

The Teacher

Teaching Politics Panoramically: American Government and the Case Method

Andrew J. Taylor, *University of Connecticut*

Perhaps the most demanding aspect of teaching political science during my first years in this profession has been to bridge the gap between the needs to divide information into understandable units and to portray political reality to my students. As teachers, we split up and categorize the subjects we teach into a variety of topics and subtopics that are each allotted a different set of readings and a different week in the semester. Unfortunately, however, presenting material in this fashion often gives undergraduates an extremely skewed understanding of what really goes on in Washington. Effective pedagogy and political reality seem to be constantly at odds.

Some examples from my early experiences will shed light on this problem. In an American politics course that I divided into separate and distinct parts, for example, I asked students to write a short essay explaining the factors that they believed influenced members of Congress when they voted. Because we had discussed the presidency earlier in the course, only a few students mentioned that the president's position, popularity, and lobbying could play a role. By the time I discussed legislative oversight, most students had forgotten that the executive branch ever existed.

In a later class, I presented V.O. Key, Jr.'s classic conceptualization of political parties as consisting of three parts: the party in the electorate, the party in government, and the party organization (Key 1964, 163–165). Although students readily understood the characteristics and behavior of each of these compo-

nents, they had much difficulty grasping the relationships among them. Many could not make the connection between pieces of information only separated in their presentation by time—this material spanned two lectures—and Key's categorization of the information—information that presumably had been categorized in this fashion to make it more readily understandable! Students had difficulty making the connection between an abstraction that was the result of pedagogical necessity, and more complex reality.

Similar problems have occurred when I have taught the legislative process. Because this is a labyrinthine topic, I have divided it previously into manageable subtopics. Unfortunately, by presenting information in this fashion I seemed to lead my students to believe that the legislative process consists of a string of totally sequential and distinct events. Many of them thought, for instance, that the congressional parties physically dissipate during roll call votes because I had suggested that members of Congress are highly individualistic when it comes time for them to vote. The parties, many thought, only reorganize themselves when it comes time to assign members to committees or perform the other tasks I said they did in Congress. Students believed that because I had a class on “congressional parties,” an understanding of them was not necessary for the class on “how a bill becomes a law.”

To overcome these problems, I decided that I wanted to begin to teach American government panoramically. I wanted to find a way

in which I could present all material on a subject simultaneously without subdividing it into self-contained topics. After all, in reality American politics is a collection of interlocking and interdependent actors, forces, and processes that are constantly and synchronously in motion. In the fall of 1992, I found such a way. It is called the case method¹ and when, in early 1993, I was asked to teach a course called “The Presidency and Congress,” I decided I would use it.

The Case Method

The case method is relatively new to much of political science. Historically, it has been used in business schools and public administration and policy programs. Its treatises are written by people who teach in these fields (Christensen with Hansen 1987; McNair 1954). Cases are mostly designed for these subjects and are compiled by institutions like the Harvard Business School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Recently, however, it has emerged as a popular method of instruction for those who teach international relations. The Pew Foundation has created Faculty Fellowships in International Affairs to expose teachers to the case method of instruction. After working with someone who had been awarded one of these fellowships, I thought that I could use the case method in American government.

The case method of teaching consists of the presentation of a case or real-life example of the phenomenon that the instructor

wishes students to understand in general terms. Principles and concepts are taught not by explaining them in the abstract, but by providing students with tangible examples of them. In international relations, for example, the principles of negotiation and bargaining could be taught by examining historical events such as the Reagan-Gorbachev Reykjavik summit or the Treaty of European Union signed at Maastricht.

A case may be in the form of an article, book, or video and is assigned to the class. After the students have read or seen the case, the teacher leads a structured discussion of the case. When I teach in this manner, I first ask students to describe what they read or saw. Who were the actors in the case? What did they do? I also call on as many students as I can during this initial line of questioning because it is easier to get students involved at this point and the more active participants there are, the more momentum the discussion acquires. During the next stage of questioning, I try to extract more analytical thoughts. Why did these actors do these things? What were their interests and motivations? As I ask these particular questions, I force the students to constantly reduce the complexity of the information presented in the case into more manageable forms.

Toward the end of the discussion, my line of questioning calls for one last abstraction and I attempt to get students to build theories from their empiricism. Do the data that they have collected in reading or watching the case allow them to make generalizations about political phenomena that they could apply to other cases? After watching a video about the Clean Air Act of 1990, for example, I would ask students to begin to think in general terms about the role committees play in the legislative process. By the time we have finished discussing the case, students understand the general concepts and principles that I had wished to present in that class period.

