

application of all the learning styles instructors can help students achieve this goal, gain greater confidence in their abilities (affective dimension), and simultaneously gain a wider range of skills (cognitive dimension).

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About the Authors

Richard L. Fox is an assistant professor of political science at Union College in Schenectady, New York. He is the author of *Gender Dynamics in Congressional Elections* (Sage, 1997).

Shirley A. Ronkowski, Ph.D., is an instructional Specialist in the Office of Instructional Consultation and Academic Coordinator for the campus-wide Teaching Assistant Development Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her published articles, book chapters, and conference papers focus on instructional design, the scholarship of teaching, cooperative learning, and instructional technology for both current and future faculty.

Numbers? Borrinnnggg!!!

William I. Buscemi, Wittenberg University

How big is government anyway? Compared to what? How much does it spend? How many people work for it? Doing what? Should we cut welfare? Social Security? Should we reduce taxes? Balance the budget? Reduce the national debt? These questions dominate public discussion of politics, and should, it seems, figure heavily in any course on American government. Indications are, however, that they do not.

Students are more turned off from politics today than at any time since the 1950s (see Mann 1996). One reason for this lack of interest might be that the pressing issues of today, e.g., structural unemployment, welfare reform, and budget deficits, call for a different sort of understanding

than did the issues of the 1960s and 1970s, e.g. school segregation, the Vietnam war, and Watergate. What appears as apathy and cynicism may be due in part to a lack of relevant conceptual tools with which to comprehend and judge important political events. To grasp today's issues one needs a sense of numbers; unfortunately, many students today would, if pressed, be hard put to describe the difference between a million and a billion. Why are students so innumerate with regard to the large numbers that figure into politics? I would suggest three factors that contribute to the problem. First of all, politicians, whose rhetoric fills much of the space available for political communication, have little in-

centive to provide, and much reason to blur and evade, clear information concerning the magnitudes most relevant to the issue at hand. Rather than speak directly of unemployment rates or deficit figures, for instance, politicians often make reference to some incremental change over a time span selected to show themselves to advantage. Ross Perot, for all his faults, is to be commended for his attempts to provide, in clear and direct form, basic figures concerning such problems as the national debt. A second factor contributing to students' lack of interest in quantitative data may be, paradoxically, our own insistence as teachers on the highest standards of rigor and precision. We tend to disparage the

“quick and dirty” estimates that are often most useful and appropriate for dealing with the issues at hand. We fail to convey to students that, even in our own research, it is the rough estimate that usually precedes the controlled study, frames its significance, and provides the intuitive criteria for assessing its results. When teaching, we too often reverse this sequence and attempt to equip students with sophisticated methodological tools for solving problems before they have been made to feel the importance and difficulty of the questions. We would do better to begin with rough numbers and bold comparisons, and hold the qualifications and refinements until later. Yet another factor contributing to student apathy concerning politics is, I believe, the failure of introductory textbooks in American government to provide significant and accessible data. Despite the plethora of slick and colorful graphics displaying all sorts of data, one senses that these are presented largely for their own sake, perhaps “to teach students to read charts and graphs” (or worse, to sell text books), and not because the data are significant, or integrally related to the text.

The kind of understanding that I argue for here is a sense of the important magnitudes, their relative proportions, and the place of one’s own concerns within the whole. This sort of understanding is not exactly “quantitative”; it results less from the application of mathematical and methodological technique than from reliance upon the kind of intuition or “feel” that an artist has for shape and composition, or the educated layperson has for geographic locations or historical periods. Such intuitions, inexact though they may be, provide the parameters within which we wrestle with more local problems. This is the same sort of intuition that we use in our daily lives. When buying a car, we estimate our assets and calculate the trade-offs between cost and comfort; and when budgeting our time, we balance the importance of various claims against the limits of our own energies. Such rough and ready estimations underlie almost all of our understanding and decision making.

