

# Is Federalism Still the “Dark Continent” of Political Science Teaching? Yes and No

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## ABSTRACT

Federalism is a core principle of American government; yet, how much attention is given to federalism beyond introductory courses? A 1969 study described American federalism as the “dark continent” of political science teaching. Based on surveys of chairs of US departments of political science and members of the APSA’s section on federalism and intergovernmental relations in 2013, the authors found that these course offerings have increased markedly since 1969, that the courses cover a range of topics, and that many department chairs are interested in offering these courses in the future. However, the teaching of comparative federalism lags far behind American federalism. Thus, comparative federalism remains a “dark continent” of federalism teaching.

Federalism often is said to cure insomnia. Former US Senator Charles S. Robb (D-VA) once claimed that the fastest way to clear a room is not to shout “fire” but rather “federalism” (Kincaid 1994, 913). Yet, federalism is a core principle of American government. Today, it also is exciting or despairing, depending on one’s viewpoint. With both conservative and liberal states enacting laws that sometimes defy federal law (e.g., abortion and immigration restrictions, legalization of same-sex marriage, and medical and recreational marijuana) and with notions of nullification and secession making comebacks (Kincaid 2013), how can someone doze off?

Woodrow Wilson’s observation that “the relation of the States to the Federal Government is the cardinal question of our constitutional system” (1908, 684) remains true, as reflected in the US Supreme Court’s 2013 invalidation of Section 3 of the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act. Because the “definition and regulation of marriage” falls under the states’ “authority and realm,” opined the court, Congress “interfered” with “state sovereign choices” by creating “two contradictory marriage regimes within the same State” that also treated same-sex marriage as “unequal” and “second-tier” (*United States v. Windsor* 2013). Students love these types of issues, which are excellent venues to illustrate intergovernmental public policy in the United States.

Virtually every introductory textbook on American government includes a chapter on federalism; however, beyond the attention given in those textbooks, does federalism have an upper-division life? Topics such as political parties, Congress, the presidency, and the courts are almost universally offered as semester-length courses.

Federalism crosscuts all of those topics, and pertinent federalism matters are likely addressed in those courses. Still, how much attention beyond introductory courses is devoted specifically to federalism and intergovernmental relations (IGR)?

The motivation to answer this question came from (1) colleagues who teach federalism courses but believe that they occupy a minority curricular niche; and (2) a 45-year-old survey of department chairs that found only 23% of political science departments offer specific courses on federalism and/or IGR (Stenberg and Walker 1969). The survey authors concluded that these subjects “have not really entered the ‘mainstream’ of the political science discipline.” Their survey documented that federalism and IGR are “dark continents” of college and university teaching (Stenberg and Walker 1969, 167).

## TRANSFORMATIONS OF FEDERALISM

American federalism, however, has experienced significant transformations since 1969 as it transitioned from cooperative federalism (Elazar 1991) to more centralized, even coercive federalism (Kincaid 1990). Federal grants proliferated from 387 in 1968 to 1,099 in 2014 (Dilger 2014). Federal aid to state and local governments (in constant dollars) increased by 366% from \$110.2 billion in 1969 to \$513.7 billion in 2014. Federal aid ranges from 24% of state general revenues in Alaska to 49% in Mississippi (Kasprak 2012). The composition of federal aid also has changed (Kincaid 2011a). In 1969, 64% of federal aid was dedicated to public state and local functions including transportation, education, economic development, housing, and criminal justice. In 2014, only 34% of federal aid serves these functions, whereas 66% is devoted to social welfare—mostly Medicaid, which equals 45% of all federal aid. Medicaid accounted for 23.9% of total state spending in 2012, making it the single largest category of state spending, compared to 9.9% for higher education (National Association of State Budget Officers 2013: 1).

Conditions attached to federal aid have increased substantially since 1969. These regulations sometimes enable Congress to achieve

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national-policy objectives that fall outside of its constitutional ambit. For example, traditional undergraduates cannot purchase alcoholic beverages until age 21 because in 1984, Congress required states to adopt this age rule if they wanted to receive 100% of their highway aid. Recent legislation, including No Child Left Behind (2001), REAL ID (2005), and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010), represent new frontiers of federal influence over state and local governments. All three laws sparked resistance from various states (Kincaid 2013; Krane 2007; Regan and Deering 2009; Shelly 2008); however, resistance has not halted implementation.

