

## Allen Schick

Having taught a core course in American political institutions for a quarter of a century, shifting (on my own initiative) to a comparative politics course proved a challenge. Quite a few of my American students know one or a few countries--they do travel a lot these days--but little about the many countries beyond their pale of experience. The non-American students generally know quite a lot about the world, but yearn to learn more about the American superpower. The vast comparative politics literature has been of little value; it has been hijacked by abstract modelers, typology-inventors, and others grounded in political science, not public policy. Two additional problems beset me: One was to discern what is usable knowledge for students preparing for careers in policy analysis; the other was to construct a thematically-coherent course that would justify inclusion of some topics and exclusion of others.

My key decision was to structure the course around the character and performance of the state, and to emphasize three teaching tools: written meditations on assigned topics, a series of brief papers on a single country, and classroom discussions of "propositions" drawn from assigned readings. The "mediations" are based on assigned readings on "authoritarian democracies"; students submit one-page critiques of (1) why this form of governance has gained popularity, or (2) whether regimes that are authoritarian can be deemed democratic. Each "proposition" has two parts, with the second seemingly logically flowing from the first, such as: "Political Parties inflame partisan conflict. Therefore, the widespread decline in party identification has moderated political conflict." By the time the students have chewed this over, they get a sense that the first part of the proposition usually is false and the second part is not valid.

The students worked hard, I learned a great deal, and American and non-US students engaged in productive dialog.