Will students be overwhelmed and

confused when confronted with huge numbers, especially when they find that these are to be taken seriously and may even be on the exam? Maybe. But perhaps the opposite will occur. A sense of empowerment can come to students when they realize their ability to see large numbers in relation to one another, and to explore the correlations among them through rough but important calculations. Ask them to estimate, for example, what would happen if we really did turn swords into plowshares. How could they perform this calculation? First, have them take the amount that is spent each year by all nations on military items, which is nearly \$1,000B (U.S. Department of Commerce 1996, 354).¹ Then tell them to divide this money among the world’s poor, who number, let us say, $\frac{1}{6}$ of the world’s population, or 1B people. The result is that each poor person would get \$1,000 annually, a fantastic sum to those whose current yearly income is less than \$100! This is, of course, a problem much easier to solve arithmetically than politically, but it provides an interesting talking point and a sense of proportion.

How can we give students a feel for big numbers? Invariably, intuitions are anchored in familiar experience. Most Americans “feel” the distance of 100 yards as the length of a football field, and a gallon as the volume of a milk container; (meters and grams remain, unfortunately, mere abstractions). To impress upon students the difference between a million and a billion, we might try comparing these numbers to the length of the class room: if the whole length is a billion, then a million is a half inch or so; or, if a million is a penny, a billion is \$10. Once numbers are brought within the circle of student “familiar,” data tend to lose their authoritative and mysterious quality. No longer must one rely so absolutely upon word from the experts, who alone have access to arcane sources. Important-sounding pronouncements concerning, for example, the national debt, can now be measured against one’s own estimates. Here, too, is a corrective against the notorious power of statistics to “lie.” Students will come to realize, when making their

own calculations, that all such operations involve interpretation and construction, that it makes a difference whether you compare U.S. living standards to all nations or only to industrialized nations, and whether you measure debt growth over the last 4 years, or the last 14. Students will be better able to evaluate the interpretations of others, once they gain experience in formulating their own.

Where do we find those figures so important to achieving an understanding of major political issues? In my experience, the typical American government text book is of little help. Scanning three texts recently sent to me for possible course adoption—Janda, Berry, and Goldman (1993), Paterson (1996), and Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry (1996)—I find little that is useful concerning, for instance, the federal budget. Two of the texts have small pie charts (Patterson 1996, 517; Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry 1996, 375), which are not very informative because their expenditure categories are too vague, and their use of percentages rather than dollar figures prevents easy comparison with other relevant data.² Indeed, much of the data presented in the typical text would qualify as “trivia,” since they are unrelated to the sorts of context or comparisons which alone could convey their significance. The main source that I used to gather data for this article was the U. S. government publication *Statistical Abstracts* (1996), a surprisingly accessible, interesting, comprehensive compendium of census data and other records pertaining to a wide range of political, economic, and demographic issues.³

How big is government? Annual expenditures by all levels of American government are shown roughly in the following figures: (U.S. Department of Commerce 1996, 330).⁴

Federal	\$1,600B
State	850B
Local	750B
Total	\$3,200B

What is the significance of these numbers? To get a sense of their importance we might compare them, first of all, to the nation’s Gross Domestic Product, which is about

TABLE 1
Total Tax Receipts as % of GDP⁶

Denmark	51.6
Sweden	51.0
Finland	47.3
Czech Republic	47.3
Belgium	46.6
Netherlands	45.9
Luxembourg	45.0
France	44.1
Poland	43.2
Austria	42.8
Greece	42.5
Italy	41.7
Norway	41.2
Hungary	41.0
Germany	39.3
Ireland	37.5
New Zealand	37.0
Canada	36.1
Spain	35.8
United Kingdom	34.1
Switzerland	33.9
Portugal	33.0
Iceland	30.9
Australia	29.9
Japan	27.8
United States	27.6
Turkey	22.2
Mexico	18.8

Source: OECD (1997, 46–47)

\$7,000B (1996, 443).⁵ We see then that the government spends almost half of all that the nation “earns” each year. Is that excessive? To pursue this question we could compare the percentage of GDP spent by government in the U.S. to that of other countries, as seen in the following table.

