

I Can't Believe I Haven't Been Asked This Question Before: Bringing "Why Government?" and "Which Government?" to the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The question "Why government?" is as central to political debate as it is to public affairs education. This article outlines an approach to teaching "Why government?" and a closely related question, "Which government?" in an introductory public administration course. I offer five components that instructors can use in whole or in part. These components can be scaled according to class level and are not limited to use within the United States. Informal student feedback suggests a high degree of satisfaction with the exercise, long-term reflection on the underlying questions, and some integration with other coursework.

KEYWORDS

Federalism, intergovernmental relations, governance, state and local government, philosophy

As Schultz (2015) recently argued in this journal, the question "Why government?" is central to both political debates and public affairs education. Indeed, within the last few years, several books have been published about the proper role of government in society (e.g., Kleinbard, 2014; Schuck, 2014). Yet public opinion on the issue is often contradictory. Some evidence suggests that the public wants all levels of government to "do more" (e.g., Schneider, Jacoby, & Lewis, 2011), but a 2013 Gallup poll found that 72% of American adults believe that "big government" is the primary threat to the United States, while just 21% answered "big business" and 5% said "big labor" (Jones, 2013).

Public affairs students will confront the question of "Why government?" and its polarizing answers

as professionals, taxpayers, consumers, and voters. They will also confront a key issue embedded in all federal systems: "Which government?"—that is, the question of whether federal, state, and/or local governments should be delegated responsibility for providing specific public goods and services. But unfortunately, most public policy and administration programs grant little attention to political philosophy and the relationship between philosophy and governance (Schultz, 2013; cf. Ringeling, 2015). This state of affairs comes despite Wilson's (1887) seminal directive that public administration "discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and, secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost of either money or energy" (p. 197).

The lack of normative emphasis has many causes. Mead (2013) notes that public affairs programs often separate normative elements of policy analysis (e.g., social justice) from empirical elements (e.g., cost-benefit analysis), placing greater emphasis on the latter. Although doctoral curricula may require a philosophy course, master's-level programs and professional doctorates typically do not, given their focus on practice over theory. More generally, the number of courses a student in any program can take is limited. Faced with an expansive list of mandatory classes and internship opportunities, students often find that philosophy can, at best, be only an elective. For better or worse, normative public affairs issues are often relegated to units embedded within courses that focus on other topics.

This article outlines one approach to asking both “Why government?” and “Which government?” in an introductory public administration course. I first describe my initial motivation for asking these questions of my students. I then explore learning exercises that illustrate the challenges inherent in answering each question, in both normative and administrative terms. I conclude by discussing both my observations while carrying out these exercises and qualitative student feedback received during and after the exercises.

BACKGROUND

During conversations with undergraduate and graduate students, I often notice a pattern: when asked why government should be involved in a particular area, and which level of government should be responsible, students react intuitively rather than rationally. For instance, students frequently answer that the public sector should “do more” to remedy a given problem and they often strongly believe that the problem is best left to federal, state, or local officials; but when pressed for details, students have to stop and think through a rationale. To the extent that people often resolve normative dilemmas through intuition rather than reason, this pattern is not altogether surprising (e.g., Haidt, 2012). But it struck me as a perfect learning opportunity.

Since 2014, I have covered “Why government?” and “Which government?” during the first or second week of each semester in my introductory public administration course. I frame the questions by asking students to think about two separate but closely related dimensions. The normative, horizontal issue is the individual versus the state. This speaks directly to the question of “Why government?” by prompting students to think about the ways in which responsibility for public and private goods are currently—and should be—allocated among individuals, voluntary forms of association, and governments. The practical, vertical issue is state versus state, or “Which government?” In considering this question, students think about how responsibilities delegated to the public sector writ large are best allocated across federal, state, and local levels, as well as about the benefits and drawbacks of devolution and shared oversight. Students also begin to link their philosophies about “Why government?” with the administrative implications regarding “Which government?”

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

Component 1: Pre-Reading

Prior to the first class meeting, I assign students two articles regarding the individual versus the state. Within American political tradition, this dimension is often shaped by the limited-government philosophy set forth in the U.S. Constitution. Instead of asking students to read the Constitution, I assign two articles that explore the underlying political philosophies. Kenney (1955) offers a brief, Catholic sociological perspective regarding the principle of subsidiarity, which argues that governments should not adopt functions that individuals can perform on their own, that governments should continually self-regulate to determine if the goods and services they provide are necessary, and that functions should be kept as local as possible. Golemboski (2015) expands on and critiques subsidiarity, noting that the organizing principle operates in varied forms in both the United States (despite the term not appearing in either the U.S. or any state constitution) and the European Union (across the governing body, member nations, and their subnational units).