Students might not realize, for example, that if their state does not comply with REAL ID, they will not be able to use their driver’s license to board an airplane or Amtrak train, open a bank account, purchase a firearm, apply for federal benefits, or enter a federal building. If their state was one of the 27 that declined to open a health-insurance marketplace under the Affordable Care Act in 2013, the federal government established a marketplace in their state.

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Since 1969, there have been unprecedented increases in federal preemptions of state powers, mandates on state and local governments, court orders and consent decrees, restraints on state and local tax bases, and federal enactments of criminal statutes (Kincaid 2011a). At the same time, institutions for intergovernmental cooperation were dismantled. For example, Congress phased out its committees on IGR and defunded the 37-year-old US Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations in 1996 (Kincaid 2011b). Most state advisory commissions disappeared as well (Cole 2011). Although many federal policies (e.g., Medicaid) enjoy broad public support, virtually every opinion poll shows the federal government being trusted much less than state and local governments—a dramatic shift from the cooperative era when the federal government most often attracted the most public confidence (Cole and Kincaid 2006).

Scholars responded with growing interest. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* was founded in 1971; the Section on Intergovernmental Administration and Management of the American Society for Public Administration was founded in 1979; and the APSA’s Organized Section on Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations was founded in 1983—the first such section.

Elazar argued that federalism was becoming “a major issue in world affairs and consequently in political science” (1993, 190). He urged more comparative-federalism studies. Twelve of the world’s 26 federal or quasi-federal countries came into existence after 1969. Combined, these 26 countries account for about 40% of the world’s population (Kincaid 2010). If the European Union is added as an emerging federal arrangement, the scope is even larger. A world

federalist journal, *The Federalist Debate*, was founded in 1987; the *Regional and Federal Studies Journal* was established in 1995; and the Forum of Federations, an organization of 10 federal countries thus far, was founded in 1999.

Nevertheless, research on teaching federalism is nonexistent and most resources are aimed at high school teachers (Kincaid 1986, 1991; Schechter 1984), except for Marsh and Bucy (2002). The few educational videos on federalism are 15 years or older (e.g., Iowa Public Television 1998).

#### SURVEY METHODOLOGY

It is in this context that we conducted online surveys from March through May 2013 of chairs of US political science departments (total = 762) provided by the APSA and all US faculty members of the APSA’s Organized Section on Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations (total = 319). After follow-up mailings, the response rate was 38.7% from chairs and 48.9% from faculty. In neither case

did we detect any regional, institutional-size, or type-of-degree bias in responses.

Both surveys gauged aspects of teaching courses on federalism/IGR in colleges and universities. We were interested in the extent to which undergraduate and graduate courses devoted specifically to federalism and IGR are offered; reasons why these courses are not offered; whether they are required or elective; enrollment levels; student-interest levels; perceived value to departments and colleagues; and whether the courses are taught online. We also sought to determine the topics covered in these courses as well as the average time devoted to each topic and how this may have changed over the years.

#### EXTENT OF COURSE OFFERINGS

Stenberg and Walker (1969) found that only 23% of political science departments offered courses specifically devoted to federalism/IGR. They did not distinguish between undergraduate and graduate courses, examine the extent of course offerings in “comparative federalism,” or measure the interest level of those not currently offering such courses in providing them in the future. The results of responses by department chairs in all of these categories are displayed in table 1.

Table 1

#### American and Comparative Federalism/IGR Course Offerings, 2013

	AMERICAN: UNDERGRADUATE (N=287)	AMERICAN: GRADUATE (N=106)	COMPARATIVE: UNDERGRADUATE (N=287)	COMPARATIVE: GRADUATE (N=106)
Offering Courses	36.1%	40.0%	13.8%	16.3%
Not Offering Courses, but Interested in Doing so	40.0	33.3	28.3	25.9
Totals (Offering or Interested in Doing So)	76.1	73.3	42.1	42.2

More departments currently offer courses in American federalism/IGR—or at least express an interest in doing so—than 45 years ago. As table 1 reveals, 36.1% of all departments report offering such courses for undergraduates, and 40.0% of all master's- and doctorate-granting departments report offering them for graduate credit. Furthermore, another 40.0% of those not offering undergraduate federalism/IGR courses indicate an interest in doing so in the future (i.e., a total of 76.1%), as do one third of those not offering such courses at the graduate level (i.e., a total of 73.3%). Thus, the interest level among department chairs in possibly offering courses on American federalism is fairly high. Our findings suggest continuation of earlier findings (i.e., Lovrich and Taylor 1978) already in the mid-1970s of an increase in courses devoted to topics related to American federalism—namely, state and local government and IGR.

