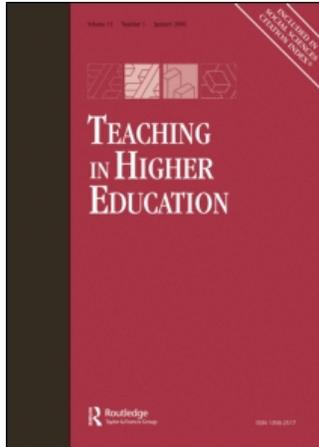


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### Teaching urban politics at an Albanian university: how do you make an American sub-discipline internationally relevant?

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## **Teaching urban politics at an Albanian university: how do you make an American sub-discipline internationally relevant?**

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This article compares American and Albanian college students' urban political experiences in order to understand the relevance of American models of urban politics to developing nations. Urban growth in Albania has created needs for teaching students about urban governance. The evidence presented here suggests that Albanians' conceptions of urban problems probably lend themselves to political activism. The challenge is to create models for teaching urban politics that are more relevant to students in developing nations.

Early in 2002, I was still giddy over my appointment as an assistant professor when a senior colleague asked if I would like to go to Albania on a US State Department-sponsored faculty exchange program. I agreed, reassured that the prospect of actually going to the Balkans seemed far in the future. Two years later, I found myself with a round-trip ticket to Tirana and a significant teaching challenge.

The Albanian faculty I met in the US (the other half of the exchange program) were particularly interested that, during my stay in Albania, I teach a 'mini-course' in my area of specialization, urban politics. Political science is new to the state-run university system—the University of Tirana has Albania's only Political Science Department, founded in 2000—and I was to be the first person to ever teach urban politics, for which there was an evident need. In Tirana, for instance, massive population growth since the fall of the Communist government and the simultaneous collapse of the economy in 1990–1991 has created a host of new problems (Table 2).

The prospect of teaching urban politics in Albania exposed a shortcoming in my training, and a shortcoming in how urban politics is studied and taught within American higher education. With only a few exceptions, urban politics is understood as a subset of the American politics sub-discipline within political science, usually with a twist of public administration—a reflection of the peripheral role assigned to cities within the discipline. As Paul Peterson (1981, 3) puts it, "Every political scientist lives in a city, in a town, or at least in a village; by studying the politics around him, he can—with only modest research resources—gather the rich contextual information necessary for high-quality interpretive analysis, which he then generalizes to the nation as a whole". If cities are only used for convenience, why not stick to those closest to home? Now I had a further question: What do you do with American models of urban politics when you find yourself far from home—say, in Albania?

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What follows is a description of how, during my four-session mini-course taught to upper-level undergraduates at the University of Tirana, I attempted to make urban politics relevant to Albanians. During each session, I had my students answer questions, in writing, designed to stimulate thinking and discussion about the connections between American and Albanian urban political experiences (Table 1). I was able to make a limited comparison of the Albanian students' answers with the answers of American students to whom I had given a similar assignment. I also had the opportunity, during a 'teacher training' session, to ask the younger Albanian faculty at least one of the questions I had asked their students. The differences in the answers between the American and Albanian students, and between the Albanian students and faculty, provided at least rough controls for nationality, age, and educational level.

Rather than a 'test' of Albanian students' understanding of urban politics, my questions should be viewed as an initial exploration into how urban politics could be taught across national borders. The comparison of countries as different as the US and Albania—one with some 300 million people, a per capita GDP of \$41,800 and a strong liberal tradition; the other with some 3.5 million people, a per capita GDP of \$4,900 (US Central Intelligence Agency 2006), and governed until the 1990s by one of the world's most repressive and isolationist regimes—suggests the outer limits to which American models of urban politics might be internationally relevant. However, there are also at least two reasons to think that a comparison between Albanian and American students could be useful. First, the fact that Albania at least officially considers itself a close ally of the US—the country still has troops stationed in Iraq, for instance—suggests that as Albania develops economically and politically, it will likely follow an American model in many respects. Second, American universities are by far the most popular destinations for students studying abroad,

Table 1. Questions asked the University of Tirana students.

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Session 1

1. What, in your opinion, are the most important problems facing the city and city government of Tirana?
2. How would you define the following terms?: a. 'urban'; b 'suburban'

Session 2

1. How would you define the term 'corruption'?
2. Do you think that some level of corruption is inherent to city government?
3. Is Tirana governed by a political machine?

Session 3

1. Which of the following best describes the political system in Tirana? Please explain.
  - a. A cohesive elite controls all major policy decisions; the general public has no input.
  - b. Elite leaders control major policy decisions, and are brought together by their mutual interest in increasing property values in the city.
  - c. Different elite groups compete with one another for control over policy decisions by gaining popular support among the general public.
  - d. There are no elites, only elected officials who seek to fulfill their campaign promises.

Session 4

1. Is there an 'urban underclass' in Albania? Who are they?
-

especially from 'developing and newly industrializing' nations like Albania (Altbach 2004, 20). This present study can be viewed as a preliminary attempt to understand the extent to which American educational models might be made more relevant to the large number of students from developing nations studying in the US.

One of the great advantages of teaching urban politics is the proximity of the subject to the everyday lives of students, who are thus more likely to discover the possibility that their actions could have an impact on the system. Models of urban politics are thus especially important in that they can shape students' understandings of how to be meaningful political actors. I found evidence that, more so than American students, Albanians' conceptions of urbanism and urban problems probably lend themselves to political activism. In addition, if Albanians find the urban context a more likely venue for activism, then their conceptions of urban politics will be more important in shaping the form their activism takes. The challenge then, which I take up at the end of this article, is to use the basic elements of American models of urban politics as building blocks for new models more relevant to the Albanian experience, and more generally to the experiences of students from other developing nations.