Table 1 indicates that the size of the U.S. government is, in proportion to its economy, smaller than that of nearly any other industrialized nation. A related question concerns the size of the national debt, which is about \$5,000B (1996, 330).⁷ Is this excessive? Supply siders would say not, since it is less than the GDP. After all, a family or business thinks nothing of going into debt for amounts two to three times its annual salary or profits, particularly if borrowing enhances the prospects of future earnings, as do college tuition, factory equipment, or,

in the case of government, highway construction. And what, by the way, is that awesome figure so often quoted, but which we never quite remember, namely “Each man, woman, and child’s share of the national debt?” No problem: just divide the \$5,000B debt among 260M people, or roughly ¼B, and you get \$20,000 per person: a little high, maybe, but close enough, and about the amount spent on a year of college! How does government spend its money?⁸ The *federal* government spends its *half* of all government money roughly as follows:

Social Security, Medicare, and federal employee retirement	\$750B
Interest on the national debt	250B
Defense	250B
Welfare	250B
Other	100B
Total	\$1,600B

Students should understand that some of these expenditures, called “Entitlements,” are more resistant to budget cuts than others, since they involve legal, contractual obligations. This is the case with the first two items on the above list. If the federal budget is to be reduced, therefore, cuts will most likely come from the other areas, which together make up only \$600B of the \$1,600B federal budget. This helps to explain why budget cuts involve such politically painful decisions.

How many people work for the government? Or, to put it more ideologically, what is the size of the “bureaucracy”? (The Council of State Governments 1996–97, table 7.14; U.S. Department of Commerce 1996, 346).⁹ The overall picture looks about like this:

Federal employees (including almost 2M military)	5M
State employees	5M
Local employees (including 6M teachers)	11M
Total	21M

Is this too many? Compared to what? Comparing the number of government workers to the total

American work force, which we could roughly estimate to be 100M out of the 264M total population, the government workforce of 21M constitutes just a bit over 20%, or 1 out of 5. Other relevant comparison would be to prior years, and to other countries (Wolff, et al. 1992, 197).¹⁰

One of the most powerful ways to present comparative data, given the natural human interest in record-setting and competition between “us” and “them,” is the rank-order list. It is perhaps not surprising, given the dependence of most publishers of textbooks or statistics on either government funding or genteel academic sensibilities, that such listings, with their potential for causing embarrassment, are rare. Even when all of the data required for such rankings are present, the actual listings are usually in alphabetical order—or some other innocuous pattern which serves to confound comparisons. With only a little effort, however, alphabetical tables can be converted to rank-order listings, as I have done in Table 2.

It would be interesting to compare incarceration rates to similar tables listing other socio-economic variables. Which states have the highest percentage of people in poverty? New Mexico and the District of Columbia top the list with 21% each. Which have the least poverty? Utah and Delaware with about 8% each (U.S. Department of Commerce 1996, 474). Which states have the highest rates of violent crime? That dubious distinction is shared by Florida and the District of Columbia (1996, 202). The least crime? North Dakota and Vermont. Which states have the most college graduates? Massachusetts and Colorado, while West Virginia and Kentucky have the fewest (1996, 161). And most interestingly, where does one’s own state stand in the rankings?

Country-by-country comparisons are even more eye-catching than state comparisons, and it is unfortunate that, as social scientists, we teach so little material from this most obvious fund of data for constructing ready-made experimental tests.¹² However rough, such comparisons are useful, at least as a first step, in evaluating our own institutions and policies. What is the popu-

TABLE 2
Rates of Incarceration per 100,000 Population¹¹

Wash. D.C.	1,583	Kentucky	288
Texas	636	Tennessee	277
Louisiana	530	Idaho	258
Oklahoma	508	Indiana	258
S. Carolina	494	Wyoming	254
Nevada	460	Kansas	249
Arizona	459	S. Dakota	240
Georgia	456	Pennsylvania	235
Alabama	450	New Mexico	220
Michigan	428	Hawaii	202
Mississippi	408	Washington	201
Florida	406	Montana	194
Maryland	395	Iowa	192
Virginia	395	Wisconsin	187
Delaware	393	Rhode Island	186
California	384	N. Hampshire	177
Ohio	377	Oregon	175
New York	367	Mass.	171
Arkansas	353	Vermont	168
Missouri	338	Nebraska	159
N. Carolina	322	Utah	155
Connecticut	321	Maine	118
Alaska	317	W. Virginia	106
Illinois	310	Minnesota	100
New Jersey	310	N. Dakota	78
Colorado	289		

