

## *Doing Politics*

# Teaching American Politics

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This article examines some of the hurdles that confront teachers of American government and politics in the United Kingdom. It argues that whilst the problems associated with teaching American politics are hardly unique within the politics discipline, they do pose substantial challenges. In particular, confronting students' stereotypes and prejudices about the United States is a key task of a successful teaching programme. To do this, and to make the study of US politics an 'active' one, some suggestions are made as to how the standard 'textbook approach' can be supplemented and enhanced.

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Within the discipline of political science, American politics provides one of the more problematic subjects to teach in the United Kingdom. On the one hand, the governmental and political system of the United States is especially complex, distinctive and designed for a society very different to the United Kingdom. The distinctive belief system(s) of the American people, the pervasive influence of the US Constitution, the complex workings of the federal system of government, the comparative weakness of political parties, the pivotal relationship between White House and Capitol Hill, the powerful but limited role of the federal courts – all of these make for a tremendously rich but especially challenging body of information to master.

On the other hand, the profound political, economic and cultural influence of America on the United Kingdom and the world brings the nation 'closer' to British students than any other. Students in the United Kingdom typically enter the study of politics in the United States with ideas, stereotypes and prejudices about both the nation and its people gleaned from films, music and literature in ways unlike that of any other nation. A heady mix of Madonna, *The Simpsons* and Hollywood treatments of subjects from John F. Kennedy to Vietnam accord students an apparent familiarity with things American that brooks no comparison with other nations outside the United Kingdom. Simultaneously, British news coverage of the United States invariably focuses on aspects that tend to personalise and sensationalise American public life: the president's particular intentions and indiscretions; seemingly routine outbreaks of gun violence; urban riots; political fanatics; and the cult of celebrity. It is hardly surprising, in the light of this, that many students enter US politics courses with a view that the president is the executive branch, the executive is the federal government, and the federal government is the government in America.

The central challenge that this poses teachers is to convey information, interpretations and ideas about American politics whilst simultaneously challenging received wisdoms and at least confronting (and as far as possible correcting) ingrained prejudices about American society and the political system of the United States.

For any teacher, this represents a formidable task. But in the United Kingdom currently, the task is complicated further by four additional elements.

First, many courses in US politics are either part of a comparative programme or short in length (one term or semester) – and in some cases are both. Thus, a large part of the learning project is concerned with conveying the contrasts of the United States with, say, the British political system (or that of another European nation state) – a task that may not allow important similarities, subtleties and qualifications about American politics to be addressed fully, if at all.

Secondly, many teachers of US politics in the United Kingdom are not themselves American specialists. The United States may be a part of their research interests or, in some instances, they may themselves have taken American politics courses several years previously, which are deemed by hard-pressed heads of departments to ‘qualify’ them to teach in-demand US courses. Whatever the explanation, many university courses lack a genuine full-time expert in American politics.

Thirdly, the United States is uniquely prone to academic criticism – even demonisation – on grounds of its singular military and economic position, self-conscious celebration of free-market capitalism, and chequered record of respect for human rights, civil liberties and social minorities. Within a discipline where leftist critiques are popular, if not predominant, the ease with which student prejudices can be confirmed makes the United States especially vulnerable to misleading or somewhat biased characterisations.

Fourthly, a two-pronged resource problem confronts many teachers of US politics. One problem is that, in an era of strictly limited university funding, many libraries lack a strong supply of American politics books, journals and in-depth periodicals such as *National Journal* and *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (a problem that the absence of a full-time ‘Americanist’ within politics departments frequently compounds).