By contrast, only 13.8% of all departments reported offering undergraduate courses on comparative federalism, and only 16.3% of master's- and doctoral-granting departments reported offering graduate courses in comparative federalism. Only about a

quarter of departments not offering undergraduate or graduate courses on comparative federalism expressed interest in offering them in the future. We do not know how the current offerings of courses on comparative federalism compare with past offerings; clearly, however, interest in teaching comparative federalism lags considerably behind the American-federalism counterpart. This finding corresponds with Wahlke's conclusion that "many American political science programs are excessively parochial, i.e. U.S.-centered" (1991, 53). Nevertheless, our finding is puzzling, given the current emphasis of higher education on globalism and multiculturalism, as well as the availability of comparative-federalism textbooks (Burgess 2006; Hueglin and Fenna 2006; Kincaid and Tarr 2005; Watts 2008).

To the extent that the 1969 survey and our 2013 survey are comparable, there has been an increase in American-federalism course offerings, and interest in offering these courses in the future appears to be fairly strong. Comparative federalism receives much less attention.

Table 2

### Logistic Regression for Factors Related to Undergraduate and Graduate, American and Comparative Federalism/IGR Course Offerings

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES <sup>a</sup>	UNDERGRADUATE AMERICAN FEDERALISM/IGR	GRADUATE AMERICAN FEDERALISM/IGR <sup>b</sup>	COMPARATIVE FEDERALISM/IGR <sup>c</sup>
	ODDS RATIOS	ODDS RATIOS	ODDS RATIOS
Constant	-2.591	-4.031	-2.201
<b>Region</b>			
Northeast	2.749*	6.632*	.811
Southwest	2.697*	1.402	.638
Midwest	3.016**	2.315	1.202
Southwest	2.357	1.078	1.112
<b>Highest Level of Department Degree</b>			
Masters	2.784***		1.146
Doctoral	1.535	.501 <sup>d</sup>	.646
<b>Degrees Mainly Offered by University</b>			
MA & BA	1.351	6.355**	1.264
PhD & MA & BA	1.963	8.403**	3.773**
<b>Nature of Institution</b>			
Public	1.555	9.724***	2.766*
<b>Size of Student Body</b>			
2,500–5,000	1.643	1.187	.495
5,000–10,000	1.373	.457	.487
10,000–20,000	1.311	1.157	.745
20,000–30,000	.883	.472	.523
30,000 and Over	1.179	.457	.111
-2 log-likelihood/sig level	292.738/.005	118.958/.088	191.768/.191
Cox&Snell R <sup>2</sup> /NagelkerkeR <sup>2</sup>	.119/.163	.179/.241	.076/.128

Note: \* = significant at <.01 level; \*\* = significant at <.05 level; \*\*\* = significant at <.001 level.

<sup>a</sup> Reference categories: Region, west; Highest Level of Department Degree, bachelors; Degrees Offered by University, BA; Nature of Institution, private; Size of Student Body, less than 2,500.

<sup>b</sup> Asked only of departments offering graduate degrees.

<sup>c</sup> Undergraduate and graduate courses are combined due to small numbers.

<sup>d</sup> Reference category: Masters

### Factors Related to Offering Federalism/IGR Courses

Stenberg and Walker found in 1969 that federalism/IGR courses were more often offered in public rather than private universities; in those having larger enrollments; and in those located in the Southwest, Mountain, and Northeast regions. As table 2 indicates, many of these factors are still related to federalism/IGR course offerings.

Public universities still offer both American and comparative federalism/IGR courses more often than private institutions. In addition, departments that offer master’s degrees and those situated in universities that mainly offer master’s and doctoral degrees are far more likely to offer all such courses than contrasting departments and universities that offer mostly bachelor’s degrees. Like Stenberg and Walker (1969) and Lovrich

student interest” also are deemed to be important factors for all categories of course offerings. “Scarce resources” is considered an important factor in not offering undergraduate American-federalism courses but not as much at the graduate level. Furthermore, “scarce resources” as a reason is considerably more important in not offering comparative courses than in not offering American-federalism courses at either level. Also, the fact that “issues of federalism may be covered in other courses” (e.g., state and local, constitutional law and American government) is more important at the undergraduate American-federalism level than for any other categories. It is interesting that “declining relevance of federalism” is not an important factor at either the undergraduate or graduate level for either American- or comparative-federalism course offerings. The majority of respondents view federalism as a matter of continuing relevance.

