Governing Texas

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Texas has undergone a startling political transformation in the twenty-first century. From the end of Reconstruction until the early 1990s, Texas was a one-party Democratic state dominated by conservative business leaders. By the end of the twentieth century, an increasingly ascendant Republican Party began to assert itself, eventually taking control of both houses of the legislature in 2002. Since then, Republicans have consolidated power in all statewide elections and continued to control the legislature. The Texas Republican Party assumed a major role in national political affairs, becoming during the Trump years a central focus of conservative efforts to influence the country's national agenda. However, is change in the wind? A high-tech economy geared to world markets is fueling economic expansion, pushing major urban areas into traditional rural settings. The Latino population in Texas continues to grow rapidly, reconfiguring the political demography of the state. A major political question is whether Republicans can secure enough conservative Latino votes to consolidate their power for another decade. Democrats now control the major cities and counties in Texas, using an urban and even suburban base to challenge the hegemony of a rural-based Republican Party.

The old "nuts-and-bolts" approach to textbooks about Texas government offered shorter textbooks that described the key institutions and structures of power as well as one or two suggestive themes for consideration. These textbooks assumed that the state did not change much from one session of the legislature to the next. They were read alongside American government textbooks as supplemental material, often ignored by instructors whose interests were at the national level. Texas government and politics were not "where the action was" for political scientists interested in more substantial questions. Today, this is not the case: a nuts-and-bolts approach no longer works. Texas textbook writers face important challenges that must be addressed: Where goes Texas during the next decade? How is the political transformation of Texas in the early decades of the twenty-first century best explained? What does this mean for the fate of the state and the nation? Most important, how do politics and government become meaningful to students who are largely unaware of what is happening?

Since 1929, students in public colleges and universities in Texas have been required to take six credits in government or political science, "which includes consideration of the Constitution of the United States and the constitutions of the states, with special emphasis on Texas." For decades, colleges and universities were free to meet this requirement in various ways, including two semesters of US/[1]Texas government or separate courses on US and Texas government. Pressure from the Higher Education Coordinating Board during the past decade has compelled all community colleges and many four-year universities in Texas to adopt the latter option. The net effect of these regulations has been the creation of an enormous textbook market in both US and Texas government. College freshmen are the main audience for these government textbooks, and most of them are beginning students at a community college or students in high school taking the course for dual credit. Generally, their mastery of the fundamentals of national government is weak; understanding of the fundamentals of state government is almost nonexistent. Students often assume that state constitutions function like the US Constitution and that the processes of governance in a state are simply a downsized version of national-governance processes. Textbooks, particularly those focusing on Texas government, must be aimed at basic concepts and issues in state politics without becoming overly simplistic. They must be written in a style that meets the needs of the smallest community college as well as the largest state school; if not, important segments of the market may be lost.

THE AUDIENCE

Writing for community college courses in Texas government is particularly challenging. Community college instructors have heavy teaching loads, often required to teach five or six courses every semester. Their teaching loads encompass a wide range of pedagogies ranging from large lectures to small seminars, to hybrid courses with discussion sections, to fully online classes. These instructors need help. Authors and publishers must figure out how best to assist them in their presentations to students. Ideally, a publisher should provide graphics and PowerPoint slides that explain the material presented in the textbook along with discussion questions and possible test-bank materials for exams and quizzes. Although these resources are invaluable to instructors who are in the classroom 15 to 18 hours a week, not all publishers provide this service. Ideally, textbooks should be written with these ancillary products in mind.

Authors who write textbooks often are from research institutions, and they may not fully appreciate the challenges faced by their instructor and student audiences. Feedback from the teaching trenches is essential for a textbook to survive through multiple editions. We discovered that the best way to accomplish this goal is through four mechanisms. First, the publisher invited faculty using our textbook, *Governing Texas*, to write detailed reviews of various chapters that indicated

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what did and did not work.[2] This type of feedback can be painful, but it is instructive in letting us know which material and ideas were and were not working in the classroom. Second, instructors and community college departments invite textbook authors to speak, often on Constitution Day. These speaking opportunities are ideal for learning about how to improve our textbook. Third, there is an annual statewide convention of community college professors where we can meet with many users of our textbook and learn about their use of it. These annual events build close relationships among authors, instructors, and colleges. Fourth, there are numerous opportunities to meet informally with community college instructors who are located near the university. As a result of feedback from instructors, for example, we discovered that an ideal flow of instruction in their courses is to cover one chapter each week. Because a typical semester is 14 weeks, we redesigned our textbook so that it consists of 14 chapters; that is, one chapter for every instructional week.

