

Internationalizing Public Policy Courses

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“If our founding fathers had wanted us to care about the rest of the world, they wouldn’t have declared our independence from it.”

“If it [international issue] was important, it would have happened here.”

—Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*

Stephen Colbert’s provocative claims offer a starting point to consider whether and how to broaden the international perspective within undergraduate public policy courses and curriculum. This article discusses whether an absence of international perspectives within public policy courses should be a concern, considers an alternative framework for incorporating a broader international perspective into an introduction to public policy course, and identifies potential assignments and pedagogical tools.

Two observations are important to underscore before proceeding further. First, the information developed here is not based upon a comprehensive assessment of public policy courses, texts, or departments at U.S. and foreign universities. The analysis is based on more limited sources of information: a review of several popular public policy textbooks; Internet searches of public policy syllabi; responses to requests for information posted on several public policy listservs; and, finally, on my own experience teaching public policy at Kent State University, a medium-sized public research university located in Ohio.

Second, broadening the international perspective within public policy courses or policy curricula is not a trivial task. Setting aside the issues regarding learning new material or squeezing new material into an already full semester still leaves the theoretical problem of deciding what to include or where to begin. Once one decides to internationalize a policy course, it is not always clear which countries or supra-national organizations to include or omit. And, because of the way in which political science as a discipline is organized, incorporating a greater international perspective in public policy courses requires that colleagues in the department (and the university) put aside concerns about academic turf; a prerequisite that is

often difficult to achieve even under the best circumstances.

Notwithstanding these concerns, I offer the following thoughts about internationalizing public policy courses.

Is there a Problem? How are International Perspectives Included in Public Policy Courses?

It is not at all obvious that there is a problem. First, some might argue that learning how public policy develops and is implemented in the U.S. is enough of a challenge. Why complicate it with other countries or systems? And second, the most assigned policy textbooks already include some cases and examples with an international focus. Perhaps we already incorporate enough of an international perspective.

The first point—whether public policy should encompass a more international focus—is a question of values. In a world where national boundaries are increasingly permeable, it is important to take proactive steps to develop and enhance our students’ understanding of transnational influences, policy diffusion, and policy processes within international or supra-national organizations.

The second point is more complicated. To begin to understand how international perspectives are incorporated in public policy courses, I conducted an Internet search of public policy syllabi using Google’s search engine. I reviewed the top 30 syllabi that came up after typing “‘Introduction to Public Policy’ and ‘Syllabus,’” and I reviewed several of the most assigned public policy textbooks.

In reviewing course syllabi, I find that policy courses use a mix of two general approaches to teach public policy. The first follows a so-called textbook model of the policymaking process, with the course divided into stages or steps in the policymaking process: problem definition, agenda setting, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. A second approach is organized around specific policy areas such as housing, defense, or the environment. Most policy courses combine both approaches while emphasizing one over the other. Missing from the syllabi were references to policies in other countries or to how globalization might change or influence policy processes in the U.S.

The textbooks share a similar mixed approach to public policy, emphasizing the policy process or specific policy areas. To the extent non-U.S. policies are given attention it is in the context of a case or an example primarily used to underscore a point about the U.S. system. There is little

context, for example, for why Germany or the EU might adopt different policies than the U.S. Nor do the texts devote much attention to how an increasingly global society and more interdependent political world change the policy process.

Imagining an Internationalized Public Policy Syllabus

Scholars of comparative political economy have demonstrated the importance of ideas, institutions, and interests in understanding cross-national differences in policymaking as well as the impact of globalization on traditional domestic policymaking processes. The classic approach to decision making as either rational policy analysis or formal political process has been examined and modified in many important ways by a myriad of authors, many of whom take institutions, interests, and ideas into account.

I propose an alternative framework: to organize public policy courses around a matrix combining the strengths of the process approach with the insights of comparative policy scholars (see Figure 1). The steps in the policy process rest on one axis of the matrix, and ideas, interest, and institutions reside on the second axis. Combining the stages in the policy process with a particular theoretical focus provides leverage to internationalize a policy course without it feeling forced or added on. Moreover, each of the cells is associated with a well-developed body of scholarly research, case studies, and news stories.

The framework permits the introduction of a wider range of concepts than those generally used in process-oriented texts (for example, political culture, corporatism, or complex interdependence) in order to trace their influence on national or transnational policymaking. Likewise, it allows for the comparison of related concepts—for example, interests are variously depicted as policy communities (Walker 1989; Kingdon 1995), policy networks (Rhodes and Marsh 1992), advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), interest groups (Cobb and Elder 1983), and issue networks (Heclo 1978). These configurations vary by country, by policy type, and by what they purport to explain. The framework also works as a structure to teach about the influence globalization has on traditional policy structures and processes.

