

**Teaching American Political Thought
to Students of American Government**

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Since the behavioral revolution, political scientists have characteristically distinguished between American political thought on the one hand and the scientific study of American politics on the other. Courses on the former might remain on the books and even be taught – course readers have persisted, and just last year there appeared for the first time a Norton Anthology¹ – but they have long been relegated to the subfield of political theory at most schools I am aware of, where they tend to reside in uneasy equilibrium with courses examining the great books from Plato's *Republic* to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, or the debates of Rawlsian liberals with their various critics and interlocutors, or the musings of post-modernists seeking new perspectives on globalization and its discontents. Those who consider their study of politics to be scientific on the model of modern natural science – who study politics empirically through the statistical analysis of data – typically believe American political thought as a field of study can be safely ignored. Its products might be subject to measurement and analysis, of course, as public opinion or political rhetoric, and tools ranging from surveys to content analysis are deployed to collect data that are in turn subjected to some or another form of multiple regression, but the interest of the political scientist as scientist is usually in the correlates and thus inferred causes of opinion and rhetoric, not the ideas themselves. I say political-scientist-as-scientist in contradistinction to the political-scientist-as-citizen, for I

¹ Isaac Kramnick & Theodore J. Lowi, eds, *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009)

don't know anyone who studies the field who does not take a keen interest in American politics, both in the competition of the parties and in the issues they engage.

This distinction between the scientist and the citizen lies in the background of the more specific issue I mean to address in this workshop presentation – it is much too preliminary to call a paper – namely the question of the value of studying and teaching American political thought for teaching undergraduates about American government. The most direct way to approach the subject – at least to a political theorist – would be to ask about the relation of the citizen to the scientist, but in the interests of dialogue, and because of a few peculiarities of the American situation, I want to proceed more empirically, looking at several topics where I think that value can be illustrated. I will propose four topics: public opinion, federalism, religion, and race. But first, let me address the peculiarities.

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Our workshop is about political theory, but everyone knows that the canon of works usually included in courses on American political thought is not uniformly theoretical.² Even *The Federalist Papers* were written on a specific occasion for a practical purpose – to advocate ratification of the Constitution of 1787 – and hence have little to say on a whole range of topics, particularly concerning culture and education, that usually figure prominently in the great books. Most of the classic

² See the classic discussion of this issue in Robert G. McCloskey, "American Political Thought and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 51 (1957): 115-129, and Martin Diamond, "Comment on McCloskey," *ibid.*, 130-134

American works are considerably less synoptic in scope or less universal in sentiment than *The Federalist*; many are political speeches or debates, anchored in the controversies of the moment even if they invoke great principles and founding documents. The exception that proves the rule is John C. Calhoun's *Disquisition on Government*, which develops his idea of the concurrent majority, abstracted from the slavery issue with which he is chiefly identified, though applied to American constitutionalism in a companion work, similarly left unpublished at his death.³ Still, I do want to ask about the contribution of American political thought as thought, not as matter of merely historical interest: What do we learn about American politics today from the study of American political thinkers in the past?

Second, the introductory course in American government is probably the place in the curriculum where current empirical research and traditional constitutional studies are most intertwined, as students are typically asked to read *Federalist* #10, the forms of the Constitution are taught and invoked, and the development of political institutions and political parties gets some play. Although I designed this presentation to talk about the introductory course and to use a few introductory textbooks as examples, I anticipate that what I say applies least to what goes on in such courses; in some ways, American political thought *is already* a part of what our students study, particularly if their teacher assigns a reader or a few classic texts alongside a textbook. Still, as I mentioned at the outset, in my experience, American political thought is marginalized in most undergraduate

³ See Ross Lence, ed., *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), and James Read, *Majority Rule Versus Consensus: The Political Thought of John C. Calhoun* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009)

curricula and is certainly eccentric in graduate study. Either it lingers out of tradition, in which case we can anticipate its gradual disappearance – or it survives for a reason, and one that begs to be understood.