The students read three additional sources regarding state versus state. Thom and Schneider (2010) provide a summary of how federalism and intergovernmental relations have evolved globally in policy areas that include education, social welfare, and disaster preparedness. Agronoff and Radin (2015) discuss Wright's (1988) overlapping authority model of federalism, for a symbolic representation of intergovernmental relationships. Peterson (1995) advances a functional theory of federalism in which redistributive programs are best allocated to central governments that can more easily correct for inequity across subnational jurisdictions, while developmental programs, including economic incentives and education, are best allocated to state and local governments where competitive factors compel greater differentiation and efficiency.

Component 2: Lecture and Initial Discussion

I begin the first class by informing students of the rationale for including theoretical concepts in a public administration course. I reference both Wilson's (1887) argument that public administration as an academic discipline should consider the role of government in society as well as my own belief that "Why government?" and "Which government?" are essential questions to ask as citizens, practitioners, and scholars. This up-front disclosure helps students

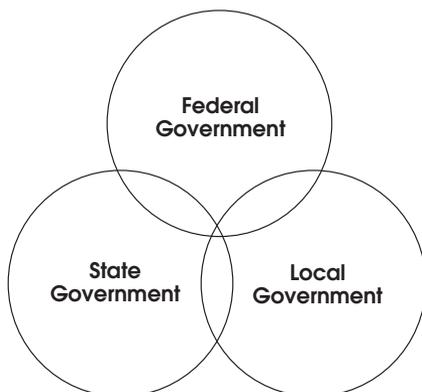
understand and appreciate why their assumptions may be challenged, and it also makes students more receptive to forthcoming exercises (Stevens & Levi, 2013).

I then give a brief lecture on the readings' concepts, strengths, and weaknesses and use that material as a transition to a class dialogue about how societies determine which functions should be left to individuals and groups versus which functions should be delegated to the public sector. Students offer varied justifications, including consideration of social justice, the role of personal industry, incentives and perverse incentives, efficiency, and classic trade-offs between liberty and government coercion.

Because instructor modeling is vital to critical thinking development (Brookfield, 2012), throughout the dialogue I engage in selective disclosure regarding my own experiences of wrestling with "Why government?" and "Which government?" I also engage in elaborative interrogation—asking ancillary "why" questions—which is critical to pushing the discussion in a theoretical direction while enhancing learning and retention (Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, & Willingham, 2013; McDaniel & Donnelly, 1996; Oros, 2007). I allocate about 60 minutes for lecture and discussion, although actual time depends on class size, and I avoid prematurely concluding fruitful debates.

Next, I display a schematic of Wright's (1988) overlapping authority model and ask the class to spend about 20 minutes brainstorming which policy functions currently "fit" into each segment of either autonomous or shared responsibility (see Figure 1). The "circle of voices" discussion style forces students to think carefully about which level(s) of government are truly responsible for policy areas that are increasingly characterized by overlapping or shared authority (Brookfield, 2012). Students quickly discover that many functions are at least partially shared across multiple levels of government but that, for others, it is difficult to conclude where the locus of responsibility truly resides. Many students are also surprised by how broad the scope of governmental responsibility

FIGURE 1.
Wright's (1988) Overlapping Authority Model of Federalism



is because, as they often tell me, no one had ever asked them to think about it before.

Component 3: Small-Team Deliberation

Following lecture and discussion, I divide students into small teams tasked with answering “Which government?” This involves each team designing its ideal model of federalism—that is, not the way functions are delegated *now*, but what the team collectively believes is a *better way* to allocate functions within the overlapping authority model. Each team has total freedom to reallocate functions but must offer a rationale for the choices made. Teams may also divest functions from government, thus leading students back to the “Why government?” question.

The use of groups for this exercise is critical to learning success. Small-team discussions facilitate greater subject-matter understanding, are more likely to nurture critical thinking, and elicit more participation from students who otherwise do not engage (Pollock, Hamann, & Wilson, 2011). Teams also help keep the viewpoint balance of discussion in check (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012) and foster cultural competency (Saldívar, 2015). The deliberative dialogue required to form team consensus increases individual students’ knowledge and robust opinion formation (Latimer & Hempson, 2012). Thus, while students enjoy developing individual federalism models, I believe the group component is, on balance, the more enriching experience.

Component 4: Class Debrief

After about 30 minutes, I ask each team to draw its model on the board. When finished, each team describes its model to the entire class, explaining the reasons for its choices. Between presentations, I point out commonalities and differences between the team models and ask students what they found most challenging about the exercise.

