

A TEXTBOOK CASE

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If holding a faculty position in a political science department makes one officially a political scientist, I have been one since the Fall of 1976. That is when I joined the Department at Oklahoma State University. I have taught a lot of courses during this time, and since one of them has always been the survey course (with its typically higher enrollment), I have taught a lot of students.

What has changed during this time? Everything and nothing. By that I mean the obvious: everything is different in its own particularized way, and yet there are the enduring concerns, and pleasures. Or, to use a cliché, the more the things change, the more they stay the same.

Anyone who has taught for the past twenty-five years has witnessed the increasing reliance on technology. Everything from replacing the chalkboard with whiteboards to special "media rooms" and the Internet. I use the Internet now to periodically require students to read the New York Times or the Washington Post, but back in the early 1980s my students were reading the New York Times (a real copy) on the same day it came out (shipped, same day, from Dallas).

Now, you can't get a hard copy of that newspaper delivered to Stillwater (why, when you can get it on the Internet). So, things change – invariably – but, as the cliché goes, stay the same.

One could go on endlessly making such comparisons and I'm sure the several contributions to this feature on teaching and political science reminiscences will provide others. The one I wish to highlight is the political science survey course textbook.

One of my favorite endeavors as a political science faculty members is selecting texts for courses. I enjoy reviewing such texts and I have been fortunate enough over the years to make a contribution to many of the textbooks used in the discipline (some still in print). One of the first questions I invariably ask colleagues I meet at conferences is what textbook are you using, followed by what do you like about it?

My favorite textbook of all time is out of print. It was Prewitt and Verba's *An Introduction to American Government*. I don't think any textbook since has approached the scholarship and readability of that text. Furthermore, that text symbolizes to me a significant way in which teaching as a whole has changed.

The watershed year for textbooks came when West Publishing – the publishing house known for its vast publication of books devoted to the legal field – entered the political science textbook market. They hit the field running with several major texts, all with authors, it seemed, who were “connected” in the field. And because their texts were successful, the other publishing houses copied their style.

Their style was slick pages, wide margins, lots of pictures and lots of color – on, and lots of pictures and lots of color. The best way to describe it was political science texts seeking to compete with MTV.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that these texts were bad. In fact, I reviewed some of them and saw my suggestions actually followed. But the overall impression, it seemed to me, was that capturing the students' attention (with quotes, definitions in the margins, pictures, and color) was the best way to get students to read the text. I, on the other hand, found all that stuff distracting while reading the text. These texts and those who imitated them, I call “kitchen sink” texts. They seem to place a great deal of emphasis on how a text is put together with not enough attention placed on how the ideas in the text are expressed in the written word. Under this arrangement, it seems to me, editors are more important than authors.

Furthermore, the underlying assumption with such textbooks is that the best way to get students to read, study, and master material is to make such activity pleasurable. Now, I'm not arguing that learning *shouldn't* be pleasurable; I'm merely pointing out how textbooks have changed during the time I have been a political scientist. The reader, if he or she believes that this change has, in fact, occurred as I have briefly described it, can argue either side (if there are "sides" in this case) of the development.

I have been telling publishers for years now to please give me a book with just words (a few graphs would be acceptable). Words that convey, in an accurate and compelling way, what we know about political science, politics, and government. A kind of text that a student wouldn't be standing in line to sell back ten minutes after they had turned in their final exam. One they might want to keep or pass on to someone else on the recommendation that they must read it. Not because of its slick pages, pictures, or color, but because of what it says and how it says it.

I'm still waiting.

