

Teaching about Comparative Government

C. Frederick Risinger

This month's *Social Education* often deals with the Constitution and U.S. government. I've put together columns on "Aligning Elections," "Presidential Libraries," and "Election Songs and Pictures." This time, I decided to go beyond U.S. borders and find websites that discuss government systems in other nations—most often referred to as "Comparative Government." As international relationships become increasingly important (with both friendly and not-so-friendly governments), I believe that it's important for U.S. students to learn about how a parliamentary democracy works—how it's similar, but different from a presidential-style government. There are also nations that have a parliamentary or presidential structure, but operate as authoritarian governments or as quasi-dictatorships. As I wrote this column, thousands of Iranians were demonstrating in Tehran against their government, indicating a split in the religious leadership of that nation. I wonder how many U.S. students know what a theocracy is?

I taught world history for several years in a team-teaching program in suburban Chicago. We spent a full nine-week period on something we called "Man's Search for Government." (Today, we would call it, more appropriately, "The Human Search for Government.") We taught about the origins of government in prehistoric times, the authoritarian governments of

most early civilizations, and, of course, spent a lot of time on Greece, Rome, and the Medieval Period. Students completed an extensive project based on a particular governmental system.

I ran into one impediment in searching for exemplary websites on this topic. The term "Comparative Government" is so closely linked to the Advanced Placement Comparative Course and Test that, no matter what search terms I used, sites focusing on the AP course and test dominated the search. However, using terms such as "governmental systems" and "teaching government in world history," I eventually came up with a variety of sites that should be useful for teachers of a range of grade levels and courses in the secondary curriculum.

Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Government>
I've become more positive about using Wikipedia. While you need to be cautious and review any Wikipedia site before recommending it to students, the articles generally present a balanced and extensive coverage of issues and topics. This site provides a wealth of information for teachers and is even arranged in such a way that teachers can build a several-day lesson on the origins and types of government. It includes such topics as "Early Government"; "Seven Roles of Government"; and "Negative

Aspects of Government," such as war, and class oppression. Types of government include monarchy, dictatorship, and democracy. Early governments of ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley, and other societies are reviewed, and definitions of types of governmental leaders (premier, emperor, monarch and president) are provided. A teacher could design projects based on the many internal links. A companion Wikipedia site, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparative_government), goes deeper into this specific topic and discusses political institutions and has comparisons of politics between Australia and Canada, Canada and the U.S., and Australia and New Zealand.

The Four Types of Government

www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/socialstd/NSL/PPT2/

This is a PowerPoint presentation designed by Nicole Frazier, a teacher at Richard Montgomery High School in Montgomery County, Maryland. It's only five slides long, but it offers a convenient and neat way to begin a study of comparative governments. Dictatorship, Oligarchy, Direct Democracy and Representative Democracy are described, with "Advantages" and "Disadvantages" listed for each. A spin-off activity could be to have students take the other types mentioned on Wikipedia and do an "advantages" and

“disadvantages” chart for them. Thanks, Nicole, for sharing this resource.

NUCAT (Northwestern University Library) International Documents Collection

www.library.northwestern.edu/govinfo/resource/internat/foreign.html

This is an amazing resource. I think just about every nation in the world—from Afghanistan to Zambia, and including such entities as the U.S. Virgin Islands, the island state of Vanuatu, and Vatican City—is listed. Every nation’s parliament or legislative body, executive branch, and ministries/cabinets are described. If teachers want to have students do research and complete individual or group projects, this a good place to begin.

Center for Civic Education

www.civiced.org/index.php?page=links_intl

The Center for Civic Education (CCE) is well known and appreciated for its programs such as “We the People” and “Project Citizen.” The CCE also has sponsored and partnered with other U.S. and international groups to bring citizenship education to more than 70 nations. Several of the projects have produced materials and other resources that students at all middle and secondary levels would find interesting. There are avenues for whole classes to contact some of the overseas projects. CCE has also developed and implemented civic education programs for students in the United States to help them better understand the history and experiences of emerging and established democracies.

The United Nations Cyber SchoolBus

www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus

Teachers and curriculum leaders who have attended recent NCSS annual meetings have had an opportunity to actually visit the UN’s Cyber School Bus. It’s a great stop within the many booths and exhibits at the convention. The

online website has even more resources for those wanting to teach about other nations. There are dozens of links to such comprehensive sites as “Country at a Glance,” where students can create comparison charts on such categories as population, health, environment, and technology. There are several interactive games and quizzes on topics such as refugees, responding to disasters, and world hunger. The focus is not on governments of individual nations, but on what groups of nations can do about issues such as human rights and the treatment of children around the world.