Component 5: Writing and Reflection

Finally, students write an essay in which they develop their personal philosophy of “Why government?” and “Which government?” by drawing on the readings, discussion, and small-team deliberations. The essay is due within one

week of the in-class exercises. At the end of the semester, I reassign the essay as part of a take-home final examination, but in this second iteration I ask students to reflect on the course material and articulate how and why their perspectives have evolved.

Informal Components

The above activities bookend students’ experience in my public administration course; students both begin and end the term thinking and writing about normative elements of governance. Nevertheless, I make a concerted effort to refer to these concepts throughout the intervening 13 weeks. Sometimes, current events facilitate students’ thinking about the role of government in their lives (e.g., passage of the Affordable Care Act and, later, the failed rollout of healthcare.gov and several state-based insurance exchanges) or about events that illustrate the complexity of federalism (e.g., No Child Left Behind legislation and the rise of Common Core education standards). Although it is difficult to find documentaries that help students think about “Why government?” and federalism, I have had success screening *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* and asking students if, and how, the Saint Louis Pruitt-Igoe housing project’s demise was a product of failed inter-governmental policy coordination.¹

RESPONSES AND FEEDBACK

Student Perspectives

The student essays generated by the above exercises can be summarized according to four key points. First, students argue broadly that government exists as a response to market failures—that is, to provide public goods not provided by the private sector. National defense is an oft-cited example. Second, students tend to argue the necessity for government to serve marginalized groups in society, such as through civil rights protections. Third, students view government, and the federal government in particular, as a necessary single point of contact with foreign governments, as opposed to private actors. Fourth, students often but not consistently argue that government exists to correct inequities across groups.

Distributing responsibilities across federal, state, and local governments unfailingly proves to be more challenging than students anticipate. For some, the sheer scope of governmental activities is daunting. One student remarked, "Wow, government does more than I realized. It's almost more complicated than I realized." Another more succinctly said, after a point of disagreement within his small group, "This is hard."

Across teams, I have noted some areas of near-universal agreement about public sector responsibilities. With one exception, every team has concluded that national defense should be a federal responsibility.² Students also consistently believe that environmental protection should be a federal responsibility, providing that implementation involves state and local governments. They also prefer that emergency management services and fire protection remain purely local in provision and oversight. I generally find that, for these policy areas, students' individual papers tend to mirror their teams' conclusions.

But for most policy areas, students have significant disagreements about which level of government should retain authority. For example, teams are often divided over higher education, a traditional responsibility of state governments. Students recognize that local governments cannot feasibly "adopt" state public university systems, or perhaps even community colleges, yet they are unhappy with the cost of higher education. Students often reason that more federal intervention to control costs may be desirable, yet they also wonder if federal student loans may be part of the problem. Informed by policing controversies, a similar debate often occurs regarding public safety. Some students express anxiety over a purely state or local system of police protection and desire a greater degree of federal oversight, especially where civil rights violations may occur. On these issues, individual papers often diverge from team conclusions.

By far, student teams disagree most over the proper role of the federal government. Reflect-

ing on the challenges of the assignment, one team leader said, "We kept assigning everything to the federal government. Then it dawned on us that we put them in charge of everything, and we were uncomfortable with that!"

At the same time, students often conclude that local governments should have the authority to experiment and vary policy parameters according to local needs, but not if such experimentation violates minimum standards. Without fail, students believe that the federal government should establish those minimum standards in policy areas such as social welfare, public health, and education, but that local governments should be delegated responsibility—along with federal funding—for implementation.

One of the more humorous elements of the team discussions is the frequent perception that state governments do not do anything. Because many teams determine that they want a combination of local implementation and federal oversight—the so-called devolution paradox—they puzzle over how to involve state governments in the process. Nearing completion of his team's model, one student said, "We need to give the states something to do." Another student in a different team remarked, "They [the states] just seem like a middleman."

Some policy areas engender a fair amount of confusion and ambiguity among teams. The issue of whether or not the space agency NASA should remain a governmental function at all, much less a federal responsibility, has prompted sharp debate.³ Teams have a similar dispute regarding the U.S. Postal Service. All tend to agree that mail service is best left to the federal government, and must be according to the Constitution, but there remains much debate as to whether or not the service should continue at all, given the preponderance of private alternatives.

End of Semester Reflections

By the end of the semester, students grow more pragmatic in their assessments of "Why government?" and "Which government?" Their essays often reflect a desire for subsidiarity—for

individuals to be left alone—but for government to act to correct market failures and inequities. Students tend to long for increased bureaucratic efficiency but at the same time show a better recognition the inherent trade-offs. Students also tend to exhibit a greater recognition of multiple stakeholders (e.g., nonprofit organizations and the private sector) and realize that involving such stakeholders is an ongoing challenge for public administration and all levels of government.