An additional resource concern is that the existing textbook market for US politics books is not ideal, since it is divided between very comprehensive but expensive US-authored texts designed for American students (such as James Q. Wilson’s *American Government* (1998)) and British-authored texts (such as David McKay’s *American Politics and Society* (1997) and Alan Grant’s *The American Political Process* (1997)) that tend to have a heavy – even exclusively – institutional focus that neglects some of the substantive issues and controversies that typically attract students to study American politics. Some American publishers offer ‘brief editions’ of leading texts – such as Kenneth Janda, Jeffrey Berry and Jerry Goldman, *The Challenge of Democracy* (1998) and Theodore Lowi and Benjamin Ginsberg, *American Government* (1996) – but these often remain poorly suited to a British student seeking some clear introductory, comparative and up-to-date context as to how and why US politics is different.

The point here is not that teachers in other area studies do not face similar challenges in devising effective course programmes and overcoming limited resources – they clearly do. But the scale and nature of the difficulties associated with the United States appear to be distinctive and make effective student learning particularly problematic. Moreover, some of the solutions that assist in respect of other national, regional or supranational entities – such as field trips to Brussels to visit EU institutions – are invariably unfeasible with the United States.

## Myths and misconceptions

The difficulties above are especially weighty when, as the QAA language has it, a 'diagnostic assessment' of the student is made – that is, her state of knowledge on entering the course. In some respects, the most difficult task in teaching US courses is to deal effectively with the acquired myths, misleading ideas and outright prejudices that students possess about America. Albeit that there is frequently a kernel of truth – or at least something that can be developed into a substantive and accurate point – in many of these, my experience of teaching American politics in England, Scotland and Ireland over the past 10 years suggests that teachers can generally rely on some standard 'entry-point' student notions about American politics.

Among these are the notions that most, if not all, Americans are religious extremists or bigots, gun enthusiasts, and are not a particularly tolerant people. Black Americans are poverty-stricken (celebrities aside), the South remains fundamentally racist, and America is being taken over by Hispanics. In terms of government, the president is in charge and can do what he likes – especially when it comes to war – but recent occupants of the Oval Office tend to be peculiarly ill-suited to the job: Kennedy was a sleaze, Nixon a crook, Reagan an intellectual lightweight and Clinton a sex-fiend. Elections are entirely based on personality and looks, not issues. This need not matter much, however, since the Democrats and Republicans are two right-wing parties with no real differences between them. Money is the sole determinant of success in America (electoral, political, and otherwise). As for foreign policy, Americans neither care nor know about the rest of the world, believe that the Middle East is Kansas, and will only involve themselves in military operations if no American lives are lost.

## Beyond the 'textbook approach'

In dealing with such student preconceptions, the most important stage of preparing a US teaching programme is the design of the course. In essence, the resources to be used and teaching techniques to be employed must vary somewhat with the type of course that is adopted. Courses that run for one term or that treat the United States in comparison with another nation, for example, necessarily provide for only limited opportunities to deal with some of the issues and controversies – such as gun control, abortion and capital punishment – that typically excite student interest. As such, these courses lend themselves more to a fairly standardised, textbook-based approach. Courses that run over a year, however, or that focus exclusively on American politics, offer more opportunities for in-depth analysis and broader subject content.

Regardless of length or comparative versus single-country focus, however, some of the following techniques and resources can usefully be employed to gain, maintain and deepen student interest.

- *Making student prejudices transparent.* One technique that has proven fairly useful in alerting UK students to their anti-American stereotypes and prejudices is to play a word-association game at the very outset of the course. For example, students can be asked to write down or shout out the first three ideas that come into their heads when the teacher says the word 'Americans' and/or 'America'.

In my experience, this tends reliably to yield an interesting dichotomy in which the people are depicted in mostly negative terms ('brash', 'loud', 'obese') whilst the nation is, for the most part, described in positive terminology ('powerful', 'strong', 'freedom'). Some of the impact of the revelation of their own prejudices inevitably dulls for students over the duration of the course. However, the simple fact of self-recognition and the reminder of this that can then be made through the remainder of the course (when prejudices resurface) can be of notable value in the learning programme.