Source: The Council of State Governments (1996–97, Table 810)

Some of the poorest nations are:

India	\$312
Ethiopia	91
Tanzania	74

Other quality of life comparisons reveal that life expectancy is greatest in Hong Kong (82.2 years), and lowest in Malawi (36.2), with the U.S., at 76.0 years, near the top (1996, 831). The nation with the highest military expenditure as a percentage of its GNP is North Korea, at 23%; the U.S. spends 5%, while Japan spends only 1% (1996, 858). The U.S. is, unfortunately, far ahead of all competitors in the number of deaths by handgun per year, topping 9,000, while Great Britain, toward the bottom, had only 7 in the year measured (Wolff, et al. 1992, 294).¹⁶ The U.S. also holds the lead in rates of incarceration, particularly since the dismantling of the Soviet archipelago; our total of about 1.5M behind bars gives us a rate 4 times higher than that of Great Britain, and 10 times that of Japan or the Netherlands (U.S. Department of Justice 1995, 548; Wolff, et al. 1992, 296).¹⁷ Looking at working conditions, we find that workers in the U. S. spend more hours on the job each year than workers in any industrialized nation except Japan. Perhaps not coincidentally, the percentage of union membership in America is only 16%, compared to Sweden's 85% (Wolff, et al. 1992, 146, 153). When it comes to foreign aid, the U. S. spends less, in proportion to its national wealth, than nearly any other industrialized nation, as indicated in Table 3.

It may seem that the sort of figures mentioned thus far relate mostly to the "policy" section of the American Government course, and have little to do with the sections dealing with government structure and function. To the extent that this is the case, I would argue for giving greater priority to policy issues than is usually done. Students feel (and I agree) that policy is, after all, the payoff and culmination of all the structures, the outcome for which the structures exist. Certainly policy issues like health care press upon student attention more urgently than, say, the operating procedures

lation of the world? About 6B people (*Information Please Almanac* 1996, 130–33).¹³ What is the population of the biggest countries?

China	1,203M
India	937M
U.S.	264M
Indonesia	204M
Brazil	161M
Russia	150M
Pakistan	132M
Bangladesh	128M
Japan	125M
Nigeria	101M
Mexico	93M
Germany	81M
Britain, France, and Italy	58M each

These 15 countries have a total population of 3,660M, or well over half the population of all the world's 191 countries. The countries listed below, some will be surprised to learn, have small populations, even though

they figure quite heavily in our national consciousness.

Canada	28M
Israel	5M
Ireland	4M

How rich is the world? The Gross World Product (the sum of the GDP's of all countries in the world) is about \$30,000B (1996, 127–28).¹⁴ The U.S. GDP, of \$7,000B, comprises about 23% of this, a far greater percentage than that of any other nation. Is the U.S. then the richest country in the world? Not in terms of *per capita* GDP (U.S. Department of Commerce 1996, 835).¹⁵ In those calculations, the richest nations are:

Switzerland	\$38,000
Japan	37,000
Denmark	27,000
U.S.	26,000
Germany	25,000

TABLE 3
Foreign Aid as Percentage of GDP

Denmark	0.96
Norway	0.87
Netherlands	0.81
Sweden	0.77
France	0.55
Belgium	0.38
Canada	0.38
Australia	0.36
Luxembourg	0.36
Switzerland	0.34
Austria	0.33
Finland	0.32
Greece	0.31
Germany	0.31
Ireland	0.29
Japan	0.28
United Kingdom	0.28
Portugal	0.27
Spain	0.24
New Zealand	0.23
Italy	0.15
United States	0.10
Turkey	0.07
Korea	0.03

