

Assessment of Individual Assignments

I have tried to answer the 5 questions for each assignment. First, I indicate whether I would use a segment or not (or whether I am “undecided”). Next, I comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the content and questions. When possible, I conclude with brief recommendations for additional content and/or different questions.

1. Comparative Study of Politics

- “Debunking statistical myths” → NO. Not sure is the most effective way to start; individual segments on the existing variety of government systems would be more interesting, likely to draw students in. I wouldn’t use the 20-minute lecture on the uses and abuses of statistics: this is something that can be done by the instructor with a few examples (presenting statistics to students and having them interpret them, then deconstructing their answers). I think it would be better to let students themselves experience what the professor in the video describes. This would also give the instructor an opportunity to gauge the students’ level of understanding on this subject. Questions relating to this segment are too focused on recall of the lecture content. Alternative questions should focus on active engagement with and understanding of statistical data instead.
- “Leadership in Iran” → YES. The segment on Iran is interesting and engaging. Question 1 is good; it asks for information beyond simple recall. The remaining questions are too focused on recall.
- “Oligarchy: Mexico and Brazil” → full text link unavailable
- “Nigeria’s Political Actors” → NO. I am not familiar with the source and too little information is provided about it.
- My first suggestion for improvement would be to develop an assignment that gets at why and how we compare governments. For example, one way to draw students in is to present a collage of interviews that show how people view their own country/political system and how they feel about the systems of other countries. I often ask students at the beginning of the semester which features of a political system they are most aware of and which ones they perceive to be most important. One variation on this is to ask students : When you read/hear about other countries in the news, what do you hear about? The leader? Mass protests? Companies? Artists?
- My second suggestion would be to provide an overview of the “big questions” being asked by scholars in the field (both in recent scholarship and the classics). Consider even an excursion into political philosophy: What is human nature? What is identity? How should society be organized? What is the purpose of the state/of government? How can government be structured to best serve the greatest number of people? This comes up to some extent in the next “lesson” with the Marx segment; I think it warrants more attention. Think about links to some primary sources or an overview thought on social justice, community, rights and responsibilities, and resistance to government rule.

2. The Settings of Politics

- “Sharia Law” → Undecided.

- “China’s Space Program” → Undecided. This segment should appeal to visual learners and promote interdisciplinary learning.
- “The Communist Manifesto” → Undecided. Should be supplemented with additional resources on the philosophy of the state. See my previous remarks.
- “Good Cop, Bad Cop in Mexico” → Undecided.
- Good reference links. It is not clear to me what the unifying theme is behind these segments? Is it about religion and power as the bases of society? The segments lack context and a clear connection to the study of comparative government; they leave too much to explain for the instructor. The one way I can think of to use this content is to raise questions that may be answered in the remainder of the semester.

3. Economic Class, Development, Globalization

- “China’s Wealth Gaps”: what is the source of this YouTube Clip? It looks like a BBC production → get the original material.
- “Global Health Equity”: good text from authoritative source, good questions → covers comprehension and asks for analysis and interpretation
- “Labor and the Informal Economy”: what is the source of this YouTube Clip?
- “India’s Growing Pains”:

4. Political Culture and Ideology

- “Comparing Cultural Dimensions” → I would use this segment but add critical questions about construction of the different dimensions/measures: Why would the author focus on these? Which other dimensions could one consider when comparing cultures? How would those be justified and what would they tell us?
- “Religious Tensions” → NO. I would replace this assignment. One alternative is a critical discussion of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” – both in terms of the argument presented in the original text and its influence on policy debates.
- “Banning the Hijab” → YES. Timely topic, good questions.
- “Socialization Factors in Brazil” → Undecided.

5. Identity Structure

- “Islam in Xingjian” → Undecided.
- “Dividing India” → Undecided. The documentary is engaging and informative, gives lots of background; its usefulness depends on how this class segment will be structured. The questions cover the range of learning objectives; I would ask students for examples of similar confrontations (and for examples of peaceful resolution).
- “Redefining Scotland” → Needs some background on the broader process of ‘devolution’. Good questions!
- “Racial Inequality in Mexico” → NO. There are two topics here: migration and racial discrimination. Either one could be covered with different resources. Migration statistics and accounts by first- and second-generation immigrants in any country could highlight problems of assimilation and identity politics. Examples of how different countries’ laws do (or do not) address racial discrimination could illuminate this second topic.

