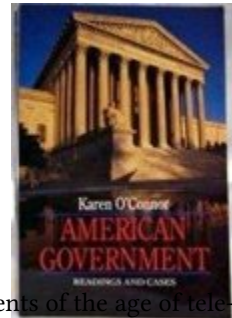


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen O'Connor, ed. *American Government: Readings and Cases*. Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1995. xx + 475 pp. \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-02-388900-4.

Reviewed by Matt Wetstein (San Joaquin Delta College)
Published on H-Teachpol (June, 1997)



Karen O'Connor's book is a "reader" that includes a diverse selection of excerpts suitable for introductory American Government courses. Like other edited volumes on the market, the book serves a purpose of providing supplementary reading material for undergraduates. I have used the book for several years, and have been selective in assigning readings from it. In general, my experience with the book has been very positive, though I would recommend a few enhancements.

The book has an extensive smorgasbord to offer to faculty and students. It contains seven-five different selections to choose from, including readings on domestic and foreign/military policy for faculty who cover those topics in the course. The book is broken down into the customary sections of the American Government course, and my review will focus on some of the highlights of the book for the introductory American government course.

Scholars who have a penchant for political theory and history will enjoy the fact that each chapter opens with a selection from the *Federalist Papers*. All of the well-known workhorses are here (Numbers 10, 17, 47, 51, and 78 to name a few). But most striking are some of the less well-known selections, including *Federalist No. 84* (where Hamilton argues against the need for a Bill of Rights). This selection is contrasted with Samuel Bryan's *Centinal No. 1*, a classic statement from the Anti-Federalist camp warning of the dangers of a strong national government that might trample individual liberties. O'Connor's attempt to open each chapter with a Federalist Paper has its positive and negative sides. On the plus side, the book features many early classic statements on issues that still abound in our system. On the negative side, students in my courses increasingly struggle with the language in these selections. This is a sad

commentary on the ability of students of the age of television to grapple with difficult reading material. My approach to this problem has been to model how I read these selections, to give announced quizzes on them, and to follow up with lectures to cover the key points. Students grumble about the reading and quizzes, but they certainly understand the arguments better at the end of the process.

Perhaps the best feature of the book is the emphasis on constitutional law cases throughout. No reader would be sufficient without the classic cases like *McCulloch v. Maryland*, *Marbury v. Madison*, and *Gideon v. Wainwright*, and they are here of course. But the O'Connor reader stands out for its inclusion of a wide array of cases that make telling points about policy in various areas. The list of cases includes: *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (1989) to demonstrate state control of abortion laws; *Lee v. Weisman* (1992), the public school graduation prayer case; *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* (1993), dealing with animal sacrifices by a religious group; *R.A.V. v. St. Paul* (1993), a case striking down a hate speech law; *McKleskey v. Kemp* (1987) on the unfair imposition of the death penalty; *Sheppard v. Maxwell* (1966) on the conflict between press coverage and a fair trial; and *J.E.B. v. Alabama* (1994), striking down the exclusion of women from juries. Many of the cases are modern disputes over issues that the students have no difficulty identifying.

The inclusion of so many cases is a positive feature in my mind, for the students enjoy reading these selections. The variety of cases also allows professors the opportunity to select among them from semester to semester as a reading or writing assignment. For example, an instructor could rotate cases in and out of the syllabus from term

to term, making one case the subject of a mini-essay or writing assignment, then dropping it for another one the next term. I have gotten into the practice of assigning mock opinion assignments, where I construct hypothetical constitutional scenarios that students must address as a Supreme Court justice would. They can rely on excerpts from the O'Connor reader to guide their writing and help them form an opinion. The good students come to me for guidance on how to do their own library research and find other Supreme Court cases. I have found that many students enjoy this opportunity to write creatively from a role-playing position.

There is one drawback to the presentation of the cases that I would like to see addressed in future editions if the book is revised. A few of the case selections would be better if they included a sample from the opinions of dissenting justices. In O'Connor's defense, she has included a sample of Justice Brennan's dissent in *McKleskey v. Kemp*, the 5-4 decision rejecting equal protection arguments against the death penalty. But *Lee v. Weisman*, another 5-4 ruling on school prayer, omits Justice Scalia's stirring critique of Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion. While I disagree with Scalia's opinions on most occasions, he does write some of the more passionate opinions of the modern era, and I believe students would enjoy his flare for colorful language. Likewise, the presentation of *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, a 5-4 decision allowing state regulation of abortion, includes only Rehnquist's majority opinion. On the abortion issue, I believe Sandra Day O'Connor's voice deserves some space in the book. Most of the other cases are unanimous rulings. But where the court is divided, I believe students can learn a great deal from the opposing sides on critical constitutional cases.

In subsequent editions, O'Connor might also contem-

plate replacing selections that are becoming time-bound. The book's 1995 copyright presents the obvious disadvantage in that the 1996 presidential election and 1994 mid-term elections get no treatment in the readings. The selections on the 1992 election by Mary Bendyna and Celinda Lake (on the gender gap), the *Washington Post* (following the candidates for a day just two weeks before the election), and Seymour Martin Lipset (on personality's importance in the election) were all very solid readings. But only the Bendyna and Lake reading will remain on my syllabus for obvious reasons. I have used that reading's data on the gender gap with supplemented data from 1996 to demonstrate the clear differences between men and women in recent elections. It also gives me an opportunity in my lectures to reprise the most worn-out term from 1996 election commentary, "soccer moms." What ever happened to the term "football dads?"

I don't have any negative things to say about the selection of readings. O'Connor has done a nice job mixing the old with the new, offering the classic academic perspective with modern media accounts, and providing a nice smorgasbord of Supreme Court cases for use in the course. The book also does a nice job covering issues of race and gender, and the impact of modern communications on politics. It does, however, need to be updated in the near future to address recent elections. (A quick check of Allyn & Bacon's web page did not list any plans for a revision). Still, O'Connor's book is a nicely packaged reader for the introductory course in American politics.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-teachpol>

Citation: Matt Wetstein. Review of O'Connor, Karen, ed., *American Government: Readings and Cases*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1038>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.