Source: OECD (1997, 68–69)

of Congress, and so it makes pedagogical sense to use the former as an entree to the latter. This said, a sense of magnitudes and proportions can help students gain an understanding of structures, as well as policies. It helps, for instance, to clarify the relationship between the three supposedly equal federal branches to see that, of the 5M people who work for the federal government, over 99% work for the president, while less than 1% work for Congress and the Federal courts combined! It also gives some insight into governmental operations to see that most federal employees work for the defense department and the postal service, while most local employees are teachers (U.S. Department of Commerce 1996, 345).¹⁸ It puts the system of federalism in perspective to learn that state and local governments, taken all together, spend as much money and employ 3 times as many workers as the federal government. And it provides a useful context for understanding constitutional issues of church and state to know

that Americans declare their religious preferences to be: 60% Protestant, 24% Catholic, 2% Jewish, 6% Other, and 8% non-religious (1996, 70).¹⁹

It is certainly not my argument that we should replace thoughtful and theoretical analysis with mindless number crunching. (I am, after all, the political philosopher in our department, and my colleagues will be amused to find that I, of all people, have written an article on the importance of numbers!) To the contrary, I think significant and interesting data, properly used, can prompt questions that go beyond the numbers themselves. *Why* is the incarceration rate so high in the U.S., the income gap so great between Tanzania and Switzerland, and life expectancy so low in Malawi? Do these figures represent fate, or can something be done to change them?

I welcome suggestions concerning better ways to find and present significant data. The numbers used *herein are intended to be more illustrative than definitive*. The best solution would be to have this task done for us by textbook writers and publishers. Until that happens, however, I recommend that instructors spend a few hours in the library reference section in search of choice nuggets for class use. We should have confidence in our own abilities to recast and juxtapose data in useful ways, and to round them off for simplification. So what if we are off a few million or billion here or there? Even if we are, it will be better to get students thinking actively and critically, in terms of estimates and rough calculations, than to allow them to remain passive consumers (or non-consumers) of boring, inert numbers.

Notes

1. The exact figure for world military expenditures for the year 1993 is \$868B. This represents a decline from \$1,234B in 1985. (Hereafter I will use B for billion and M for million, and will avoid trillion altogether.)

2. These happened to be the 3 textbooks at hand. My comments are not intended to reflect on the quality of these books in any respect other than the matter of charts and data. Nor am I aware of any texts that do a better job with the data, though I would be happy to hear of some.

3. This publication has the additional merit that nearly all of its information is free of copyright restrictions, allowing it to be photocopied as needed for class use. The paperback edition was listed at \$28 in 1995. Computer disc editions are also available.

4. Federal expenditures for 1996 (estimated) are listed as \$1,572B. State and local government expenditures are shown only up until 1993, and these are \$743B and \$685B, respectively (1996, 297). I have estimated higher state and local figures to reflect current expenditures, and have rounded off the whole set of numbers for pedagogical purposes.

5. The U.S. Gross Domestic Product for 1995 is listed as \$7,245B.

6. I am indebted to my colleague Richard Flickinger for introducing me to this valuable source of intergovernmental comparisons. The figures account for taxation by all levels of government. I have converted the alphabetical listing to a rank order listing. I am aware that there is a large discrepancy between these figures, showing U. S. tax receipts to be 27.6%, and my estimates showing U. S. federal and state governments to spend \$3,200B of a \$7,000B GDP, which would indicate a 45.7% tax rate. This discrepancy may be due in part to the fact that the OECD data are from 1994. Also, government tax receipts cannot be used to indicate government expenditures without taking account of the annual deficit. In any event, such an important comparison calls for further inquiry.

7. The estimated debt for 1996 is shown to be \$5,207B. Many students, in my experience, are not aware of the difference between the annual deficit and the total debt, and are under the mistaken impression that “balancing the budget” means eliminating the debt.