PBS Teachers

www.pbs.org/teachers/search/resources/?search=comparative+governments

It’s difficult to do one of these columns without mentioning the Public Broadcasting Service and the great resources it provides for teachers and students. This specific URL takes you to a search of teacher resources for lesson plans that, in one way or another, focus on comparative and international governments. They include an educator’s guide titled “Democracy around the World,” and a lesson plan on “Freedom from Oppression,” that examines genocide, both historical and recent. You can search for lesson plans and resources by K-12 grade levels and find programs and resources for such topics as the social and political issues facing China or immigration throughout the world.

GovEd Web (University of Omaha)

www.unomaha.edu/govedweb/resources_comp.php

The Department of Political Science at the University of Omaha has been mentioned many times in this column. In addition to having great links to other websites, it has links to embassies around the world, and specific ties to governmental agencies and leaders in countries such as Mexico, Great Britain, and Iran. Unfortunately, it doesn’t offer lesson plans for comparative government,

but it offers (1) many others focusing on U.S. government; and (2) the opportunity for teachers to upload their own lesson plans and classroom activities. Just hit “Contribute.”

The Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html>

The Library of Congress continues to be a wonderful resource and a teacher-friendly website. This link will take you to “Country Studies,” which provides more information on more nations than anyone would ever need. It offers description and analysis of the “historical setting and the social, economic, political, and national security systems and institutions of countries throughout the world.”

Seeds of our Democracy—Core Values

learningtogive.org/lessons/unit8/lesson1.html

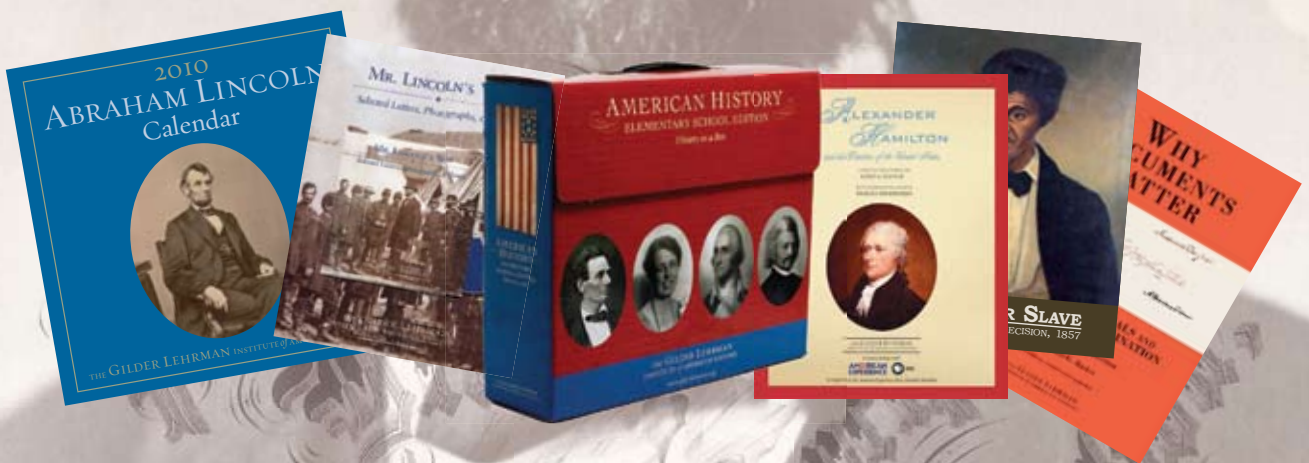
This link isn’t exactly about comparative government. Yet I would use this lesson plan if I were teaching students in grades 5 or 6 through 12. It asks us to take a look at our “core values” and consider whether or not they are being represented in our governments—local, state, and national. The directions are clear and the two handouts are easily downloaded or printed. It’s the first chapter of a larger instructional unit, also titled “Seeds of our Democracy.” I think teachers will also want to review some of the other chapters and lesson plans.

As I said earlier, I think it’s important for students to be knowledgeable about other forms of government and the history of government. If citizenship education is our primary goal as social studies teachers, then comparative government must be a part of it. 🌐

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