Students conclude the semester split on the question of federalism. Many express concerns that excessive decentralization will overly burden local governments, which is ironic considering that many begin the course recommending a combination of federal oversight and funding with local implementation. But at the same time, other students have grown into ardent defenders of decentralization. One non-U.S. student, whose home nation is known to have a corrupt central government, wrote, “Strengthening the autonomy of state and local governments can be conducive to creative public-private partnerships and decentralized initiatives that are better fitted for the special characteristics and circumstances of each city or municipality.”

But for other students, the reflection essay is a chance to think about their personal evolution. One student wrote,

I found myself expressing ideas that I did not even know I held. I became excited about combining seemingly antithetical conservative and liberal ideals in devotion coupled with my idealistic vision of the federal government as watchdog. I have always considered myself a Democrat, but this paper and this course in general made me realize that I have my own views that need not comply with any political party.

Alumni Feedback

One calendar year after the end of the first course in which I implemented these activities, I e-mailed all 16 alumni from the course to ask how much they remembered about the exercises

and what they liked and disliked. Every student remembered the exercises, and their feedback was complimentary. Although working in small groups can cause complaints, students spoke fondly of the team-based component. Echoing Saldívar (2015), one student responded, “Having those teams come up with different allocations of responsibilities helped bring a lot of unique perspectives to the conversation.” Another wrote, “I thought it was a good experience because it really demonstrated how everyone thinks differently philosophically and to compare that to reality was pretty interesting.”

Students also appreciated the emphasis on “Why government?” and the bigger picture. One student, a nonprofit professional, told me:

The whole concept of subsidiarity was one of the most useful takeaways from last summer’s class—and it has come up in all my subsequent classes. I particularly liked [the] exercise with the overlapping circles. . . . I think it was an “aha” moment for everyone in the class when we realized how hard it was to decide.

Another student who had since graduated with dual Master of Public Administration and Management-Politics-Law degrees wrote,

As someone who took [the course] after having already been [in school] for 2 years, I kept thinking, “I can’t believe I haven’t been asked this question before!” and I was happy to get to that level of detail on the issues. The readings were super helpful and I still think about them today (and refer other students to them sometimes). I liked that the assignment combined both our personal thoughts/experiences and the readings, and both the horizontal and vertical elements.

Students also offered constructive feedback. Nearly all expressed a desire to have more time to work in their small teams and, of course, on the subsequent essays. A few students suggested that it would have been helpful to repeat the team exercise at the end of the semester to

develop a "new" model of federalism and then compare it to their earlier models. One student also recommended that our graduate programs find a way to integrate investigations into "Why government?" and "Which government?" across the entire curriculum, rather than offer them in just one course.

CONCLUSION

The exercises outlined in this article offer several benefits to public affairs students and instructors. For students, the activities link governance theory and practice and encourage them to think critically about the practical and normative challenges inherent to the role of government in society. The in-class team exercise exposes students to the difficulty of assigning functions to government in a collaborate environment of diverse ages, backgrounds, and ideological perspectives. It also compels students to recognize the difference between their ideal governance model (the public sector in which they would *like* to work) and the real world (where they actually *will* work). The discussion components further help students recognize and reflect on the interconnectedness of public policy across different levels of government.

For instructors, the exercises are flexible and scalable. With little modification, the same activities could be repeated with public affairs students on any continent, save for Antarctica. For example, among European Union member states, the questions can be asked along two dimensions—the relationship of the European Union to individual nations and, within those nations, the delegation of authority across central, regional, and municipal governments. By design, the overall approach has multiple components that can fit into one long class period or be broken up across multiple, shorter periods. The readings can be swapped out to meet individual instructors' preferences.

"Why government?" and "Which government?" are increasingly important questions for students of public affairs. For a number of reasons, big-picture questions of this nature are often overlooked in public affairs programs. However,

instructors can easily embed normative questions within existing coursework. The exercises described in this article represent only one approach for prompting students to think about the role of government in society as well as about federalism and intergovernmental relations. There are countless other approaches, and public affairs education can only benefit from developing them.

NOTES

- 1 Multiple studies report that using this *Pruitt-Igoe Myth* film has a positive impact on student engagement and learning (e.g., Leckrone, 2013; Weber, 2001). But instructors should consider how to align films with more traditional exercises (Swimelar, 2013).
- 2 One team concluded that there should be no system of national defense, arguing instead that it be replaced with an international peace-focused institution.
- 3 I often observe generational differences when this question arises. Older students are protective of NASA; younger students are more critical.

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