- *Comparative examples.* Despite – or, rather, because of – its distinctiveness, using an example by which America can be compared to the United Kingdom is often a good starting-point for a US course. Rather than proceeding as most textbooks conventionally do, with either an examination of America's social base or the Constitution, a specific public-policy problem or politically controversial issue can be employed. Using a subject such as gun control or capital punishment, for example, is a straightforward way of grabbing student attention, confirming that the United States is a very different system to the United Kingdom, and concisely summarising some of the arguments and themes that will follow in the course: the importance of the Constitution and different approaches to its interpretation, the crucial role of the judiciary, the federal nature of the system, the identities, values and beliefs of Americans, the limited role of the presidency, the nature of Congress and the parochial pressures of constant electioneering. Naturally, these themes can only be touched on at this stage. But this method has the merits of confirming to students that the course is going to prove interesting as well as conveying to them the range of themes that they will need to study in order to achieve a solid understanding of US government and politics.
- *Personalised participation.* Two methods are helpful in prompting students to be 'active' in their study and, in particular, familiarising them with the federal nature of the US system (a point that can sometimes be lost when concentrating on the institutions of the federal government). First, one can allocate students their own 'personalised' state from among the 50 available. Obviously, this needs to be tailored according to numbers, but by giving Louisiana to John and Idaho to Jane, the students can feel more involved and be encouraged to look out for 'their' state. (Admittedly, this has the inevitable cost of student disaffection when they fail to be allocated Texas, California or New York.) Secondly, one can then ask students during the course to find out facts about their state to bring to the next class – How many electoral college votes does it have? For whom did it cast them in the last presidential election? Does the state allow the death penalty? How restrictive are its abortion laws? What kind of welfare provision does it offer? Given the regularity of American elections and the prominence of US news in the British media, this can help to generate a sense of an active learning experience as well as making the federal nature of the system directly manifest to the students.
- *Role-playing schemes.* Making student participation active is a difficult task, especially when the substantive information about US government and politics is so complex and difficult to master. However, some methods seem to be reasonably effective in deepening student understanding not only of American politics but also of a broader grasp of what politics is about. For example, on the federal judiciary, one method that can be employed is to select nine students as the

members of the US Supreme Court and two (or more) others to argue the merits of a case before them. If one takes some of the more famous rulings – *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), *Roe v. Wade* (1973) – this approach both allows students to discuss the more normative aspects of certain controversial issues whilst simultaneously demonstrating the operational ‘mechanics’ of how the Court works and its role (in both theory and practice) within the broader political system. More sophisticated games can be adapted from the excellent book by Michael Laver, *Playing Politics: The Nightmare Continues* (1997).

- *Web-based resources.* Although not all students have access to the internet, the many that do can easily be prompted to search for US sites, which are not only numerous but also – in many cases – exceptionally sophisticated and informative. One strength of this resource is also that it frequently encourages students to investigate a topic much more thoroughly than they might otherwise do with a standard book or journal article. Admittedly, with some sites this activity may have a somewhat macabre motivation (death-penalty sites are voluminous and the National Rifle Association’s site is one of the most impressive on the web), but the results in this instance often justify the means. As Table 1 indicates, students can access the sites of the US Senate and House of Representatives, can investigate the president’s daily schedule from the White House, and call up the full or edited rulings of the Supreme Court. (The one caveat here is that sites require regular monitoring to make sure that they have not ceased operating or changed their addresses. A disclaimer is also worth inserting in any course booklets regarding lecturer/university responsibility and cases of offence.)
- *Audio-visual resources.* Aside from the many popular films and television resources that can be employed, there now exists a wealth of explicitly politics/current affairs-focused video and audio materials on most aspects of American government by which lecturers can enliven and enrich their teaching. Some of these are readily available – such as Politico’s ‘American Political Commercials: The Greatest Hits’ and the Jeremy Isaacs ‘Cold War’ series – whilst others can be obtained with relative ease (Amnesty International, for example, has several videos on capital punishment that can be purchased directly from the organisation). *May It Please the Court* (with an accompanying book edited by Peter Irons and Stephanie Guitton (1993)) offers a series of taped live recordings of oral arguments before the Supreme Court on landmark cases from abortion (*Roe v. Wade*) to flag burning (*Texas v. Johnson*) whilst its sequel, *The First Amendment* (1997), deals with 16 historic free-speech cases.

