

Proficiency, Inquiry, and Textbooks in Comparative Politics

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When I was asked for this contribution, I initially found it difficult to reflect on the larger implications behind my work. It is one thing to write about the subfield, distilling and teaching concepts and ideas that others have developed over time; it is another thing to make observations about that process. Although I admonish students in comparative politics to ensure that their work is not simply a glorified book report, listing one event after another, I now run the risk of making that same mistake. To provide some context, I come to textbook writing from a small liberal arts college where teaching trumps research. I have taught an introduction to comparative politics course almost every semester for more than 20 years. As a result, whether or not consciously, the textbook reflects many years of teaching small courses in which lectures are few and student engagement is expected.

Essentials of Comparative Politics emerged from a series of frustrations that I experienced when I entered academia (O'Neil 2020). As I moved from graduate student to professor with a wide-ranging and heavy teaching load in international relations and comparative politics, I quickly realized how unprepared I was. Among the many challenges I faced was managing the material I was trying to get across to my students. The more I taught, the more frustrated I became with the relative paucity of textbooks that focused on a grammar or common language of comparative politics—texts that laid out the key concepts, variables, theories, and debates that defined the subfield. This seemed to be in marked contrast to international relations, in which—for good or ill—it was easy to find several textbooks based on concepts, paradigms, and levels of analysis. In retrospect, this was not a surprise. My own undergraduate experience in political science had been similarly fragmented—a course on revolution here, one on German or Chinese politics there—but a substantive language in comparative politics always remained unclear. It was these experiences that led to a conversation with a representative from W. W. Norton & Company, which had published Mingst and McKibben's (1999) *Essentials of International Relations*. I lamented that comparative politics lacked a similar work; as far as I could tell, comparative politics textbooks still reflected the conceptual fragmentation that I had experienced as a student. Norton's representative told me, in essence, to “put my money where my mouth was,” suggesting that I submit a proposal and a sample chapter. Unlike many other scholars, who come to textbook writing after many years of scholarship and teaching, I had only just acquired my

PhD a few years before, which was a source of hesitation. However, in retrospect, perhaps this provided a certain advantage in that the experience of being a graduate and even undergraduate were not too far removed from my own experience in the classroom.

Twenty years and seven editions later, writing *Essentials of Comparative Politics* has taught me many things. As already suggested, it first indicated to me how fragmented the subfield remained. In the 1990s, there were (still) intense debates underway about qualitative versus quantitative methods, inductive versus deductive reasoning, and the future of area studies. Although there had been attempts at systematic thinking and teaching in the field—such as Almond's structural functionalism (Almond and Powell 1969), which lingered like a ghost in the machine—textbooks in the field remained largely descriptive, focused on individual cases without those cases referencing core concepts or even one another. One country study might emphasize political culture and another concentrated on electoral systems; edited textbooks by country specialists naturally reflected the personal interests of those authors. Information and anecdote rushed by, like a package tour of Europe. This only reinforced pedagogy that encouraged students to memorize facts but not consider how those facts related to one another or any broader concepts in comparative politics. *Essentials of Comparative Politics* began by eliminating cases altogether, assuming that their use was something that faculty could choose to add as they saw fit. A language of political science had to be taught before a student could “read” politics, whether a case study or a newspaper article. Over time, this concept-driven approach to the field has become the norm. Case studies have not disappeared, but a greater emphasis on concepts is evident across most textbooks in the subfield.

If textbooks can make understandable a field of study by elucidating its grammar, there still remains the challenge of how to effectively get that grammar across. Having students memorize the distinction between different types of electoral systems may be an improvement over a whirlwind tour of cases, but there remains the problem of effective application. In my own writing and teaching, I came to believe that the challenge was not crafting better answers but instead helping students to construct better questions. As several scholars have noted, one challenge in education is that as students move through the educational system, they become less engaged with the material at hand, from an environment where they can ask open-ended questions to those where they are rewarded for providing the expected, memorized, answers

(Berger 2014). Trying to actively construct our pedagogy around puzzles, and embracing questions for which there are not obvious answers, can give students a greater sense of ownership. However, this approach also requires that textbooks and teachers who use them embrace the uncertainty that comes from this type of approach. It is more difficult to think about a textbook as something that provides better questions rather than better answers—for both students and teachers. Textbooks by their nature are instruments of control, indicating what does and does not matter. To what extent can they be instruments of better questioning and puzzling—or does their very format work against that objective? A textbook can organize knowledge, but inquiry also suggests that faculty members move from the center of focus as the source of expertise to guides who can help students explore ideas.

