

Introduction to comparative politics: Attitudes towards immigration among students and the British Public

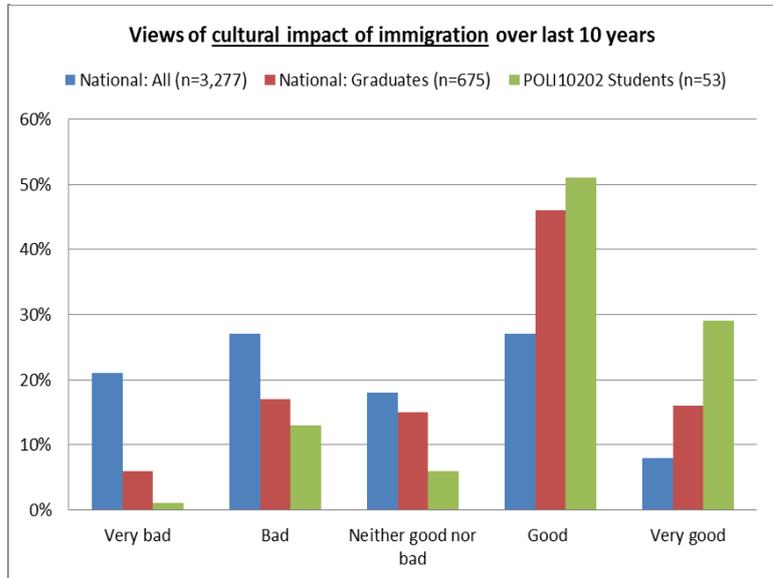
Introduction to Comparative Politics is a Year 1 course unit in Politics at the University of Manchester that is currently taken by around 200 students each semester. For this course unit we developed materials based around attitudes towards immigration.

Making students 'part of the dataset'

The materials were based around a survey of student attitudes of immigration. The students were surveyed using questions from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. Then, using data from the

2011 BSA survey, student results were presented alongside results for the British public and graduates. This simple exercise allowed students to become 'part of the dataset' and, in this case, showed the students had more positive attitudes towards immigration than the British public (see Figure 1). The survey instrument, exercise of data collection and the resulting dataset provides the basis for an interesting and engaging lecture and tutorial with a number of pedagogical benefits.

Figure 1: Making students 'part of the dataset'



Source: British Social Attitudes (2011) and students from Introduction to Comparative Politics (POLI10201) at the University of Manchester 2012-2013

Course Aims and Objectives

Introduction to Comparative Politics provides a foundation for the study of comparative politics, by

- *Introducing students to key concepts such as 'power', 'democracy', and 'the nation-state'*
- *Examining leading models of political science;*
- *Comparing the politics of the United Kingdom and the United States of America;*
- *and by studying economic and political reform in contemporary China.*

The course enables students to understand the features of different political systems and to ask who governs, how they govern, and what government does.

In this introductory course unit, students will:

- *Learn some of the basic concepts of political studies, such as political power, governance, the state, authoritarianism, democracy, and democratization;*
- *Learn some of the basic research tools of political studies, such as conceptual analysis, comparison over time and space, causal explanation, and normative evaluation;*
- *Develop a critical awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of theories of the state;*
- *Analyse political institutions, procedures and behaviour in the UK and USA;*
- *Analyse the workings of non-democratic regimes, focusing on China;*
- *Develop the ability to communicate ideas in writing and verbally.*

Engage and surprise students

The process of comparing groups helps students appreciate social differences. In turn, students can be encouraged to realise the problems of generalising from their own experiences and to think about the kinds of social processes producing such differences.

From our experience, students showed high levels of engagement in the data that related to them and how compared to the whole population. As Rob Ford describes, the exercise "provided a very interesting teaching experience because [the students] were very surprised to discover just how far away they were from the average person out there in society at large"

Introducing quantitative data and methods

The exercise introduces students to quantitative data in a naturalistic and non-threatening way. Starting with answering the survey questions themselves, they see how data is generated.

With this understanding of the data, the exercise enables a conversation about the limitations of data and the processes through which it is generated. For instance, since students have answered the survey questions themselves, we get consider how reliable the survey questions measure attitudes by inputting their own experience. Additionally, the responses rate for the class supports discussion of the whether the BSA data are representative of UK population.

"So instead of being an alien lump of data dropped from above...it was a process that they found themselves participating in." Dr Rob Ford, Lecture in Politics at The University of Manchester

Learning and applying core quantitative skills

The exercise supports the learning of core quantitative skills such as how to read graphs and tables and use percentages and proportions to compare groups. As many students may lack relevant knowledge and confidence, revising and developing these core skills early in a degree can help students to better engage with quantitative evidence as it appears through their degree and beyond.

Meaningful differences between groups

In addition to practicing core skills, the exercise offers scope to introduce more complex issues in quantitative research. Increasing the statistical content without leading students to disengage is tricky. However, whilst keeping the focus on the substantive questions, the exercise can include conceptual discussions of the idea of estimation, precision and chance, which in turn, could be supported by using confidence intervals for some of the national estimates.

Making Students part of the data set - How it was done

We conducted the student survey through the online learning platform Blackboard.

The BSA data was accessed online (See below).

The data was combined in Excel and rescaled (from a 0-10) scale to make it easier for students to see and interpret differences.

Key results were presented in graph form in the lecture (see Figure 1) and a full set of tables in the tutorial (see accompanying hand out)

Further Resources

Tutorial: Attitudes towards immigration

BSA questions on immigration, student and national results and suggestions for the tutorial topics (Word document).

British Social Attitudes

British Social Attitudes (BSA) is an annual survey conducted by NatCen and the data is made available through the UK Data Service, further details about the BSA can be found by visiting their website.

Data from the BSA can be obtained online through

- The British Social Attitudes Information System <http://www.britsocat.com/>
- The UK Data Service NESSTAR Catalogue <http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/series/?sn=200006>

About this resource

'Introduction to comparative politics: Comparing student and the British Publics attitudes towards immigration' was developed by the ESSTED team in collaboration with Dr Rob Ford and Dr Nick Turnball from Politics at the University of Manchester.

Authors: Mark Brown, Rob Ford, Nick Turnball, Steph Thompson and Jen Buckley

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