## Conclusion

UK teachers of American politics are equally blessed and cursed by the profound political, economic and cultural influence of the United States. On the plus side, American politics courses are usually extremely popular, the students are eager to learn, and the subject-matter is rich and varied. Few students taking American courses enter them without some awareness of and opinions about the United States – in many respects, a welcome asset for a learning programme. But when many of these ideas and viewpoints are informed by a mixture of popular culture and unthinking prejudice, the task of crafting a genuinely effective teaching strategy can be a formidable challenge.

Table 1: An indicative list of useful US politics websites

<i>Government</i>	
<a href="http://www.whitehouse.gov">www.whitehouse.gov</a>	The White House
<a href="http://www.senate.gov">www.senate.gov</a>	The US Senate
<a href="http://www.house.gov">www.house.gov</a>	The US House of Representatives
<a href="http://www.supremecourtus.gov">www.supremecourtus.gov</a>	The US Supreme Court
<a href="http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct">www.law.cornell.edu/supct</a>	Cornell University's law school database on the Supreme Court
<a href="http://www.defenselink.mil">www.defenselink.mil</a>	The Pentagon
<a href="http://www.state.tx.us">www.state.tx.us</a>	State Government of Texas
<i>Parties and elections</i>	
<a href="http://www.democrats.org">www.democrats.org</a>	Democratic Party National Committee
<a href="http://www.rnc.org">www.rnc.org</a>	Republican Party National Committee
<a href="http://www.greenparty.org">www.greenparty.org</a>	Green Party USA
<a href="http://www.fec.gov">www.fec.gov</a>	Federal Election Commission
<a href="http://www.lwv.org">www.lwv.org</a>	League of Women Voters (non-partisan information and views)
<i>Interest groups and policy institutes</i>	
<a href="http://www.nra.org">www.nra.org</a>	National Rifle Association
<a href="http://www.csgv.org">www.csgv.org</a>	Coalition to Stop Gun Violence
<a href="http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org">www.deathpenaltyinfo.org</a>	Death Penalty Information Centre (anti-capital punishment)
<a href="http://www.prodeathpenalty.com">www.prodeathpenalty.com</a>	Pro-capital punishment links
<a href="http://www.aclu.org">www.aclu.org</a>	American Civil Liberties Union
<a href="http://www.nglftf.org">www.nglftf.org</a>	National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
<a href="http://www.cc.org">www.cc.org</a>	Christian Coalition
<a href="http://www.now.org">www.now.org</a>	National Organization of Women
<a href="http://www.noi.org">www.noi.org</a>	Nation of Islam (black nationalist)

It may continue to be sufficient, in many cases, to rely exclusively on a straightforward textbook-based approach to teaching US courses. (Unexpected events and crises – from Clinton's impeachment to the contested 2000 presidential election – can also assist here by prompting detailed discussions on the original meaning of 'high crimes and misdemeanours' and the pros and cons of the electoral college.) This textbook approach certainly avoids accusations of 'dumbing-down' and compounding rather than confronting student stereotypes.

By engaging these prejudices directly, however, a vice can be rendered something of a virtue. Although this should not be a motivation for a more 'active' learning programme, it may even be that students can leave US courses not only with a new and substantive body of knowledge about American politics and society but also one that makes their viewing and listening habits richer as well. In this respect, we

can perhaps borrow the neat summation of the 'American Creed' that Bill Clinton ventured in his first inaugural presidential address, when he claimed in January 1993 that 'there is nothing wrong with America that can't be fixed by what's right with America'. In terms of teaching US politics, there is nothing wrong with students' misinformation about the States that can't be corrected by using their (mis)perceptions as part of a carefully constructed and systematic teaching programme.

## References

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