The Textbook Road Taken

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In this article, I reflect on my experience of writing and marketing a textbook in the midst of rapid intellectual, technological, and methodological changes in the profession. Like writing the textbook, the process of writing this article helped me to think more deeply about our profession, our teaching mission, and my engagement with publishers, students, and fellow professors. I hope these insights are helpful.

I began the process of writing an American government textbook in 2004, and the first edition was published in 2011 (Kollman 2011). Targeted to undergraduate students in introductory American government courses, the book has gone through multiple editions as well as election updates. The experience of producing a textbook in introductory American government since 2004 has been wonderful, time-consuming, and revelatory. I collaborated with people in the textbook industry whom I admire and respect; similarly, the diverse and interesting fellow political scientists I met during the manuscript-review process brought me joy and professional satisfaction. However, the focus of this article is mostly on what the process revealed and affirmed about intellectual and pedagogical currents in our profession.

Before discussing the broader context in the discipline and in classrooms, I summarize the personal side of my experience. The processes of writing, marketing, and revising the textbook, I believe, improved my writing and my teaching. The overall task broadened my scope of knowledge about political science and especially the study of American government. Would I do it again? Probably—although I now would hedge against trends in the discipline more than I did then. If someone were to ask me the question, I would "speak out of both sides of my mouth," as the saying goes. I enthusiastically recommend writing a textbook. I strongly recommend against writing a textbook. Both statements summarize advice that I would give readily, but which of the two options depends on factors specific to individuals. I will subsequently return to this question and my answer.

Mine is a conceptual textbook, relatively brief, and with less detailed factual material than other American government textbooks. The publisher originally viewed it as targeted toward the so-called upper end of the market, meaning that the book has challenging concepts for typical undergraduate students and likely would not be assigned to community college courses or high school AP classes.

The textbook has been described variously by colleagues, reviewers, and graduate students as teaching a social-choice approach to politics, as an institutions-focused textbook, as a rational-choice textbook, and as one with collective-action problems as the core concept. These descriptions are not obviously wrong but they are incomplete. What is revealing to me is that by describing my textbook in this way, people highlight their teaching preferences as either in favor of or against these topical elements, as well as their expectations based on what is absent or present in most other textbooks.

It is true that I frame the topic of American government in terms that fit within a certain intellectual tradition best summarized as positive political science. These ideas, especially about collective dilemmas and institutions, frame the overall textbook and many of its chapters. The core concepts and themes introduced in chapter 1 and carried through all the chapters can be summarized as follows. Human societies face collective dilemmas in which individual and group interests are not aligned. Political institutions help to solve these collective dilemmas. The details of those institutions matter for distributive and redistributive outcomes across groups of people.

Many other ideas from various intellectual traditions in the discipline, however, coexist throughout the chapters. The textbook rarely uses the terms "rational" and "rational choice." Many chapters focus on sociological and psychological concepts that our discipline has imported. My textbook reflects the rich and diverse concepts used by scholars across many subfields. The important point is not so much the specific conceptual focus as the fact that it focuses on theoretical concepts.

When I started writing the textbook, political scientists were almost a decade past the intradisciplinary debates about rational choice and its alleged pathologies. It seemed to me then and now that the rational-choice intellectual movement within the discipline mostly succeeded in influencing scholarly work, in the sense that its ideas saturate our intellectual undercurrents in ways that we hardly recognize. Ideas and concepts about collective dilemmas, about institutionalized incentives and norms, from social choice, and from transaction-cost economics are found in writings across the discipline—even among researchers and writers who would not agree to be characterized as part of a rational-choice approach. It is worth noting that we rarely argue about rational-choice methods anymore, partly because core ideas have been absorbed and also because of the behavioral-economics trend that melds psychological and economics concepts in theories of decision making.

My textbook begins with core concepts and themes that I believed as recently as five or six years ago were commonly agreed to within the discipline and that those should be communicated to undergraduate students. In other words, although the specific manner in which I described and applied these concepts differs from how other scholars might do so, I did not think that introducing the textbook with these

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concepts would make it non-mainstream. That is, I believed that my textbook was consistent with the trends in the discipline.

I now believe that I was wrong. There is less of a consensus about the important concepts to teach in political science than I thought would be the case when I began. Moreover, there is less of a consensus that *teaching undergraduates a consistent conceptual framework front and center* is a priority. The reasons are many, but intellectual trends within the discipline during the past 15 years have played a role.

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My observations about the American government textbook market—and from what professors say they and students want in textbooks—are that we can agree on facts and norms but not as much on common concepts. First, we can agree on facts and clear patterns in data. For instance, the US Constitution had a three-fifths clause with enormous subsequent implications for representation, racialized oppression, and sectional conflict; the incumbency advantage in congressional elections increased in the mid-twentieth century as Congress institutionalized; and poor people vote less often than wealthier people. It is important for students to learn facts and understand clear data patterns.