6. Political Systems and Rules

- “Nazi Propaganda” → Undecided. This piece needs context and careful introduction. The questions are useful, especially to the extent that they ask students to abstract from blanket statements and to draw conclusions about the type of political systems being promoted here.
- “Debates in Parliament” → YES. Great illustration of British parliamentary procedure and political culture. Possibly contrast with C-Span clips of Congressional debates and similar footage from other countries. This is daily politics in action!
- “Occupied France” → NO. Excerpts from speeches or memoirs of former Vichy government officials about the motivations and rationalizations for the regime would be more engaging.
- “The Role of the EU” → YES, but content is now dated. Maybe add a segment on the opposition to the Lisbon Treaty by Vaclav Klaus of the Czech Republic and the domestic political divisions over his EU stance.

7. Legislatures and Executives

- “Regime Seeks Leader” → NO.
- “Putin on Term Limitations” → NO.
- “Ahmadinejad’s Perspectives” → Undecided.
- “Re-Inventing India’s Government” → Linked content is available to Economist subscribers only.
- For additional content on leaders and executives, consider examples from South America, which experienced military dictatorships, democratic transitions and populist leaders. Also consider comparisons between political systems that have a more independent executive (the U.S.) and systems with less strict separation of powers (e.g. parliamentary systems such as Germany).

8. The Unelected Components of Government

- “Habeas Corpus Suspended” → YES. Good questions, especially those asking for an assessment of the Court’s argumentation.
- “Nigeria’s Oil” → YES. Very interesting piece on the power of multinational corporations. Good questions. It may be interesting to have students think about the extent to which governments have influence on corporations, and – in an international setting – which national governments have influence over them. Demonstrates how unelected actors can limit the policy autonomy of the state. This documentary may be useful for International Relations classes as well.
- “The Chinese Bureaucracy” → YES. Would need to provide additional context before introducing this content, but the piece provides a rare perspective on bureaucratic organization. I am not sure I would use the piece on outsourcing; again I have questions about the source. The questions cover a range of learning goals. (Note that you put the second-to-last questions into the answer box.) I would add a question inviting student to speculate about the consequences of bureaucratic organization for society at large, e.g. “Imagine you’re a Chinese small business owner trying to do X.” It would encourage students to apply what they have learning from the content.
- “Brazil’s Indigenous Peoples” → NO. I don’t see the relevance of this piece, unless the class focuses on the treatment of minorities or on diversity in general.

9. Participation, Clientelism, and Interest Groups

- “Protests in France” → YES. On the subject of protests, it may be interesting to give examples of organized protests that are widely unpopular but constitutionally allowed, leading to police protection for Neonazi-rallies in Germany, for example. This would give a fuller picture of governments’ commitment to freedom of assembly and its sometimes counterintuitive consequences. A note on readings: The questions for this piece draw on Mills and Huntington; I assign Hirschman’s “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” as well.
- “Clientelism in Mexico City” → I have reservations about assigning unpublished conference papers.
- “Jewel of the Amazon” → YES. Captivating if almost too dramatic. The questions focus mostly on recall; I would hand them out before students watch the documentary so that students can take notes as they watch.
- “Nigeria’s Transition” → YES. Content will require a bit more background but offers the opportunity of linking this topic to “Regime Transitions” later on. Questions are appropriate.
- *Content clear and engaging*
- *Enough context at right level?*
- *Would I use this?*
- *Suggestions for improvement:* I would add content about lobbying at the level of international institutions, such as the EU. Around The Hague, a small “town” of lobbying firms and organizations has sprung up. The influence of interest groups at different levels of governance is an increasingly important topic for research and policymaking.

10. Political Parties and Electoral Systems

- I like this segment. It covers a range of topics and countries. The questions for each piece of content address higher-level learning goals, which should provide a change of pace from more theoretical discussion of electoral systems during lectures. If I could add one segment, it would be an expansion on the first clip: It is sometimes difficult to convey how the ideological spectrum of political parties differs across countries. Subtitled campaign ads (video or print) from a variety of countries and parties (e.g. French Socialists and Nationalists, German Greens and Christian Democrats, U.S. Republicans and Democrats)
- “Conservatives in Britain”
- “Mexico Candidacy Battle”
- “United Russia”
- “German Election”
- *Content clear and engaging*
- *Enough context at right level?*
- *Would I use this?*
- *Suggestions for improvement*

11. Leadership and Individual Political Choices

- “Helmut Kohl” → YES. Good content, pitched at the right level. Clearly, this would be appropriate for a segment on the German political system as well. The questions

are too focused on recall. At this point in the semester, it makes sense to ask questions beyond the test: have students think about leadership changes in other countries (Great Britain, U.S.; the “conservative era”) at the same time that may have paralleled and reinforced Kohl’s policymaking. This could link to content about the power of elite consensus.