8. *Statistical Abstract* (1996, 332) shows the following estimated federal budget for 1996, in millions of dollars:

National Defense	\$ 265,556
Social Security	350,924
Income Security	228,342
Medicare	177,586
Health	121,211
Education	54,131
Veterans Benefits	37,748
Transportation	39,769
Commerce and Housing	–10,744
Net Interest	241,059
Other	71,452
Undistributed Offsets	–42,268
Total Outlays	\$1,572,411
(includes “Outlays not shown separately”)	

Detailed as it is, this breakdown is not fully satisfactory. Poverty-related assistance, for instance, is not listed separately, but is scattered throughout the other categories. “Income Security” refers not to poverty assistance but to federal employee retirement programs. Fortunately, poverty-related expenditures are brought together in a table on p. 371 of the 1996 *Statistical Abstract*. There we learn that, for 1994, means-tested federal outlays totaled \$246B, in addition to \$99B by state and local governments. The table lists in

detail the amounts spent by the federal government for food stamps, AFDC, housing assistance, student loans, Medicaid, school lunches, job training, etc. Using this table, together with the one printed above, I have reconfigured categories and rounded numbers to arrive at the simplified presentation herein.

9. *The Book of the States* gives 1992 figures showing government employment at the state level to be 4.595M and, at the local level, 11.103M. (This chart also showed the numbers employed in different types of jobs: teachers, police, etc.) *Statistical Abstract* shows federal civilian employment for 1995 to be 2.94M. To this must be added military employment, shown to be 1.7M for the year 1993 (1996, 357). In the simplified table that I have constructed from these numbers, the biggest "reach" was to round off the military at 2M.

10. A couple of years ago I used this book in class. It consisted almost entirely of vivid graphs and charts comparing the U.S. to other nations in a whole variety of categories, including economics, education, health, politics, leisure, (and even sex, though I forbade my students to read that chapter!). This book illustrates well the main theme of my essay, since the selected points of information were significant, interesting, and well presented. I have not used it recently, however, since it has not been updated, and, more importantly, because it does not clearly indicate its sources and assumptions. With those reservations in mind, I will cite that source herein. It indicates that the U.S. percentage of government employees to total workforce is 14.4%, a figure which ranked the U.S. far down the list of countries in terms of the size of government. I was unable to determine, however, the year of the report or assumptions concerning the total workforce.

11. Figures are for 1994, and include prison populations serving sentences of one year or more.

12. Undoubtedly, courses in comparative government do far more to compare cross-national data than do courses in American government, and some might think that the division of labor principle dictates that we assign such tasks accordingly. I have reservations about this reasoning, however. Since American government is the only political science course taken by many undergraduates, we are missing a great educational opportu-

nity if we do not introduce such concepts in that course. Another problem with such a division of labor is that it is only in the light of comparison that we fully comprehend our own American government. (The logical conclusion to this point is that the introductory American and comparative government courses should be combined, which I believe should happen).

13. World population is listed, as of July, 1994, at 5,643,287,771. All population figures come from this source. I have rounded all country figures to the nearest million.

14. This interesting figure is shown to have been \$29,000B in 1993.

15. All GDP per capita reports are for 1994. Figures for the richest nations are rounded to the nearest thousand. Figures for the poorest nations are as printed!

16. The figures are from 1988, but the source is not mentioned.

17. Data from 1994 show a total population of 1,475,329 in all federal and state prisons and jails. A chart shows a dramatic increase from about 300,000 in 1980 to over one million (in prisons) in 1994 (U.S. Department of Justice 1995, 555).

18. The 1995 civilian employment by the federal government is listed as 2,918,674. Of these, 28,993 work for and in the judicial branch, and 33,367 work for and in the legislative branch. This table also gives a detailed breakdown of totals within the executive branch, and across the years 1990 to 1995. Agencies employing the greatest number of civilians are the defense department with 830,738 and the postal service with 845,393.

19. Between 1967 and 1994, the percentage of Protestants decreased from 67% to 60%, the percentage of Catholics and Jews remained fairly constant, "Other" grew from 3% to 6%, and "None" grew from 2% to 8%.

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About the Author

William I. Buscemi is professor of political science at Wittenberg University, where he has received the Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching. He teaches in the areas of American politics and political theory, and his research interests focus on postmodern and pragmatic liberalism. His email address is buscemi@wittenberg.edu.