*In virtually all categories—American and comparative, undergraduate and graduate—the most cited factor in not offering such courses is “lack of qualified or interested faculty.”*

and Taylor (1978), we found that departments in institutions with larger enrollments are more likely to offer undergraduate American-federalism/IGR courses. However, the differences are not statistically significant and often are reversed when considering graduate courses on American and comparative federalism (again not statistically significant).

Similar to Stenberg and Walker, we found that compared with departments located in the West, departments located in all other US regions are more likely to offer such courses. The West stands apart because respondents most often cited low student interest and lack of qualified or interested faculty as the reasons for not offering such courses. This pattern is primarily true for only undergraduate and graduate American-federalism courses. Departments in all regions, including the West, are about equally likely to offer courses in comparative federalism.

Thus, many of the factors identified in 1969 as related to course offerings on federalism and IGR are still related to such course offerings. However, these relationships apply primarily to undergraduate American-federalism courses. When considering graduate courses and courses on comparative federalism, the relationships are less clear.

### Reasons for Not Offering Federalism/IGR Courses

Chairs of departments not offering undergraduate or graduate courses on American or comparative federalism/IGR were asked why they do not offer them. Responses are shown in table 3.

In virtually all categories—American and comparative, undergraduate and graduate—the most cited factor in not offering such courses is “lack of qualified or interested faculty.” Other courses being “more important to students’ degree plans” and “low

### COURSE CHARACTERISTICS, STUDENT INTEREST, AND VALUE TO DEPARTMENT

We also asked faculty that teach these courses about the characteristics of their courses, the level of student interest, and the value that they believe their department colleagues consider such courses to be to the curriculum.

As shown in table 4, most undergraduate American- and comparative-federalism courses taught by the faculty respondents are offered mainly in political science departments. However, significant proportions of graduate courses, in both American and comparative federalism, are taught in other departments, including public administration, public affairs, and public policy. Federalism courses—American and comparative and undergraduate and graduate—are overwhelmingly elective, and most are offered either once a year or not every year. The most common enrollment ranges include 16 to 30 students for undergraduate American-federalism courses; 6 to 10 and 16 to 20 students for graduate American-federalism courses; 11 to 20 for undergraduate comparative-federalism courses; and 16 to 20 for

Table 3  
Reasons for Not Offering Federalism/IGR Courses\*

REASONS FOR NOT OFFERING FEDERALISM/IGR COURSES:	UNDERGRADUATE AMERICAN (N=179)	GRADUATE AMERICAN (N=93)	UNDERGRADUATE COMPARATIVE (N=212)	GRADUATE COMPARATIVE (N=97)
Lack of Qualified/Interested Faculty	40.8%	31.2%	44.8%	48.5%
Other Courses More Important to Students’ Degree Plans	37.4	23.7	35.4	30.9
Low Student Interest	36.9	24.7	35.4	29.9
Scarce Resources	31.8	14.0	45.3	33.0
Issues of Federalism Covered in Other Courses	16.2	4.3	6.1	2.1
Declining Relevance of Federalism	3.4	3.2	2.4	2.1
All Other Reasons	10.6	10.7	6.6	5.2

Note: \*Respondents were permitted to indicate all factors that might apply. Graduate-level responses are shown only for departments offering graduate degrees.