Third, perhaps it will be helpful if I clarify at the outset where I stand on the question of the relation of political theory to political science as widely practiced. I would characterize my own approach as Aristotelian, so I would integrate political theory into political science as a whole. Although I think political science is a practical science, I do not think it is simply pragmatic, so the synoptic perspective towards which the theorist aspires – both in relation to the field itself, and in defining its relations to other academic disciplines – is essential to its task. I do not think the political theorist has as his business the drawing of blueprints for social engineers, though I would defend the usefulness of genuine utopian thinking, that is, literary development of an imagined best regime. I think the Kantian distinction between the normative and the empirical is overdrawn: not only are empirical concepts in social science morally laden – indeed, so interwoven is morality with social life that to invent a morally neutral language is usually seen as craven – but knowing what should be done in any set of circumstances is deeply dependent on factual awareness, for “values” are empty if they cannot be applied with good judgment, and that usually requires extensive knowledge of the factual context. For example, it is difficult to know how to vote without knowing how others plan to vote – at least if you are of a mind to influence the outcome of the election, for it is self-indulgent to blindly vote one’s preference without regard to who is electable, or at least with regard to gaining a platform for one’s views.

Finally, I want to say at the outset that I think there is a noble practical intention behind modern behavioral political science – nonpartisanship – which is closely tied to American constitutionalism itself, though the connection is rarely articulated. Behaviorists describe American politics from a perspective that stands above partisanship: When they predict election outcomes they aim to forecast the winner, not promote the side they happen to favor, and they eschew wishful thinking and partisan “spin” in analyzing political events. The patterns and structures they identify can serve both sides of the political spectrum, and their most successful technique – scientific polling – can be used by either party as it decides how to allocate resources and contest elections. I say this aspiration to nonpartisanship is noble because it seems to me that the essence of constitutional government involves accommodating both parties in an active political life: On the one hand, allowing for vigorous partisan dispute, which, as Publius explained in *Federalist #10*, is inevitable if people are free, while on the other hand establishing a constitution that transcends partisan difference and to which people in both parties are attached, preserving civic peace and even civic friendship or patriotism. The nonpartisanship of the behaviorist may not always be constitutionalist – sometimes, it seems merely cynical – and it may not be able to account for itself in its own terms. To settle that question would return us to the issue of the scientist and the citizen, which I have wanted to postpone. From the perspective of teaching, the nonpartisanship of the behavioral political scientist is important, for at many schools teachers of political science have students who may be inclined towards either side of the political spectrum, and we could probably agree that teachers who

aim to recruit them into one party or the other, or merely confirming them in their prejudices, are not doing their job.

TOPIC ONE: PUBLIC OPINION

Every American government textbook has a chapter on public opinion, usually as the first in a section of the book that includes chapters on political parties, interest groups, campaigns and elections, and the like.⁴ Invariably they focus on the data collected by public opinion surveys, describing for students what a survey is, contrasting short-term and long-term opinion shifts, and explaining the correlates of opinions. Public opinion comes first, it seems, on the assumption that "Public opinion sets bounds to every government, and is the real sovereign in every free one." That's James Madison in one of his post-*Federalist* essays, now gaining attention from scholars who are attempting to understand how the critic of majority faction could within a decade become the mastermind of a majoritarian party.⁵ Compare the definitions in the textbooks – for example, "the sum total of individual beliefs about political questions" [B&P] or "core beliefs and political attitudes... expressed by ordinary people and considered as a whole" [G&P] – and the focus Madison provides becomes evident. He proceeds in his short essay to distinguish

⁴ In the sections that follow, I will draw on the following texts: Joseph M. Bessette & John J. Pitney, Jr., *American Government and Politics: Deliberation, Democracy, and Citizenship* (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011) [B&P]; Edward S. Greenburg & Benjamin Page, *The Struggle for Democracy*, 7th ed. (New York: Pearson, Longman, 2005) [G&P]; Thomas E. Patterson, *The American Democracy*, 9th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2009) [P]; Susan Welch, John Gruhl, John Comer, & Susan M. Rigdon, *American Government*, 10th ed. (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006) [WGC&R]. Their chapters on public opinion are, respectively, ch. 8, 5, 6, 4.

⁵ Madison, "Public Opinion," 19 December 1791, in *Papers* 14:170. See also, Colleen Sheehan, *James Madison and the Spirit of Republican Self-Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

how fixed public opinion circumscribes government, while uncertain public opinion can be influenced by government; he expresses his concern that in a large country, public opinion can be counterfeited and individuals thought insignificant, a circumstance "unfavorable to liberty," but quickly adds that "whatever favors a general intercourse of sentiments... is favorable to liberty," recommending roads, commerce, a free and popular press, and representatives moving among the states. Compare as well Alexis de Tocqueville's famous discussion of the tyranny of the majority over thought in *Democracy in America* – equally appraised of the power of opinion and apprehensive of its limits.