also may need to be unbundled in the future, reconstituted as specific modules that contain information, questions, projects, tests, and spaced repetition activities—all of which can be imported easily into learning management systems and other platforms. During the pandemic, many of us have come to expect important information and services to be available on demand online, platform agnostic, and as easily operated on a smartphone as on a laptop. This may only increase the need to break down textbooks into their constituent parts and bind knowledge to clear learning outcomes. Rethinking the purpose of a textbook—from a long essay to a series of questions, puzzles, and challenges that build on one another—may help breathe life into a format that is in need of rethinking.

This article may give the impression that I am skeptical about the future of textbooks—at least in their current format—

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Perhaps we will obtain greater clarity on these issues through changes in educational technology. Faculty have heard the promises and warnings of online education for decades. Technological improvements have emerged here and there; however, although the online space became a useful adjunct to the classroom, the physical presence and the physical textbook have remained central. In the early 2000s, my colleagues, Don Share and Karl Fields, and I decided to write a limited number of case studies to complement *Essentials of Comparative Politics*. We wrote them to be solely online, structured to mirror *Essentials* and allow for effective “horizontal” comparison of cases. Thus, we could look at the discussion of political culture in Japan and then click to a similar discussion in China or the United Kingdom, allowing for more explicit comparisons than we might find in the linear structure of a textbook. Whether we were ahead of our time or simply misguided is a matter for interpretation but, in the market, there was little interest. In the second edition, we jettisoned the online version for paper. A similar project for Mingst’s *Essentials of International Relations* (Harknett 2001)

as a way of transmitting knowledge. Uncertainty abounds; if universities are being asked difficult questions about the purpose and cost of higher education, then textbooks should be a part of that conversation—and that conversation should reach for more thoughtful debates than e-book versus paper or private versus open source. In a way, I am reminded of Dahl’s 1961 essay, in which he described behavioralism as “a mood of sympathy toward ‘scientific’ modes of investigation and analysis” and “a mood of optimism about the possibilities of improving the study of politics” (Dahl 1961, 766). We may be more skeptical or pessimistic than the behavioralists were decades ago. Yet, perhaps we now will see a new “mood” emerging regarding modes of analysis and teaching. Whether it will be faculty members who lead that change or they instead will be engaged in a rear-guard action against budget cuts and administrative decisions is unclear. Concerns about cost may drive innovation or reduce the quality of what is produced.

There are real successes that can be seen most clearly beyond higher education. One area in which I am most heartened is how textbooks are playing a role in shaping the

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that walked students through the lenses of analysis remains frozen online, an artifact of what could have been.

It is difficult for me not to think that what we were trying to do was simply ahead of its time. The widespread utilization of online learning during the pandemic may finally represent a shift in how information is expected and delivered. As with all of the discussion of “unbundling” organizations, textbooks

teaching of comparative politics in high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses. For several years, I have spoken at AP workshops in which teachers train to teach comparative politics for the first time. Most have experience teaching only American politics, and it is likely that many come to comparative politics with trepidation. However, as the number of classes in AP comparative politics has grown, the AP exam

also has become more systematic in what is being taught. It is balancing the study of a few cases with an emphasis on what now are the expectations in the field: discussions of civil society, executive and legislative systems, forms of legitimacy, ideologies, and methodological approaches within the sub-field. Despite the qualms that faculty may have regarding AP or “college in the classroom” programs, the fact remains that fundamental concepts in political science are being introduced to students at an earlier age and to a wider audience. It may well be that many of the “essentials” of political science will migrate to the high school level, which in turn might necessitate changes in textbooks to meet those students’ needs as they prepare for college.

However textbooks change in form, content, and perhaps even audience in the future, there will remain a role for professors as writers who can guide students through complex areas of study. This is less a question of translation than interpretation. Simple translation can get the main point across. However, for more complex discussions, there remains a deep need for faculty members in the role of interpreters, who can explain the meaning of a concept

and place it in the wider context of understanding and assumptions. This is as central to writing a textbook as it is to being an effective teacher. A textbook, in whatever form it may take in the future, remains indispensable in that task. ■

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