Table 4  
Course Characteristics

	UNDERGRADUATE AMERICAN FEDERALISM/IGR (N=60)	GRADUATE AMERICAN FEDERALISM/IGR (N=35) <sup>a</sup>	UNDERGRADUATE COMPARATIVE FEDERALISM/IGR (N=11)	GRADUATE COMPARATIVE FEDERALISM/IGR (N=10) <sup>a</sup>
<b>Department Where Taught</b>				
Political Science	84.6	34.3	81.8	55.6
Public Administration	5.8	20.0	9.1	22.2
All Others	9.6	45.7	9.1	22.2
<b>Required or Elective</b>				
Required	18.0	22.8	30.0	22.2
Elective	82.0	77.1	70.0	77.8
<b>Course Teaching Frequency</b>				
Once a Year	41.7	57.1	45.5	66.7
Twice a Year	6.3	11.4	18.2	11.1
Three or More times/yr	10.4	2.9	9.1	—
Not Every Year	41.7	28.6	27.3	22.2
<b>Average Enrollment</b>				
5 or less	2.2	3.0	—	—
6–10	8.7	33.3	—	25.0
11–15	8.7	18.2	40.0	12.5
16–20	21.7	33.3	20.0	37.5
21–30	32.6	6.1	10.0	25.0
31–40	6.5	3.0	10.0	—
41 and above	19.6	3.0	20.0	—
<b>Student Interest Level</b>				
Very Interested	12.8	32.3	Not Asked	Not Asked
Somewhat Interested	66.7	54.8		
Not Very Interested	20.5	12.9		
<b>Value to Department</b>				
Very Valuable	10.8	25.0	Not Asked	Not Asked
Somewhat Valuable	73.0	62.5		
Not Very Valuable	13.5	12.5		
Not Valuable at all	2.7	—		

Note: <sup>a</sup> Asked only departments offering graduate degrees.

37.5% of graduate comparative-federalism courses, but with 25% reporting 6 to 10 students and another 25% reporting 21 to 30 students.

Comparing both undergraduate and graduate American-federalism courses with other courses in the curriculum, 79.5% of faculty teaching undergraduate and 87.1% of those teaching graduate American-federalism courses believe students to be “very” or “somewhat” interested in the courses. However, comparing their federalism courses with others in the curriculum, most respondents teaching these courses believe their colleagues find them to be only “somewhat” valuable, with far fewer stating “very” valuable. Also, more of those teaching undergraduate American-federalism courses state “not very” valuable or “not valuable at all” than those who state “very” valuable. The undergraduate course, therefore, is believed to occupy a weaker value position than the graduate course.

#### TOPICS AND EXTENT OF COVERAGE

We also wanted to identify the topics covered in federalism/IGR courses and the relative amount of time devoted to each. Fortunately, in 1995, Box (1995) published a survey of federalism/IGR topics covered in graduate-level public-administration programs. After examining 42 syllabi gathered from faculty that taught such courses, Box rank-ordered the amount of coverage given to each topic and discovered a “set of core concepts” in the teaching of federalism/IGR (Box 1995, 28). Although Box focused solely on graduate federalism/IGR courses in public administration and did not survey faculty, his study did provide comparative benchmarks.

Many of the topics included in our 2013 survey are identical or similar to those examined by Box. Figure 1 presents in rank order the proportionate amount of class time reported by faculty to be devoted to each topic in both undergraduate and graduate

American-federalism/IGR courses. The numbers in parentheses indicate each topic’s rank order as reported by Box in 1995. For example, “policy issues” received the most time in undergraduate federalism/IGR courses in our 2013 survey but was ranked fourth in Box’s study. Box did not include interstate topics (e.g., compacts and uniform laws) as we did in our survey, and he allowed for tied rankings.

Figure 1 shows that both undergraduate and graduate courses devote more time, on average, to “policy issues,” “vertical federalism,” “theories and concepts,” “fiscal matters,” “political issues and actors,” and “historical trends.” Much less time is devoted to “IGR administration,” “comparative federalism,” and “interlocal relations.”

It is interesting that the top four topics are the same for both 1995 and 2013, although the order has changed. Policy issues currently receive the most attention in undergraduate courses and rank second at the graduate level, but they were fourth in 1995.

### Whereas the teaching of federalism/IGR has increased, the factors associated with offering such courses have changed little.

Fiscal issues that ranked first in 1995 fell to fourth place in both undergraduate and graduate courses in 2013. Historical issues were found to be more important in 1995 than in 2013, as were interlocal concerns.

With a few caveats, a core set of topics still describes the teaching of undergraduate and graduate federalism/IGR courses. The topics include “policy issues” (i.e., policy types and policy areas); “vertical relations” (i.e., relationships among local, state, and federal); “theories and models” (i.e., dual, cooperative, and coercive); “fiscal matters” (i.e., grants, revenue, and expenditures); “political concerns” (i.e., interest groups and actors); “historical developments” (i.e., changes since 1798); and “legal and constitutional issues” (i.e., court cases and laws).