Or consider Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, first published in 1922 after his involvement with the propaganda effort in World War I. "Manufactured consent," according to Lippmann, undermines the myth of democracy that the people rule, but in the age of mass society and world politics, there is no going back to Jeffersonian ideals. "The troubles of the press, like the troubles of representative government,... go back to a common source: the failure of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice, by inventing, creating, and organizing a machinery of knowledge."⁶ What will save democracy from itself is organized machinery: social science, expert administration, and an "appeal to reason." Lippmann did not yet have in mind scientific polling, but his book surely indicates the milieu out of which it came. We now take polls for granted as a crucial tool of electoral politics, but seeing public opinion as a problem as well as a sovereign – as Madison, Tocqueville, and Lippmann all do in very different ways –

⁶ Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press, 1965; orig. 1922), pp. 229-30

seems to me both to make the subject more interesting and to teach more about the nature of democracy. Can we really fault politicians for resorting to a politics of symbols and sound-bites when we measure what people think in precisely such units? Isn't it possible that we have here a magnified Hawthorne effect or Heisenberg Principle: Our definition of public opinion and its measurement turn out to alter the very thing we aim to measure and to understand. Can opinion itself be understood except in the context of the knowledge it aims at but doesn't achieve?

TOPIC TWO: FEDERALISM

Every textbook on American government includes a chapter on federalism, and none can avoid a historical discussion of the topic. Most note the ironies of federalism as it operates in modern politics – how it is invoked variously by different parties depending on the issue and the context⁷ – and accept that nowadays federalism is best explained pragmatically. Louis Brandeis's notion that the states are laboratories for social policy is generally accepted as the most rational account of why the system should be left in place, but it is hardly adequate to justify even the expense of multiple levels of government, much less the equality of votes in the Senate. A robust account of federalism requires, I think, an attempt to understand the states as political communities, to see them as democracies in a more immediate way than a continental republic can ever be a democracy, to recognize the differences in their political cultures, and to come to terms with what

⁷ A particularly good example is provided by Greenberg & Page, who begin their chapter on federalism quoting Hubert Humphrey in 1948 denouncing states rights in favor of human rights, then Dianne Feinstein and President Obama recently denouncing the Defense of Marriage Act as a violation of states rights.

is not liberal in their foundation – with the fact that, while the federal government was established for the classic liberal ends of security and prosperity, the states are comprehensive in their powers and in their law. I use the present tense because it seems to me that all of this remains in their structure, even if current constitutional doctrine or federal practice points in a different direction, in other words, even though national politicians speak as though the people expect every problem to have a national solution and every right to have a uniform meaning. Whether the structures make sense requires understanding what they were built to accommodate, and then assessing whether those ends still have value and can be achieved, or better achieved, in other ways. I don't mean to advocate dismantlement of federal power by my comments here; indeed, the key to understanding federalism might be in understanding that the perennial struggles it entails reflect permanent and conflicting goods that require struggle to remain intact.

Let me attempt a few examples of how studying American political thought can be of critical value in understanding federalism. First, the debates between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists over the ratification of the Constitution illuminate the nature of representation and the different logic that underlies state and federal governments. The Anti-Federalists reject the idea of a national republic overlaid upon the states because, understanding representation as the device of creating “in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large,” they know this to be impossible on a continental scale without a huge assembly. The Federalists, by contrast, accept the possibility of a national republic because they understand it to

be created for limited purposes that representatives, understood as agents of the people and the states for those purposes, can fulfill through compromise and coalition.⁸ The Federalists make the case that these kinds of representation can exist simultaneously, although to the extent their confidence depends on their anticipation of growing homogeneity they prove vulnerable to the Anti-Federalist charge that they sought consolidation. The Anti-Federalist position has proven surprisingly resilient, although its subsequent capture by the slave interest and its white supremacist successors generally undercut its credibility for a century or more.

Second, to grasp the political cultures of the states and their differences, it makes sense to investigate their origins and the thought of those who established them. What Daniel Elazar referred to as the moralistic political culture⁹ of New England becomes clear when one reads John Winthrop and John Cotton on the aspiration for a Christian commonwealth and then compares the 1641 Body of Liberties which places the regulation of the churches and their disputes squarely in the hands of the state. Read Michael Drayton's "To the Virginia Voyage" and then the early statutes of Virginia to appreciate the very different character of that colony, carrier at once of the worldly ambition of the Elizabethan English Renaissance and of its confident Protestant Establishment. (It should be recalled, here and throughout, that American political thought itself needs supplementing

⁸ Cf. Herbert Storing, ed. (with the assistance of Murray Dry), *The Complete Anti-Federalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. the Federal Farmer, with *The Federalist*, esp. ## 53, 55-56. The quotation, ironically in light of subsequent developments, is from John Adams, "Thoughts on Government" (1776), in Kramnick & Lowi, *American Political Thought*, p. 126

⁹ Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972)

with the political thought of England and Europe, with which it is in constant dialogue.) Can the states of the West, formed for the most part after the Constitution and so temporally derivative of the Union in ways the original states were only by legal fiction, be understood apart from the Jeffersonian aspiration to an "empire of liberty" and apart from the ambition to civilize a continent and extend the bounds of human power over the land – while bringing along a rough democracy unencumbered by settled privileges and monarchical remnants? No one would think the South can be understood apart from its defense of its peculiar institution – or the North apart from its insistence that this undermined the basis of the union itself.

