

**Newsletter
of the
African
Politics
Conference
Group**

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Chair's Report

Anne Pitcher, University of Michigan

As I announced at the APCG business meeting in Chicago, we are now officially an organized section of the American Political Science Association! For those of you who may not be familiar with the significance of that designation, for the last ten years, APCG has been a related group of the APSA and also a coordinate organization of the African Studies Association. Last spring, we approached the APSA to discuss a change of status and with the association's enthusiastic support, we petitioned APSA members to endorse such a change. The steering committee learned last June that the petition was successful.

Our advancement to "organized section" status within the APSA is an acknowledgment of the collective and individual contributions to APCG made by many of its members. For more than a decade, our members have organized and participated on APCG panels at the APSA, the ASA, MPSA, and ISA. They have edited and contributed to the newsletter or managed our website. Since 2008, many members have hosted the APSA's Africa Workshops. They have served on committees, attended our business meetings and social hours and participated in many of the other tasks that are part of creating a strong and highly visible scholarly organization. Our status as a section recognizes our hard work and our dedication and we should all celebrate!

**Symposium:
Teaching African
Politics**

Features contributions
from
**Warigia Bowman,
Kevin S. Fridy,
Timothy Longman,
Michael Byron Nelson,
Robin L. Turner, and
Beth Elise Whitaker.**

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Symposium: Teaching African Politics

The following contributions were solicited from APCG members who had participated in recent panels on teaching at the African Studies Association. The first set of contributions provide refreshing takes on relatively traditional approaches to teaching African politics, using novels, debates, and research paper assignments. The second set of contributions focuses on the use of technology in teaching, including videos, wikis, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) that can connect American students with Africans.

From the beginning, APCG members have used each other as resources for teaching African politics. Besides the contributions included here I encourage you to consider making contributions to the list of syllabi and “innovative assignments” we have on our website. Contact our website manager (Zach Warner) or myself if you are interested in doing so.

- Editor

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Teaching African Politics with Novels

Timothy Longman, Boston University

During my first year of graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I took African Politics with Crawford Young. Along with a variety of serious political science texts, Professor Young assigned two novels: *The Emperor* by Ryszard Kapuchinski, a somewhat fictionalized account of the last days of Haile Selassie’s regime, and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s story of the pervasiveness of corruption in the life of Ghanaians. In many ways, I found that these texts offered important insights on the reality of African politics that the straight-forward prose in traditional social science texts simply could not express. Having up to that point never traveled to Africa, for me the descriptions and imagery in these books made life in Africa more real and understandable and gave depth and texture to the practice of African politics.

After encountering novels, short stories, and other alternative sources in a few other graduate courses (most notably

Ed Friedman’s Chinese Politics, which included writings by political prisoners as well as several works of fiction), I adopted the practice of including novels in my own courses and have since used them in almost every class that I teach. I find that fictional works can complement social science texts in a variety of important ways that help to enrich student learning:

Accessibility

In exploring political issues through stories, novels provide an approach to Africa that is more accessible to many students, particularly those who are not political science majors. For example, I have commonly assigned Chinua Achebe’s *Anhills of the Savannah* in my African Politics course. The novel tells the story of a military regime from the perspective of several friends of the president who have become increasingly disillusioned with his rule. While we





The African Politics Research Paper

Michael Byron Nelson, Wesleyan University

Research papers are a common assignment. But what purposes do they serve? Why is it important that students write research papers on African politics? What are some of the challenges that students face when writing an *African* politics research paper (as opposed to a research paper on, say, Europe or the US?) And what are some of the strategies that are available for overcoming those challenges?

Why is it important?

I find that teaching research papers is important for at least four reasons. One is that, learning *skills* may be more important to an individual student than *content*. We want our students to learn how to think critically, to search for and find information to test their own ideas, and to communicate the outcomes of this process for them. Few of our students go on to careers in political science or have an Africa-related career, but they all need these skills and college is the place for them to acquire them. A second is that teaching content is still important and it is important that bad research does not get in the way. One of my key concerns in advising students on their research projects is that they do not end up with a bag of bad ideas about how politics works in their particular case study countries or across the continent. If the connection between argument and evidence is generally important, I would suggest it is even more important in a region that is so little understood by the average American. A third reason is that I think

this can encourage the development of a new generation of Africa scholars. Finally, research papers act as an escape valve for students who have burning questions or passions regarding Africa. I find that I cannot cover all of the subjects that interest some of my students at the level of depth that would satisfy them. So, letting them explore on their own is a fantastic opportunity for them.

Challenges

The African Politics Research Paper does have its own challenges, however. Here I want to discuss two¹ which are core to the experience of writing a research paper on Africa.