To give an example, ideas and problem definition form a cell in the matrix that allows exploration of how different cultural understandings of family and gender help explain why a lack of childcare options is

Figure 1: Theoretical Foundations/Stages Matrix

Stages	Theoretical Foundations			
		Ideas	Institutions	Interests
	Problem Definition			
	Agenda Setting			
	Decision-Making			
	Implementation			
	Evaluation			

a problem in one country and not another (Adler 1997). Alternatively, the cell that combines the implementation stage with institutions allows consideration of why public sector reforms such as contracting or pay-for-performance plays out differently in different countries (Cassell 2002).

Most undergraduate policy courses are unlikely to cover all 15 cells in a single semester (without incurring the wrath of students). The framework offers a theoretical roadmap to introduce or enhance an international perspective within an already existing public policy course. One could apply the framework to a two-semester course or alternatively use it as a basis for revising a public policy curriculum.

In short, an idealized version of the policy process doesn't reveal the divisions and tensions—what Lieberman (2002) has recently called the “friction”—between different institutions and competing ideas. While formal political processes are a good starting point for examining policy, they often omit the important factors that enhance student understanding of public policy and national variations. The framework offers a potential remedy. The next section turns to a list of assignments and exercises that policy instructors have used to internationalize their policy courses.

Assignments that Help Internationalize Public Policy¹

The research paper. In some cases, papers summarize and synthesize literature from different national contexts. In other cases, students analyze a policy area comparatively. One faculty member broadened the international perspective of her class by actively recruiting and pairing foreign students with U.S. students in the presentation portion of the research assignment.

Writing up a case study. Several faculty assign students to write up a case study. In one notable example, students are asked to write a case study of a public organization and examine how globalization influences the organization's performance and capacity to deliver public or collective goods.

Using a case study written by others. A number of faculty suggested utilizing case studies written by others as way to broaden policy students' perspective. The Kennedy School (www.ksgcase.harvard.edu/), the Electronic Hallway (<https://hallway.org/>) run out of the University of Washington, and the Pew Case Study Program at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service offer a wealth of case study resources.

Tracking policy issues in foreign media. Students are asked to identify and track policy issues covered in foreign newspapers. Reports on the coverage include information about how the issue is presented, the “frame” or narrative used to tell the story, what's missing or left out, and whether the issue is covered broadly or narrowly. A variation on this assignment compares coverage to examine agenda setting cross-nationally.

Briefing papers. Several faculty suggested a variation on the briefing paper or policy memo. In one case, students are asked to write a policy briefing paper to be presented to a hypothetical decision maker or decision-making body. The assignment enables students to research issues that are meaningful to them, their classmates are exposed to issues from around the world, and students learn how to write policy briefing papers that are targeted to a particular decision maker.

Tracking political institutions in other

countries. Students track the daily news of a majority or minority party speaker/leader in the legislature in a chosen country, or the work of a minister or the chief executive. The purpose is to give perspective on the range of competing priorities and pressures that any participant in the process faces at any given time. In other cases, students compare the web site of political parties and interest groups in different countries.

Election simulations. Students go through a mock election simulation under differing electoral conditions. The aim of the exercise is to discuss how election rules shape the types of public policies that make it on the agenda.

Notes

* I wish to thank Karen Mossberger and Frank Lebo for their help in pulling together information used in this paper.

1. The information was gathered in two ways. First, I searched the web for public policy syllabi with assignments that were geared toward undergraduates and which encouraged students to think outside an American context. This web search differed from the previous search in that the focus here was to identify courses with particular types of assignments. This often meant looking for courses with “Comparative-” or “Global-Public Policy” in the title. I also posted a query on the Association for Public Policy and Management (APPAM) and the Public Policy (PUBPOL-L) listservs asking for suggestions on teaching public policy in a way that encourages more global or international thinking.

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(Mis)Understanding Others

On March 28, 2006, the following televised exchange took place between two professors at Al-Azhar University in Egypt and the station newscaster for Kuwaiti Al-Rai TV on the subject of female circumcision:

Interviewer:

So what about the . . . opinion [of the girl who will be circumcised]? What if she says: I don't want to be circumcised. What happens then?