Falling out of the “core” are “the founding” (e.g., Federalists and anti-Federalists), “regulatory matters” (e.g., preemptions and mandates), “IGR administration” (e.g., collaboration and networking), “comparative” (e.g., cross-national and international), and “interlocal relations” categories. However, all of these topics receive measurable attention and each receives somewhat more time in graduate rather than undergraduate courses.

With a few exceptions, topics ranked high in class time in the 1995 survey also ranked high in 2013; topics that received less attention in 1995 still receive less attention.

#### ONLINE COURSES AND PREFERENCES FOR TRADITIONAL TERMS

We asked all faculty who teach courses on federalism/IGR—graduate and undergraduate, American and comparative—whether any of their courses are offered online. If so, we asked their evaluation of the effect of online offerings on student interest. We also asked whether they believe that more contemporary terms such as “multilevel” government or governance and “collaborative” or “networked” government or governance are more appropriate for course titles than traditional terms such as “federalism” and “intergovernmental relations.”

Only 16.5% of those teaching federalism/IGR courses reported any of these courses—graduate or undergraduate, American or comparative—as being taught online. Of the few faculty who offered online courses, 69.2% stated that online offerings have “no effect” on student interest in the topic.

Most respondents believe that terms such as “multilevel,” “collaborative,” and “networked” government or governance are either somewhat worse or much worse than “federalism” or “intergovernmental relations” (45.6% and 49.5%, respectively) or make “no difference” (25.9% and 24.3%, respectively).

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

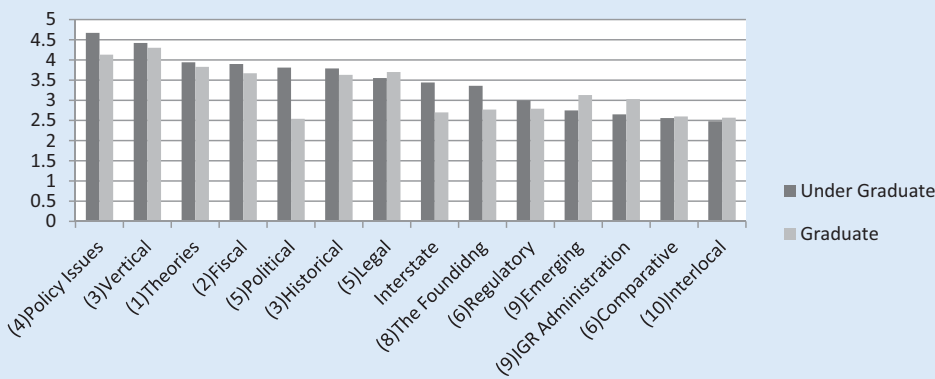
More departments currently offer American federalism/IGR courses than 45 years ago, and a significant proportion of department chairs not offering them report an interest in doing so in the future. Three fourths of the department chairs indicated that they either offer undergraduate or graduate courses on American federalism/IGR or probably or definitely will do so in the future. None of the department chairs not currently offering such courses attributes their absence as a lack of relevance of federalism; rather, the major

factor for not offering the courses is a lack of qualified or interested faculty. When federalism/IGR courses are offered, students appear to be as interested in them as in any others, although these courses are perceived to be slightly less valued by departments and colleagues than other courses.

Whereas the teaching of federalism/IGR has increased, the factors associated with offering such courses have changed little. As in 1969, regional variations still exist (i.e., fewer departments in the West report offering such courses), and public universities,

Figure 1

### Topics Ranked by Time or Class Coverage



larger institutions, departments offering graduate degrees, and departments situated in universities offering graduate degrees are significantly more likely to offer such courses than are contrasting institutions.

Much less attention is given to comparative federalism. Only 14% of department chairs reported offering such courses at the undergraduate level and only about 16% at the graduate level. Furthermore, the extent of class time given to comparative federalism, as reported by faculty teaching federalism courses, falls at the bottom or very near the bottom of all topics covered.

Thus, American federalism and IGR no longer inhabit the “dark continent” of college and university teaching. If not truly mainstream, such courses currently occupy a respectable position in political science curricula. However, the teaching of comparative federalism—although seeming to have established a foothold in larger universities and those offering advanced degrees—lags far behind the teaching of American federalism. Hence, comparative federalism still inhabits the “dark continent” of political science teaching.

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