

Review Essay

A Comparative Review of Comparative Politics Texts

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Haynes, Jeffrey. *Comparative Politics in a Globalizing World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005. \$28.95. 10

Newton, Kenneth and Jan W. Van Deth. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. \$34.99.

O’Neil, Patrick. *Essentials of Comparative Politics*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2004. \$49.70. 15

Texts for introductory comparative politics usually follow one of two organizational structures. The most common is the “around the world” approach, where chapters focus on individual countries and are grouped by some theme: level of development, timing of development, political system, political heritage, etc. This format includes the vast majority of texts available today. The second approach, a thematic or integrated structure whose chapters compare across countries on some specific characteristic, has produced several notable new textbooks. Three, Haynes’s *Comparative Politics in a Globalizing World*, Newton and Van Deth’s *Foundations of Comparative Politics*, and O’Neil’s *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, are considered here. 20 25

Haynes follows many other books in organizing Part I of his text around major categories of regime types, developed and transitioning democracies and autocracies. This portion of the book is generally clear and concise, and parallels the most common around-the-world organizational theme. The chapter on “approaches to comparative politics” that follows, however, is a historiography of the field rather than the expected discussion of the scientific method or a “how to” discussion. This chapter also contains some rather heavy discussions of what globalization is, the penetration of boundaries, and how it affects the study of comparative politics. 30

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Haynes then continues on to discuss *his* methodology in the book, involving looking at issues of structure, agency, and contingency. Though saying this feels quite odd, the book would have benefited from less theory or abstraction, and in particular the elimination of this section and its attendant effort at a theoretical organization framework. The remaining substantive chapters in Part II of the book, on the environment, regionalism, economic globalization, political culture, democratization, political violence and terrorism, religion, human rights, and women and participation, contain useful and infrequently discussed topics, but they would benefit from streamlining around this issue and that in the next paragraph.

Haynes's book is tightly linked to the modern comparative politics literature. Citations to recent and prominent publications are plentiful, though the citations vacillate between serving as support or evidence for general points and a role in providing a literature review, surveying several different pieces of contradictory evidence or arguments. At times this takes an air of Haynes picking fights with the existing literature from his personal theoretical perspective. This latter set of usages feels somewhat inappropriate in an introductory text; freshman students are not particularly concerned with which author said what, and indeed few are even equipped to do so at this level. Again, the thematic chapters in Part II seem to display this rather strongly.

Besides its ability to serve as a main textbook, the price of Haynes's book makes it attractive as a supplemental text in courses based on an instructor-designed reader or a series of classic or contemporary texts. This is particularly true for upper-division courses or masters' level field seminars; I would hesitate before assigning this text to a freshman-level class. Its coverage of the field is probably too abstract, esoteric, and jargon-laden for the average freshman to feel any degree of comfort with this text, particularly if it were used as the primary textbook for the course. Instructors interested in some of the thematic chapters may find selections useful, though; others may choose to use the comparative-institutional Part I chapters to supplement a more traditionally organized textbook.

Newton and Van Deth, on the other hand, produce a more freshman friendly text, complete with the internal structures that help students organize their understanding like bold-faced vocabulary, frequent and descriptive subheadings, and useful figures and diagrams illustrating key points. Chapters on institutional structures, political parties, public opinion, mass media, and the like have inset "country focus" boxes featuring data on salient or key features of a national political system, tailored to allow students to make the connection between the data presented and the rationale or explanation for the phenomenon in the chapter.

Topics such as policy-making and decision-making structures and policy implementation are nicely complemented by two substantive policy chapters on comparative social welfare and defense and security policy. It also includes coverage of the European Union (EU) in the context of a chapter on multilevel government. Pairing this with coverage of subnational government structures and federalism creates a more comprehensive picture of the transformation of governance in Western Europe by placing the changes in a broader context rather than treating the EU as a special case, disconnected from its underlying and composite governance structures.

