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7-1-1984

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*PS: Political Science & Politics*, 17:3 (1984) pp. 561-563.

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# The Division of Political Science Into American and Non-American Politics: The Case of Legislatures

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When undergraduates want to study legislatures, more often than not their choice is limited to a course on Congress, although they may find a course on the legislative process which includes attention to state legislatures.<sup>1</sup> This is hardly a cause for student discontent. The first, and often the only, ambition of political science students is to learn about the American system of government. That is why the introductory course in the discipline is usually a course in American government, why courses on state and local politics are entirely concerned with the United States, why courses on political parties are really about the Democratic and Republican parties, and why there are hardly any courses on the executive at all since the only subject in that area which is taught is the American presidency.

It was not always so. A century ago, as curricula in political science developed in American universities, a general, theoretical concept of politics, derived from continental and particularly German approaches to the subject predominated.<sup>2</sup> The focus on American politics came a full generation later, inspired by a concern for citizenship training and by the prospect of large captive audiences in classrooms of students fulfilling teacher certification requirements.<sup>3</sup>

America First was consistent with the mood of the United States in the 1920s, but less so in the 1930s and 1940s. In those decades student interest in non-American politics revived in response to the nation's involvement in world affairs, and this interest was expressed in the curriculum by separate courses, often misnamed "comparative government." These were frequently courses in a series of major foreign governments, shaped by the writing and teaching of a new cohort of emigré faculty who revived the European influence on American political science. In this form the study of what was called "comparative government" gained a larger place in the curricula of departments of political science. But as a subfield of the discipline, comparative government remained too small, and the approach was too country-specific, to permit sub-specialization except by geographic areas. There was no place in it for courses on non-American legislatures, or executives, or political parties.

For at least a decade, the name "comparative government" was not widely recognized as a misnomer for a field which consisted of the study of foreign governments *seriatim*. When comparison did begin to be taken seriously, the methodological problems it raised generated an interesting, if at first quite esoteric literature which

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<sup>1</sup>L. Sandy Maisel, "Teaching the Congressional (Legislative) Process, A Background Paper," presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Denver, Colorado, September 2-5, 1982.

<sup>2</sup>Albert Somit and Joseph Tanenhaus, *The Development of Political Science* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>*The Teaching of Government*, report by its Committee on Instruction (Charles Grove Haines, chairman) to the American Political Science Association, New York, NY, 1916, quoted in Somit and Tanenhaus, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

## The Case of Legislatures

impinged not at all on undergraduate curricula, and only sporadically on graduate training.<sup>4</sup>

The bifurcation of the study of politics into American and non-American has had two kinds of costs for students of political science. First, while they learn about the politics of their own country in considerable detail, students are likely to remain baffled by the politics of other countries even as the actions of these countries impinge ever more specifically on American lives. Second, without systematic comparison, the general understanding of politics which students gain in our classrooms is shaped by that decidedly deviant case on which they will inevitably concentrate, that of American politics. As long as this is so, their notion of politics, of the sources of conflict and the institutions for coping with it, is badly skewed.

Take Congress. As an example of a legislature in world-wide perspective, it is highly aberrant. It has ten times the staff of any other national legislature. It has much weaker parties, far stronger committees, and immeasurably greater control over legislation and budgets than any other representative assembly in the world. It has members who are more independently entrepreneurial than other representatives anywhere. It is uniquely independent of the executive, and the executive, incidentally, is unusually independent of it. What can we learn about legislatures as political institutions from a study of such an example? How can we interpret Congress without knowledge of the generic type of which it is but a single, highly untypical example? How can we evaluate it, consider alternatives, assess reforms?

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Continue with the example of this institution. One modest way of providing context and provoking generalization about legislatures is to stay within American boundaries but to compare Congress with legislatures in the states and localities. Variation, the prerequisite of generalization, is immediately available. Opportunities for observation are close at hand, even if systematic comparison across 50 state political systems is a daunting enterprise. But arousing student interest in legislatures across the river or the mountains is a problem. And theoretical problems abound: under what conditions can a national legislature operating in an autonomous political system be compared with state legislatures operating within a single national environment? Yet courses on legislative systems which consider varieties of American legislatures are more practicable than courses which include varieties of non-American assemblies. Excellent texts are available.<sup>5</sup> Comparisons of similar phenomena within the United States are attractive.

By contrast, cross-national comparison is less likely to enter into courses on Congress, or on any other American politics subjects. Course materials are sparse. Where they exist, they displace rather than supplement the standard texts. The intellectual challenge of setting a study of Congress within the context of the study of, say, examples of European, Latin American, and Asian legislatures, seems forbidding.

<sup>4</sup>Gerhard Loewenberg, "New Directions in Comparative Political Research: A Review Essay," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* XV (1971), 741-756.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Malcolm E. Jewell and Samuel C. Patterson, *The Legislative Process in the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, in press); William J. Keefe and Morris S. Ogul, *The American Legislative Process; Congress and the States*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

Concepts are abstract and elusive, data are spotty and lack equivalence, the appropriate level of analysis is unclear. The incentives for meeting such a challenge in the design of undergraduate courses are slight.

Yet the prospects of integrating the study of Congress and the study of non-American legislatures are not negligible. Quite appropriately, it is not student demand but scholarly interest which is likely to provide the motive. Curiosity about Congress on the part of the leading scholars in the field is promoting research on other legislatures, just as curiosity about American voting behavior among its leading investigators inspired research on voting in other countries, by both Americans and non-American scholars.<sup>6</sup>

The division between American and non-American politics in our curricula occurred for institutional rather than for intellectual reasons. If the fields are gradually to be reunited, it will have to be for compelling intellectual reasons to which our institutional arrangements for teaching the subject may respond.<sup>7</sup> Intellectual curiosity, prompting scholars to ask questions about Congress which can only be answered in comparative perspective, will have to be the source. Unless scholars have that curiosity which leads them beyond the native horizon, their students cannot be expected to seek anything other than what they get: courses on Congress masquerading as courses on legislatures, courses on American politics purporting to be introductions to political science, courses on recent presidential politics appearing to offer instruction on political parties and voting behavior. However, in an increasingly research-driven discipline, there are reasons to believe that the expertise we have developed as teachers of American politics may well be channeled into an attempt to interpret the politics of our immediate surroundings in terms of the politics of the larger world community to which we also belong. A generation of undergraduates which is not only baffled but deeply worried by politics beyond the seas will be responsive to that direction.

<sup>6</sup>The state of scholarship on non-American legislatures will be apparent in the articles which Malcolm E. Jewell, Samuel C. Patterson and I are editing for the *Handbook of Legislative Research* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); cf. Mogens N. Pedersen, "Research on European Parliaments: A Review Article on Scholarly and Institutional Variety," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* IX (1984), 505-529.

<sup>7</sup>This might be regarded as a particular application of the ideas expressed by Warren E. Miller in his presidential address entitled "The Role of Research in the Unification of a Discipline," *American Political Science Review* 75 (1981), 9-16.