Second, we tend to agree with certain normative assertions such as that democracy is good and authoritarianism is bad; we firmly agree that past (and present) discrimination and oppression were (are) terrible and must be taught so as not to be repeated (or continue); and that students and all people in democracies should participate in their government, including young people. Professors want textbooks in American government to convey a set of agreed-on facts and historical examples and to make one or more of these normative claims as themes. They also want to ensure that basic civics information is conveyed. Most American government textbooks emphasize either more facts or more normative claims, or a combination of the two.

Textbooks in political science with conceptual material of the type more common to economics, sociology, and psychology textbooks, however, are less common and less commonly adopted. Professors would rather teach facts and norms to first- and second-year students and teach theoretical, conceptual material (if at all) in advanced courses.

The reasons for this are complex. One reason surely is related to trends of the past two decades. My textbook was published after years of writing at the height of the incorporation of behavioral economics and the beginning of the causal-inference movement. These movements had profound implications for how political scientists conduct their research work. Serious engagement with psychological processes, a broader use of experimentation, and an intense focus on research design to establish an exclusion restriction all follow from these movements within the discipline.

These movements also had implications for the pedagogical priorities of political science instructors at the university level. Less emphasized are core assumptions of human behavior and their implications. The movement in behavioral economics fits better with the pre-rational-choice behavioral movements from political psychology and political sociology. Furthermore, following the causal-inference movement, there is more emphasis on empirical findings that seem to cut against intuition and have a type of treatment-control aspect to them. For instance, textbooks include comparisons across US states in voter turnout over time based on changes in voter-identification laws. There also are experimental findings about media effects on political attitudes. These are important concepts to teach, and my textbook includes them. However, as I believed when I began writing the textbook and still believe now, there are many such findings and facts that require overarching theoretical structures to make sense in combination.

One way to think about the teaching of political science to undergraduate students is to compare it to how economics, sociology, and psychology are taught at the university level.

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My textbook is framed as a cross between micro and macro textbooks taught in first-year economics or introductory sociology textbooks that are quite conceptual. Trends within political science have reinforced the teaching to introductory students as a cross between economics history and experimental economics. Political scientists tend to wait until advanced courses for majors to teach our discipline's equivalent of micro- and macro-economics. I do not judge this as good or bad because it ultimately is about variation in the sequential timing of when to present material to students. I state it as an empirical generalization about our teaching relative to how other social sciences are taught.

I suppose a lesson learned is that it is impossible to guess accurately what instructors will want to teach in 15 years—which essentially is the guess a would-be author needs to make to write a textbook that departs from standard norms. A flip

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side of this lesson is that textbooks must adapt to changing trends in their disciplines. Would a textbook that focuses on conceptual material based in behavioral economics and psychology gain support? This is an interesting question, and my claim that professors avoid conceptual material would be put to the test. Perhaps if the writer incorporated the most up-to-date conceptual thrust in the discipline, professors would feel comfortable assigning a largely conceptual textbook. I have my doubts, but I would be glad to be proved wrong.

Other lessons I have learned are perhaps obvious but need to be acknowledged by potential textbook writers. For instance, students want free material, and their expectations about deserving free content has increased dramatically in recent decades. Students prefer smaller blocks of writing than most textbooks offer in typical chapters. Financial pressures have reduced the time that professors and teaching assistants can spend on grading written assignments; therefore, electronically graded exams and assignments (e.g., multiple-choice quizzes) are valued by textbook adopters.

I now return to the more personal side of the process. Writing a textbook is not a light decision; it is a massive commitment. Textbook writers should enjoy the writing process, especially writing for general audiences. When contemplating the task, they should want to become more generalist in knowledge. This is not necessarily in opposition to becoming more specialist but rather to be complementary to the specialization required to conduct publishable research in journals and academic books. Textbook writers should be serious about becoming a better teacher. Finally, they must be able to tolerate the time devoted to marketing themselves and their textbook.

Of all the reasons to write a textbook, making money should be low on the list of considerations. The sustained effort requires the type of dedication—and, at times, enthusiasm—to be motivated in ways that financial reward cannot. The compensation (in expectation) is too small to justify the time and effort involved. Almost all academic social scientists choose their profession because they are motivated by more than money. There are more reliable and less time-consuming ways to increase financial compensation.

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American government introductory textbooks are targeted to a large but not growing market. It is a market crowded with many competitors. Other types of textbooks that are more targeted (e.g., Congress) or in different subfields (e.g., international relations) generally have smaller markets and fewer competitors. Whether or not this article applies to these other areas I cannot convey from experience. ■

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Kollman, Ken. 2011. *The American Political System.* New York: W. W. Norton.

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