Dr. Muhammed Wahdan:

If a girl says she doesn't want it, she's free. No problem.

Interviewer:

Is this what happens in reality?

Dr. Muhammed Wahdan:

I have no relation to reality. I am talking about the way things should be.¹

Most of us, as U.S.-trained political scientists, are unable to make sense of Professor Wahdan's claim. What can he mean to vehemently assert in the middle of a political debate that he has no relation to reality?² With no training in Islamic political theoretic assumptions, or the impact of the neo-Platonic denigration of the actual on Islamic thought, we are neither able to decipher Professor Wahdan's claim, nor to render his point compre-

hensible to our students. We are equally unfamiliar with the Islamic doctrines that inform this worldview,³ as summarized by Yusuf Umar (2003): "Theological reason in Islam limits itself to the talk of interpreting the present in light of an ideal [Quranic] community in the past. The present is always confronted as a deviation from the ideal."

Without training in Islamic political thought and history we cannot fulfill our responsibility as political scientists to foster transcultural competence in our students. We can neither aid in comprehension of historical events, such as the nineteenth-century Sudanese revolt against the British that was ideologically fueled by the Doctrine of the Hidden Imam, nor foster understanding of contemporary political realities, such as the pressure Shi'a Islam places on secular states to conform to Shari'a law, principles, and precepts, while rejecting secular states' claims to legitimacy (Umar 2003).

The State of Political Theory

Judging from a general survey of syllabi of introductory political theory courses, the critical training we as a discipline are offering our students in political theory is almost exclusively Western. Standard courses in political theory commonly include readings in the Greek tragedies, Plato, Aristotle, sometimes Augustine, less often Aquinas, usually Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, occasionally Marx, sometimes Hume, Nietzsche, Foucault, etc. In general, these courses could appropriately be renamed Political Thought in the Western Tradition. These courses are what we were taught, and what we teach our students, and we have a lot of students.

Between 1991 and 2001, over 400,000 baccalaureate degrees were awarded to majors in political science, and a sizably larger number of non-majors enroll in and are exposed to discussions in political science classes. In our current global context, it is critical that Western college graduates, particularly in political science, understand more than the nature and history of neo-liberal capitalism that is generally taught in political science courses in the U.S. Such limited training is inadequate. This generation of students, and their instructors, should have the ability to understand the cultures and contexts with which the global market places us all in contact. It is incumbent upon the discipline to cultivate transcultural competence in our students and instructors so that we are able to decipher political speech across cultural boundaries.

Classroom Aims

Not only should additional materials be taught, but these materials should be taught with a far more international approach than they currently are. So, what can be done differently in the classroom? The following sections offer some possibilities that correspond to the period organization of most political theory courses.

The Ancients

Political theory instructors can place assigned readings in international perspective, beginning with the earliest canonical texts. Eduard Meyer (1995), for instance, addresses the visit of Herodotus to Egypt, underscoring how understanding Egyptian thought is critical to understanding that of the Greeks. While Plato's *Timaes* and *Critias* explicitly mention Plato's visit to Egypt, the importance of the Egyptians to Greek civilization is rarely, if ever, mentioned in traditional political theory courses. Furthermore, the extensive debates on the influence of Egyptian culture on Greek thought since the publication of *Black Athena* typically go unmentioned as well, despite the availability of numerous articles that outline these debates (Meyer 1995). Classroom examinations of debates surrounding the comparative and influential relationship of Greek to Egyptian thought would contextualize canonical texts in a broader global context. Moreover, at the very least, a substantive explanation is in order in introductory courses of why political theory courses begin with the Greeks, rather than the Egyptians, or sub-Saharan African thought.

An internationalist approach to classical material in political theory may also consider scholarship on African oral traditions in relation to the oral traditions on which the tragedies are based, as well as in relation to the Socratic oral tradition. Segun Gbadegesin argues in *African Philosophy* that "communal wisdom derives from ongoing critical debate and rational inquiry among individuals, which is only later popularly formulated and remembered and perhaps unquestioningly, as oral tradition" (Presby 2001, 12). Gbadegesin's analysis reverses the customary view of oral traditions as deficient in critical rationality. His reevaluation of those traditions can enrich classroom discussions of folklore as expressed in the tragedies, and the nature of philosophical political thought.

Introducing into the classroom treatments of oral traditions in African thought, including those of Gbadegesin, Teodros Kiros, Gail Presby, and Claude Sumner, would enrich our study of the nature of the Socratic tradition and inform analyses of how, if at all, knowledge cre-