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ADAPTING TO CHANGE

It is remarkable how quickly issues in Texas politics change. Adapting to that rapid change is essential for writing a textbook that is up to date. Recently, one of the most important issues facing local governments was the unsustainable cost of local government pensions. Although the full problem of pension costs has not been resolved by local governments, within the past two years, the more pressing issues were resolved—or at least postponed to a later date. Within one edition of our textbook, the cost of public pensions was no longer the overriding issue of local government. Rather, the issue was state preemption of local decision making on numerous matters, largely because of a Republican–Democratic division in which Republicans control state politics and Democrats control local politics in the state's urban centers.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the state as the fifth edition of our textbook was being prepared. Although a substantial part of it had been written, we quickly realized that we must adapt and that a major rewrite was needed because the pandemic had significant effects on the state's people, politics, and budget. Conflicts ensued between state and local officials over closure regulations and mask requirements. Governor Greg Abbott went from deferring to local decision making to opposing local regulations to allowing some local regulations. In the process, he was criticized by Democrats for insufficiently responding to the pandemic and criticized by right-wing Republicans for overresponding. The pandemic will affect state and local budgets for years to come. It severely curtailed the state's judicial system and created crisis conditions in the state prisons and jails. How long the pandemic will impact the state and its long-term effects remain open questions. Assessing the effects of COVID-19 on the state's politics will be a complex task for the sixth edition.

THE DATA PROBLEM

One way that we have tried to distinguish our textbook from others in the market is through the development of various features that present data in new and interesting ways. Teaching students how to read tables, graphs, and maps can break up the monotony of text that threatens to lull students to sleep. Interspersing this material with photographs and analyses that move beyond the flow of the text can pique students' (and instructors') interests in politics and provide good material for in-class discussions.

Much of the data presented in our textbook rely on reports from various state agencies. However, a significant lag time in the publication of these reports is problematic. For the 2021 edition, for example, many of the agency reports were available only through fiscal year 2018 or 2019. Whereas that might not be a major problem in many other states, in fast-growing Texas, the differences in data between 2018 and 2021 can be substantial. Additionally, due to the pandemic, we anticipate even more dramatic data differences. The number of trials during the pandemic, for example, have been reduced dramatically and the number of people incarcerated has been

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decreased to avoid contagion; however, these data were not available at the time of writing.

There also are problems in reporting campaign-contribution data. When a textbook is published in the winter of an election year, these data are incomplete or unreported. As a result, the best available data are for the election prior to the one being discussed in the current edition. This lag time associated with reporting essential data in the textbook is an insoluble problem in providing updated material to students. We have learned that it may be necessary to report data that are older than we would like and to supplement the data with either a discussion of likely changes or with data that are incomplete but more recent.

AUTHORSHIP

Learning how to work together as a team may be the greatest challenge facing textbook writers. There are three important decisions that authors must make as they begin writing a textbook or working on a new edition. First, the work must be divided fairly based on the expertise of each author, recognizing that coauthors must learn about topics that may lie outside of it. Someone, after all, must write about the budget and municipal utility districts! As important, each author must be willing to step in when their coauthor is experiencing writer's block on a specific topic. Writing a textbook is a team endeavor, not a solo affair. Second, authors must agree at the beginning of each new edition about the key themes of the textbook and where and when these themes will be developed. Discussions of redistricting, for example, can take place in various chapters, as can discussions of equity and justice. Coauthors must be in agreement about what goes where. Third, authors should listen carefully to one another's concerns about how material is presented or which arguments are made. Remember, there is no one "right way" to write a textbook. ■

NOTES

1. See https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.51.htm#51.301.
2. Anthony Champagne, Edward J. Harpham, and Jason P. Casellas. 2021. *Governing Texas*, Fifth Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

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