Third, what is the significance for federalism of the replacement of traditions tied to place and faith with a uniform science indicated by the Progressive Era? I think this is a little-investigated aspect of the Progressive story, but the question of federalism is surely central to understanding the difference between Democratic Progressivism, which came encumbered with Jeffersonian states rights, and Republican Progressivism, which was more openly nationalistic. Does this difference, when seen retrospectively in the light of, not federalism, but internationalism, particularly the dispute over the League of Nations, suggest that the question of federalism remains, as it was at the time of the Founding, intertwined with the question of the place of the United States among world powers? Insofar as Progressivism, at the turn of the last century and in our own day, indicates a scientific mentality that is uncomfortable with American exceptionalism and fully reconciled with dominant trends in Europe, does the future

of American federalism depend upon the success or eclipse of Progressivism in its current form?

TOPIC THREE: RELIGION

Whatever one thinks of American exceptionalism as a political aspiration, as an empirical matter the United States is distinct among modern liberal democracies for the religiosity of its citizens. How is this treated in the textbooks on American government? Most make a brief mention of the role of religion in the settling of the country, of its effect on public opinion, and of its correlation with partisan preference, and all have a few pages in the chapter on civil liberties devoted to freedom of religion. The new book by Bessette and Pitney stands out by a treatment of America's religious history sufficiently detailed to discuss the First and Second Great Awakening, often thought critical, respectively, to the formation of the American identity and to the rise of nineteenth-century reform movements. Bessette and Pitney discuss as well the role of churches and religious societies in the anti-slavery and temperance movements, early twentieth century Social Gospel teaching and its influence on social welfare policy, the religious aspect of the Civil Rights Movement, and the involvement of religious groups concerned with social issues in recent years, all in the context of their chapter on civic culture, and they follow their discussion of religion with a discussion of patriotism (and thus the symbols of "civic religion"), a particularly apposite approach, I think, and one that simultaneously pays appropriate historical respect to the importance of religion in American political development, informs students of the variety of religious

traditions in America, and alerts them to its competitors. Like their counterparts, Bessette and Pitney devote a section of the chapter on civil liberties to a discussion of religious liberty, but with considerably more attention to the intertwining of religion and government – particularly on the state level – than one usually finds.

My point here is not to deny the importance of the principle of religious liberty or the separation of church and state. On the contrary, I consider these to be central to the understanding of what makes American constitutional government distinct from previous republics and from the English tradition from which it otherwise inherited so much. The problem is that modern secular orthodoxy, interpreting strictly the “wall of separation” between church and state, can blind political analysts – not to mention their students – to the real and persistent connections between religion and politics in America. Here again, the classic texts in American political thought – from John Winthrop and John Cotton, previously mentioned, to Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson – can help students engage perspectives different from their own, and there are numerous other authors besides whose works are barely studied today but who thought deeply and wrote vigorously or circumspectly on the question of how religious precept or principle should guide political action and choice. In fact, broad reading in the texts of American political thought shows religion mentioned almost everywhere – least of all, significantly, in the law and in discourse about the Constitution, but widely in political speech. Can Progressivism, for all its scientific demeanor, be understood apart from Protestant reform, when the same political forces promoting government expertise and expansion brought us Prohibition? Can the New Deal be

distinguished from Progressivism without taking into account the incorporation of Catholics and Jews – with their ancient traditions of law and their cosmopolitan intellectual networks – into its coalition? Nor are only domestic policy and politics implicated. What was the role of religion in American wars against modern totalitarianism? What is its role in the confrontation with Islamic radicalism today?