The book also contains an extensive glossary featuring concise, effective definitions for key concepts and terms, and chapter-concluding sections that introduce key theoretical approaches to the substantive matter of the chapter. The end matter of each chapter includes internet links and further reading suggestions that are

generally appropriate or slightly challenging for freshmen. Several projects—small assignments appropriate for brief (2–3 page) writing assignments or five-minute presentations—also appear at the end of each chapter. These often involve investigative research, application of concepts to situations, or independent critical thinking and would serve well as starting points for teaching assistants preparing for discussion sections. 85

The book's strength, its clear and deep explorations of developed democracy political institutions, is also its largest weakness. The authors make few references to post-Communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, or fledgling democracies in other parts of the world. At a number of points in the book, addressing how concepts or institutions change in these other contexts is the next logical topic; additional coverage of how other types of systems differ from the mature, well-functioning democracies described in the chapters would benefit the book immensely. This text would be useful for instructors who are teaching an introductory class on developed democracy comparative politics, or who are willing to supplement the text with additional material for less institutionalized democracies and non-democracies. 90 95 100

O'Neil's *Essentials of Comparative Politics* provides a broad overview of major themes and issues in the field, organized around the key ideas of institutions and freedom and equality. O'Neil positions regimes, both political and political-economic, on the "matrix of freedom and equality." To illustrate, this two-by-two matrix places social democracy in the center, with moderate levels of both freedom and equality; liberalism has low equality and high freedom and communism the inverse. This consistent framework is used throughout the text to allow students to develop a sense of how regime types relate or compare to one another. The initial chapters introduce the field of comparative politics, the rise of the state system, nationalism, and ethnicity, and major elements of political economy. The second portion of the text is organized with chapters on regime types: autocracies and democracies, separated into advanced, post-Communist, and less-developed/developing styles. The concluding chapter on globalization is a bit of an odd find in a comparative politics text, particularly one focused on and structured around institutions, but it does make an effort to address political, social, and economic globalization and how these affect the book's core ideas of freedom and equality. All chapters include a wide range of two-tone figures, boxes, maps, and graphs, plus bold vocabulary and reading recommendations.¹ 105 110 115

The abstract material in the body of O'Neil's text is nicely supplemented by an extensive website, which includes ten optional country studies. The country studies combine a sufficient amount of detail to support application of the concepts without being overwhelming. The countries in the series include a good crosssection of the "standard" comparative politics countries (the United Kingdom, France) as well as some states that are less frequently included in texts but that are interesting from an analytical perspective (Brazil, India). Instructors who wish to include specific cases to illustrate key ideas will appreciate the flexibility of this arrangement; instructors select only those cases they wish to cover and students purchase access to only these. 120 125

O'Neil's book differs from Hayes and from Newton and Van Deth in that its organizational structure hinges on generalized regime types. This makes it similar in some ways to the organization of many around-the-world style textbooks, which contain country case studies grouped by regime type. This makes the book more 130

appropriate for instructors who want to focus on commonalities within classes of states rather than on particular institutions across classes. As a result, though, coverage of any particular type of institution/etc. in each group is fairly thin. While the chapters on each of the different types of democracies contains useful information about that type, the topics covered vary substantially between the types so that the chapters feel more like catch-all receptacles for any remaining important information about that group. The book, and student understanding, would benefit from coverage of a consistent set of topics in all groups: political institutions, social institutions, economic institutions and systems, etc. The current organization features most of the “mainstay” comparative politics concepts, such as types of executives, political parties, and electoral systems, in the general chapter on democracy. Political parties in mature democracies function differently and serve different purposes than those in transitional democracies, developing democracies, or single-party states. Greater consistency in topical coverage would facilitate students’ ability to compare *across* groups. What, exactly, about these types of states gives them their position on the matrix of freedom and equality? 135

This review of recent textbooks demonstrates that while pickings are still somewhat slim in non-cases-based textbooks, existing books contain diverse viewpoints and organizational structures. The scarcity of textbook options of this nature, though, mean that most instructors using these books will be forced to compromise on some element of textbook design preference. Two of the three are suitable for freshmen while one is not; two of the three are thematically organized while one is structured around regime types. Two of the three facilitate incorporation of specific country case studies while one does not; two of the three include explicit links to the scholarly literature while one does not. Hopefully, interest in these types of books will continue to grow so that publishers will be encouraged to seek and to produce a wider variety of texts in this style. 140 155

Note

1. Chapter reading questions or objectives are curiously absent from both the text and the website, but they would notably facilitate student learning given the book’s fairly abstract content. 160