Challenge #1: The “Africa is a country” problem.

The first set of challenges are related to students’ lack of familiarity with the African continent. I have seen this problem arise in the research questions students ask, such as:

“How does foreign aid impact Africa?”

“Why is there conflict in Africa?”

¹ In my ASA presentation I mentioned four challenges. The third was the challenge of helping students understand and identify the many informal institutions that are relevant in the African context. The fourth involved theory-building.

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Debating African Politics (Whitaker), *continued from page 4*

The Product (Red)[™] campaign is little more than an advertising strategy that benefits the partner companies more than the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria it claims to support.

The United States should compensate African countries for the revenues their farmers have lost due to American agricultural subsidies.

The conflict mineral provisions of the Dodd-Frank law should be repealed because they are hurting people in target countries such as DR Congo.

Finally, as may be obvious from these resolutions, the main drawback of the debate format is that it forces stu-

dents to take polarized positions on complex issues about which there is actually much middle ground. (One could argue that this is a good lesson for political science more broadly!) Students can get frustrated with this dynamic, and often seek to promote more nuanced positions which we discuss further in the debriefing portion. In the end, though, I find this problem a small price to pay for the energy and enthusiasm generated by the debates. When I hear students leave my classroom arguing about whether the U.S. should suspend aid to Uganda if it passes the Anti-Homosexuality Bill instead of sharing the latest frat party gossip, I know that I have achieved my pedagogical goals.



The African Politics Research Paper (Nelson), *continued from page 5*

“What is US policy towards Africa”

There does not have to be anything wrong about asking such questions. Many of us do that in our own work. But there are at least two real problems that can arise when students ask such questions. First, I find this often masks their ignorance of the diversity that exists within the continent. Second, there is not really much of a chance that they can address such broad questions in a substantive way as part of a course research paper. We cannot expect our students to grasp the entire continent within a single term, and in most cases it just is not a good idea to lump all of these countries together.

Solution: Teach Case Selection

For me, an important solution lies in teaching case selection. Now, I do not necessarily expect all of my students to grasp all of the intricacies of how to select appropriate cases to test the arguments that interest them. But I do try to get them to understand, at a minimum, that there are consequences to selecting some countries and not others for exploring their research questions.²

There are also clear pedagogical reasons for teaching case selection. First, consider the lessons that students take home with them after conducting their research projects. Students on their own, I find, tend to gravitate towards case study designs that focus on “extreme cases” (Sudan or Zimbabwe) rather than “most typical” or “diverse” case-selection choices. Students also tend to over-generalize larger patterns based on weak case selections. So we can end-up with a student having a very one-dimensional image of, say, the role of China in Africa after their paper on “China and Sudan”.

Second, consider the lessons we fail to teach students if we ignore case selection. Research papers can be a fantastic opportunity to teach students the basic elements of research design. What is a natural experiment? (Have them read Posner’s work.)³ How can we apply Mill’s Methods to comparisons between Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana? Can we do experimentation in the social sciences (look at the work that is being done with randomized evaluation in

² I have some resources (including a slide presentation) available on a website I created for students: <http://govthesis.site.wesleyan.edu/research/collecting-data/sampling-and-case-selection/>.

³ Posner, Daniel N. 2004. The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi. *The American Political Science Review*, 98 (4), 529-545.

development economics such as that described in Cohen and Easterly’s recent edited volume)⁴

Challenge #2: Data

Students face a number of challenges with data, as do all of us. Both the quality and the quantity of data available are often limited. Most of the time, for the purposes of undergraduate research, we can work around those limitations. However, my students and I have occasionally come up with other ideas for solutions to the data challenge.

Solution 2A: Design a study

Not finding data does not have to be a dead-end for an undergraduate research paper. For instance, this can be turned into a teaching opportunity for helping the students understand research methods. Students can be told to use part of their research paper to design a study that would find the data they currently lack. This could include proposing specific survey questions (Is China helping your country?) and target populations (market women in Makola Market) that speak to their specific research interests.

Solution 2B: Use study abroad students

A second solution my students have used is contacting their peers who are currently studying abroad in the countries they are researching. So far, this has been very ad hoc. However, every so often students that are studying abroad have been able to help students in my classroom find data (telecom statistics that are not yet online, for instance) they were looking for.

Final Thoughts

Research papers are a fantastic way for students to discover and engage the aspects of African politics that fascinate them (rather than us!). They also provide a number of teaching opportunities. They help students appreciate the diversity of political life across the continent, improve their research skills and their capacities for deductive and inferential reasoning. If we can accomplish any of that, it is clearly worth it.

⁴ Cohen, Jessica & William Easterly. 2010. *What works in development? Thinking big and thinking small*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.