Finally, it is sometimes useful to supply additional reading materials and a more conventional lecture

The Case Method of Instruction

1. Assign a case. Most cases take the form of a book or article to be read outside class. Video materials can also be used.
2. The instructor leads a class discussion in which students describe the case. Questions are "Who?" "What?" "When?" Try to bring as many students as possible into the discussion at this time. It is much easier to get them involved now than later.
3. After the case has been described, the instructor directs questions to invoke more analytical and abstract thoughts. Questions are "Why?"
4. At this stage it is often helpful for the instructor to retreat from the discussion a little. Allow students to "kick around" ideas among themselves.
5. The instructor concludes with questions that allow students to build theories and make generalizations from what they have read or seen. Questions are "Of what is this an example?" or "What does this case tell us about . . . ?" At this stage, try to highlight the important concepts and principles you have used the case to illustrate.
6. Often a set of supplemental readings or a short follow-up lecture on the general concepts and principles taught via the case method is useful. This helps students organize ideas that arose during the discussion.

class that recapitulate the general concepts that arise during the case discussion. This is even necessary after a successful case discussion because ideas are often exchanged at such a furious rate that students may be unable to totally digest them.

There are plenty of cases to be used in American government. The legislative process, for instance, is particularly suitable for the case method. There are many good books that can be used as cases (Birnbaum and Murray 1987; Martin 1994; Redman 1973; Reid 1980). Moreover, C-SPAN's video archives are replete with ready-made cases. I was awarded a C-SPAN Faculty Development Grant to teach my course and was able to select many useful video tapes from their holdings. Tapes of campaign commercials and the Clean Air Act of 1990 were among several video materials that I used as cases in the course.

The principal advantage of using the case method, of course, is that it accurately portrays political reality. This was the reason I chose to use it. As I mentioned earlier, politics does not consist of a group of loosely related but chronologically and spatially distinct actors, forces,

and processes but is a complex arrangement of interlocking and interdependent actors, forces, and processes that are constantly and simultaneously in motion. Students are much more aware of political reality as they work their way through the complexities of a case than when they suspend their knowledge of the rest of politics to understand a single political phenomenon in isolation and the abstract.

There exist, however, two other advantages that the case method has over more conventional means of teaching. The first is that students are forced to engage themselves with information. In a lecture format, students are passive consumers of information. In a class taught by the case method, they must interact with information. This interaction may be in the form either of an oral contribution in class or of thinking carefully about the information at home and is induced in two ways. The first is the result of the fact that students seem genuinely to enjoy the method. Cases are not technical presentations of abstract and distant phenomena but are descriptive accounts of real events that have more proximity to the students'

own lives. Second, cases force students to engage material out of fear! Untouched, a case is worthless to students. They know that they will not be examined on what caused a jurisdictional dispute between John Dingell and Dan Rostenkowski over user-fee provisions in the Clean Air Act, but the roles that committees play in the legislative process, the interests and prerogatives of committee chairs, and why committee chairs engage in turf wars of this ilk. Without thoughtful analysis of the case, they are unable to make these generalizations.

The second supplemental advantage is that the case method of instruction provides good social science training. One thing that I have noticed during my early teaching years is that most undergraduates have no idea of what the epistemology of social science is all about. They just go to class, read, and do what is required of them. The case method forces students to be rigorous empiricists and teaches them to engage in inductive reasoning and theory building. The case method forces students to scrutinize the cases and begin to think in terms of making generalizations about what they read or saw. "Of what is this an example?" became a question that I called upon students to ask themselves continually.

The case method is not without its flaws, of course. A large class pushes the logistics of a successful discussion to their limits. I would not advise using this method in a class of more than 50 students. Further, because of the intricacies of the real world, information overload is an initial, but ultimately surmountable, problem for the student. And, as effective treatment of

a case requires some knowledge about the fundamentals of a topic, the case method should be used with caution in survey and introductory courses. Indeed, even when used in more advanced courses, I think that cases need to be interspersed with more conventional presentations of certain important and fundamental concepts and principles.

Finally, the instructor needs to be highly sensitive to the dynamics of the class and the relationships between students. I would not recommend using cases until students have some familiarity with this method of instruction, the teacher, and their peers. In addition, because a premium is placed on active participation in the classroom, the instructor must be cognizant of students who might feel uncomfortable in an environment where public speaking is important. More introverted students need to be encouraged and watched. Encouraged to participate orally because public speaking is an important life skill that even the most shy individual needs to become acquainted with. Watched because although on the surface these students may not seem to be participating, their behavior during discussions and work outside of class may reveal that they are actually getting more out of the exercise than the most vocal of students.

Having said this, though, I have found the case study extremely useful. I wanted to teach politics panoramically and I think I have found a way to do so. I would encourage teachers of political science to find out more about the case method and adopt it strategically in appropriate courses at appropriate times in the semester.

Note

1. I would like to thank Professor Mark A. Boyer of the University of Connecticut for familiarizing me with the case method of instruction.

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About the Author

Andrew J. Taylor, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Connecticut, teaches American politics and government and comparative politics at the University of Connecticut at Hartford. He is writing his dissertation on domestic policy outputs during times of divided government.