TOPIC FOUR: RACE

A fourth area of study in American politics which I think might benefit from attention to American political thought is the study of race. Outsiders have, since Independence, seen in the question of race the great contradiction of professed American principles and so the great anomaly in our political thinking. Though most modern societies were built upon ethnic or national identity, Americans claimed as their basis universal principles – then denied the effect of those principles to those who did not share majority identity. From the eighteenth century through the Civil War, antislavery writings were critical to American political thought, and as noted above, attempts to square the circle of defending slavery in a democratic regime led to some novel intellectual efforts and to recourse to ancient traditions otherwise diminished or abandoned. But the most extraordinary writings about the race question are from the pens of those oppressed by the old systems, first of slavery, then of segregation. As no course on American political thought is complete without the Lincoln-Douglas debates, no assessment of Lincoln is adequate that has not encountered Frederick Douglass's 1876 "Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln," and one's understanding of that is

richer if one also knows his Fourth of July Oration of 1852. Nor can the choice of what to accommodate and how to resist in the heyday of segregation be clearly understood from the outside without reading the classic exchange of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois.¹⁰ For that matter, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," now a classic not only in the study of race relations and Civil Rights but in the literature of civil disobedience, can be profitably contrasted with the speeches of Malcolm X, especially "The Ballot or the Bullet," for a sense of the choices faced by those determined to topple segregation at a moment when, only in retrospect, its collapse seems inevitable.

In the introductory textbooks, mention of race in general and of African-Americans in particular is scattered throughout and appears in many contexts. Except in the case of Bessette and Pitney, who have a chapter on citizenship early on which considers immigration, race, Native Americans, and other topics, most of the books attend to the race question chiefly in a chapter on civil rights, usually framed as a struggle for equality, with the story of African-Americans treated as paradigmatic, but with subsequent campaigns for women's rights and homosexual rights treated as well. I suppose it is natural that this story takes on the character of "Whig history," with progress looking inevitable in retrospect and heroes and villains easily identified, but it seems to me that something serious is lost by such simplification, not only from the perspective of history but from the point of view of the present. If progress was inevitable, it is now irreversible; how then to account for the sense of precariousness that minorities continue to feel in American

¹⁰ Cf. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (orig. 1901) with DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (orig. 1903), republished in John Hope Franklin, ed., *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965).

democracy? If equality in the sense of nondiscrimination (what Justice Harlan vividly called "colorblindness") is the course of justice in the matter of race, is it obvious that justice in relation to sex or sexual orientation similarly demands of society that no distinctions be made in law and policy on the basis of either of these? What if such a change, unlike the adoption of racial equivalence, comes into conflict with long-established religious beliefs? My point, again, is not now to argue one side or the other of such controversies, only to suggest that there are serious issues here that are being addressed today in documents that fall within the ambit of contemporary American political thought, issues that cannot adequately be captured by statistics on demographics, opinion polling, even election results. Race is particularly interesting because it seems to me the most striking arena where widely read students of American politics learn the difference between a variable and a voice.

CONCLUSION

I have grown increasingly convinced that Justice Jackson almost got it right in *West Virginia v. Barnette* when he wrote, "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein."¹¹ Because of the principle of freedom of conscience, there is no official orthodoxy on first principles; because of deep differences, we should not expect harmony on questions of policy

¹¹ 319 U.S. 624 (1943), at 642

and often not on questions of law. There is a constitutional constellation, however, a set of principles and institutions in terms of which and by means of which Americans agree to conduct our political disputes, although different citizens might base their fealty to these principles and institutions on different reasons. Because of the great diversity that results, the study of American government and politics is necessarily empirical; how can we begin to know one another unless we first survey all there is to come to know? Because of the common commitment to constitutionalism, there is coherence in the subject of study, and for all the diversity of universities and textbooks, the introductory course in American government is quite sensibly at the core of citizen education.

But an introductory course built solely on the findings of modern empirical political science would seem to me unable to achieve its aim: In the end, what generates interest and engagement on the part of students is not the mechanics of the system, whether viewed as a machine or an organism or a network or a decision game - although each of those perspectives is not without intellectual interest and often captures bright young minds unawares, who had no idea that what they heard was a mess is actually an intricate order, even one based on intelligent (human!) design - but rather for most the imaginative entrance into political controversy, sometimes at the level of policy, sometimes at the level of the constitution, sometimes in the search for first principles of a best regime. That is why, as I said at the outset, the introductory course always incorporates, albeit in digest form, important elements of American political thought - and why I am suggesting that the enrichment of that study at more advanced levels requires the integration of

American political thought throughout the American politics curriculum. It is noble, I repeat, for political science to attempt to be nonpartisan rather than partisan. It is nobler, I would hold with Tocqueville, in the end "to see not differently but further than any party," a task that requires first of all learning to look through the noblest partisans' eyes.