- “Khomeini Returns” → Undecided. If available, a first-person narrative (interview, memoir) of Iranian’s perception of Khomeini’s return would be more engaging. What did it mean to (young) Iranians at the time? Alternatively – or in addition – how did newspapers from different countries report this event? Consider a U.S., British, Egyptian, and Israeli news outlet and/or any of the big news agencies: AP, AFP, Reuters, TASS.
- “Brazil’s President” → YES. The NPR piece in particular provides good content and sufficient information on both the electoral system and da Silva as a leader.
- “China’s Political Art” → YES. Great content/assignment for visual learners in particular. Here it may be useful to put these posters into the larger context of political art/propaganda in authoritarian countries and Communist countries especially. This could be done by adding posters from the Soviet era either in the USSR or Eastern/Central Europe. Ask students about similarities and differences – which features represent overarching themes, which ones are expressions of national characteristics?

12. Regime Transitions

- “Economic Heresy in the USSR” → YES. But using this piece will require background on the reforms in Chile (mentioned at the beginning of the clip). The questions are evocative and pitched at the right level, especially given that this topic is usually introduced in the latter parts of the semester when students are somewhat familiar with the structure of political systems.
- “The Collapse of the Soviet Union” → YES. Good content, good questions.
- “Denazification” → YES. Very interesting primary sources. I would assign the full oral history from the Truman Library. In general, I think providing link to full content in addition to excerpts is a very practical idea. Very useful link: International Center for Transitional Justice. Additional content options would include interviews and documents related to both successful and failed “truth- and reconciliation” commissions.
- “France’s Fifth Republic” → Undecided. The content is interesting both for its substance and for larger lessons in historiography: many American students will rarely be exposed to articles published in the *International Socialists Review*. Questions should include some encouragement to speculate about the author’s perspective and possible bias. I would use it as part of a larger lesson on the history of the French political system and political culture.

13. Public Policy and Government Performance

- “Death by Privatization” → This segment needs to focus on taxation, distribution, and regulation. Russia seems to be an extreme example. On the other hand, it does tie back to the very first lesson on the power of statistics and could be a useful and stimulating exercise in this regard. I would add a segment or link that allows students

to compare tax rates in different countries and also provides information on benefits provided. From my experience, students are often equally shocked and fascinated with maternity/parental leave policies in Scandinavian countries. News reports/documentaries about this would be very interesting.

- “Oil for Iran” → NO. The focus of the segment is good but I am not convinced that Iran is the best example, given that it has been under international economic sanctions for an extended period of time. A more general segment on “Dutch disease” and the so-called “resource curse” may make the same point more effectively. Particularly interesting are the smaller oil-producing states that have been actively trying to diversify their economies compared to Saudi Arabia.
- “A Shadow Minister’s Thoughts” → Had trouble viewing the video.
- “China’s Economic Growth” → YES. Great segment, very accessible. The questions are pitched at the right level. I would add an assignment that asks students whether limiting freedoms and access to goods for some is acceptable if it allows gradual economic improvements for everyone in the end. Have students think about economic development as a process that other countries passed through as well.

The first two sections are the weakest. The segment on statistics was a good idea but I believe that there must be more effective and engaging content out there. Overall, the beginning of the semester should introduce the “big ideas” and raise questions. The remaining sections are strong.

As you probably know, most textbooks are organized around two broad approaches to comparative study: general questions or policy areas and individual country studies. In addition to the thematic groupings you have compiled here, it may be a good idea to offer sections focused on particular countries as well. Instructors who are using a textbook and following a more traditional approach to teaching introductory classes will probably appreciate this resource.

I like that China is strongly represented in the assignments. Only the most recent textbooks cover this country and it is arguably one of the most important countries for us to understand and of great interest to students.

I find it problematic that so many of the questions are aimed at lower-level learning goals (knowledge, comprehension). I would add writing assignments that asks students to analyze, speculate, and apply what they have learned.

I also have a few more questions. You may want to clarify this for potential users. How is the content chosen? I keep reminding students to use online resources judiciously and mind the sources. Some of the content used here is not attributed. While I understand the allure of new media such as YouTube and privately produced net content, I believe official documents and content produced by journalists, historians etc. are of superior quality. Consider using old news reels etc. If I am going to use content, I need to know its origin and context and so do the students.

How were the features links chosen?

How often will content be updated?

Will I be able to add to the “Reference” section?