organization of our course does not mirror that of the discipline, nor does it even employ exclusively the modes of inquiry used by most political scientists. Teaching this course has required us to educate ourselves in history, economics, sociology, and to rethink much of what we already knew (or thought we knew) about political science.

A major difficulty has been the absence of an appropriate textbook. While we wanted to move away from using a core text, it would be useful to have some brief outline of American political history in the way that we present it. We have successfully used a combination of anthologies and our own editing of primary documents in the public domain. Still, a textbook would be a convenient and useful addition to the course. The absence of a textbook shifts to the classroom the entire burden of drawing the meaning out of difficult primary documents and of establishing connections among the varied ideas, events, and institutional patterns that we study. Many students want and need a handbook that gives them the essential material in a digestible format. Teachers may want a textbook to compensate for their own lack of expertise in a given area, or to present basic information so that class time may be reserved for the

discussion of more interesting questions.

On balance, however, we believe that the benefits we have gained far outweigh any costs we have incurred. Whatever its limitations, we think our approach provides a more effective vehicle for conveying an understanding of the American political system for these reasons:

1. *Our course presents a holistic understanding of American politics.* We minimize the coverage of the details of institutional arrangements and procedural rules—little noted nor long remembered by our students, anyway. We emphasize the interactions among institutions rather than relegating them to the background. The point is not to explain all institutional structures and procedures, but to understand the forces that produce them and their consequences for political values and for public policy. The details are covered in our advanced courses, where we have a smaller number of students who generally are more interested in the finer points of institutional operations and now also have the advantage of being able to place them in a historical context.

2. *Our course integrates the American political system into its context.* Students are challenged to examine the relationships among social, economic, and political forces. Our course also includes an explicit consideration of political values. Most fundamentally, it requires students to understand not just how institutions work, but *why* they work that way, and the consequences of a given pattern of institutional interaction. It also allows students to consider the tensions among American political values. A consideration of values challenges students to examine their own political values and to evaluate critically the values of the contemporary political system.

The emphasis on political values allows for the introduction of political ideas and the classic texts that express them. For class readings, we have drawn upon the rich treasury of primary materials available to students of American political history—speeches, party platforms, judicial opinions, and social commentary, as

well as an occasional poem or excerpt from a novel. We have selected and edited these materials with the view of allowing each generation to express its own political concerns and its own understanding of fundamental values. Such materials give our students a sense of their own political history, and have been enthusiastically received by students as more interesting and challenging than any textbook we had used previously.

Consideration of the American political system in historical context also provides more opportunities to discuss ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity as an integral part of the course. The “Seneca Falls Declaration” fits naturally into our consideration of the values of the Jacksonian system; the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” becomes both an eloquent defense of nonviolent re-

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sistance and a challenge to pluralist assumptions about American democracy.

3. *Focusing on successive historical “models” or “paradigms” of American politics turns students’ attention to change over time, and to the causes and consequences of change.* As a result, many contemporary policy debates (e.g., the proper balance between national and state government responsibilities) are understood to have raged over a long period of time. Students come to realize that change is normal, that no set of political institutions has ever remained stable for long. And they see that the development of political institutions in the United States has not taken place randomly, but that the forces that create change in one institution usually affect all others.

4. *Our approach to teaching Ameri-*

can government works for our students. This, we feel, is its greatest advantage over the traditional approach. The course draws upon the background students bring with them from high school courses in civics and American history, and yet requires them to examine this familiar material in a new way, making the course both accessible and challenging. Student reaction to the course has been very favorable. They find it more interesting because there are fewer details to memorize and spew back on exams. They find it more comprehensible because they are given a framework for viewing American politics holistically. De-emphasis of institutional arrangements leaves more time for class discussion of those aspects of the political system—ideas, values, public policies, and people—most exciting to students and most useful to them in their political lives after graduation. We believe our course satisfies many of the recommendations made by the Task Force on the Political Science Major, and brings us closer to the goal of equipping our students “intellectually to comprehend and deal with their political world.” (Wahlke 1991, 50)

We began this course as an experimental response to a very immediate need within our program for a new approach to an old course. We have created a course which presents, we think, a more complete, more accurate, more sophisticated picture of American politics than does the traditional institutional approach. It enables us to provide a more stimulating and challenging intellectual experience for our students as we emphasize those aspects of American politics most appropriate for consideration in an undergraduate liberal arts course. As an added bonus, it has even been fun to teach—something we never would have said about the traditional course. In short, while “American Politics and Institutions” is still very much a work in progress, we have no desire to return to Ogg and Ray.

Notes

1. We examined the second and third editions of Ogg and Ray (1925, 1928) because they were available to us. We have no reason to believe the first edition differed in format from the later versions.
2. The UCLA Higher Education Institute's annual survey of college freshmen found the class that entered in the fall of 1995 to be the most politically apathetic in its thirty-year history. (Sanchez 1996)
3. While we changed the approach of the course, we did not change its position in our curriculum. It is offered in the fall term of what is normally a student's sophomore year. Many, but not all, of the students taking the course will have had introduction to Politics, which focuses on comparative ideologies and institutions, and is the normal entry-level course in government.
4. Several scholars have recently given attention to the transformations in American political values in response to their changing context. See for example, Huntington (1981), Ellis (1993), and Wiebe (1995).
5. A number of scholars have proposed that the American political system—or portions of it—be considered as a succession of distinct models or paradigms. Dodd (1991), in his call for a "Transformational Perspective" for studying American politics, outlines a succession of political eras and periods of transition, each with its own distinct pattern of institutional interaction. Similarly, Kelly (1994), identifies five distinct political eras in American politics. A well-known classification of American party systems is presented in Chambers, Burnham, and Sorauf (1975). Skowronek (1993) distinguishes four distinct cycles of presidential leadership. Roskin (1974) has proposed "generational paradigms" in American foreign policy. Koh (1990) suggests a historical succession of "national security constitutions," each having distinct legal and political relations among the three branches of American government.
6. After spending about two weeks introducing the students to the approach we are going to take in the course and leading them through the Founding period, we use about

one week of class time for the Jacksonian and each of the other nineteenth and early twentieth century systems. This gives us approximately half of the term to deal with the New Deal and post-New Deal systems.

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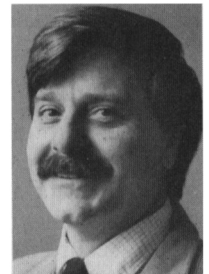
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The Electoral College: A Misunderstood Institution

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"It was of great importance not to make the government too complex." Thus did Caleb Strong, a Massachusetts delegate at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, argue against the use of the electoral college to select the president and vice president. Most college textbooks for the introductory American government course discuss the mechanics of the

electoral college, so we decided to examine eighteen textbooks and their treatment of the electoral college.¹ Written by prominent political scientists, these texts contain many errors on the workings of the electoral college. It would appear Strong's concern was a valid one.

Some might object to an examination of the accuracy with which po-

litical scientists treat the electoral college as either trivial or a "cheap shot." Yet we pay close attention to treatment of the electoral college because it is of interest to many students. One subject for which otherwise unenthusiastic students *do* show enthusiasm and interest is the electoral college. Often, questions on the subject come up very early in the