### **The course**

My Albanian mini-course was a distillation of the 10-week urban politics course I teach at my home institution, which I divide into three sections covering (1) urban society, (2) urban government and politics, and (3) urban political economy. I devote approximately three weeks to each of the sections in my American course. In Albania, I covered urban society in one class session, urban politics and government in two sessions and urban political economy in one session. Each session ran for approximately two hours. I reduced the material I covered to 'classic' theories and works that I thought would be most relevant to Albanians. For example, I devoted an entire class to urban political machines, as I thought their close association to corruption, strong parties, and population growth might make them relatively relevant to the Albanian urban political experience.

Besides the length of time and breadth of material covered, there were other important differences in the two courses. First, I taught the mini-course in English, which required some change in my teaching, as I often stopped to check if students were able to follow my lecture and sometimes had to go over topics several times. I also asked the students to write answers to questions in English. My comparison of American and Albanian student responses is thus limited by the fact the Albanians were responding in a second language, and I note the possible limitations this imposed on the comparisons in the following discussion.

Second, my Albanian students received a certificate for attending my course, but no credit or grade. There was thus little incentive for them to read the assigned material, and they were taking my course on top of a full course load. As a result, and because I was speaking in their second language, I spent more time explaining the readings than I would in an American course. Third, my American course enrolls an average of 15 students who attend regularly, while attendance in the mini-course varied from 15 to 39 students on any given day, with a core of ten students who attended all of the sessions. Finally, while the Albanian students were the same age as the American students (18–22), there were more women in the mini-course (80–90%,

reflecting enrollment in the social sciences at the University of Tirana) than in my American course, which usually enrolls equal amounts of men and women.

In the session on urban society, I discussed alternative conceptions of cities (as legal entities, physical artifacts, and social processes), and compared the famous depiction of Wirth (1938) of urban life as “impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental” to the argument by Jacobs (1961) that the very superficiality of interpersonal relations in cities makes meaningful community possible in an urban milieu. I framed the competing arguments of Wirth and Jacobs through an introduction to American urban development from the Depression through the 1950s, covering urban political machines, federal housing policy, deindustrialization, the migration of Southern African Americans to Northern cities, and White flight to the suburbs.

At the end of class, I asked the students to define the terms ‘urban’ and ‘suburban’, and to answer the question, ‘What, in your opinion, are the most important problems facing the city and city government of Tirana?’ These questions were used to establish a baseline understanding of Albanian students’ urban experience and their conceptions of urbanism. In previous urban politics courses, I had asked American students to define the term ‘urban’, and I used their answers to provide a comparison to my Albanian students’ answers. Both groups of students had been asked to define ‘urban’ after similar lectures, so they were similarly primed. In total, I could compare the definitions of ‘urban’ provided by 27 American students and 13 Albanian students.

In the first session on urban government and politics, I discussed the classic model of the urban political machine. I used the example of Tammany Hall to describe how the ‘spoils’ system of rotation in office and other ‘privatist’ benefits were distributed and thus translated into electoral power through a network of neighborhood political clubs and a hierarchy of block captains, ward leaders, district leaders, and the county boss. I placed the machine in the context of industrialization and European immigration, and then explained and critiqued the functionalist model of Merton (1957) of the machine. At the end of the session, I asked students if they thought Tirana was governed by a political machine. Since much of my discussion revolved around the relationship between political machines and corruption (i.e., they dealt in private rather than public benefits, and sought power for no higher purpose than power itself), I asked my students if they believed that some level of corruption was inherent to city government. To control for unwanted variation in the answers, I also asked students to define ‘corruption’. Sixteen students provided definitions of corruption and answered whether they thought corruption was inherent to government, and 13 gave their opinions about whether Tirana was governed by a political machine.

In the second session on urban government and politics, I covered more contemporary models of urban politics, including the community power structure debate (e.g., Hunter 1953; Dahl 1961; Crenson 1971; Gaventa 1980), the growth machine model (e.g., Logan and Molotch 1987) and regime theory (e.g., Stone 1989). Drawing from these models, I asked students to choose one of four characterizations of urban politics that they thought best fit Tirana (Table 1). My characterizations of urban politics depicted descending levels of elite control (‘a’ is pure elite control; ‘b’ a depiction of elite control limited to the goal of increasing land value; ‘c’ a combination of popular and elite control; and ‘d’ assumes no elite control). Nine

students provided opinions about which of the four models were most relevant to Tirana.

In my final session, on urban political economy, I introduced the argument of Tiebout (1956) that public goods can be efficiently supplied through ‘polycentricity’, where residents ‘purchase’ public goods by moving to a municipality of their choosing; the argument of Peterson (1981) that cities, as governments with uniquely porous borders, are constrained to pursuing ‘developmental’ or ‘allocational’, rather than ‘redistributive’ policies; and the argument from both the new regionalist and Social Stratification Government Inequality (SSGI) literature (e.g., Ostrom 1983; Orfield 2002), that polycentricity results in ‘economic sorting’ where municipal boundaries exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities. I used the question of how socioeconomic status was distributed across space as the lead-in to a discussion of the urban underclass debate (e.g., Wilson 1987), and asked students if there was an underclass in Tirana—and if so, who were they? I offered students the following criteria for an urban underclass: (1) intergenerational transmission of poverty; (2) geographic concentration; (3) social isolation; (4) unemployment and underemployment; (5) low skills and education; and (6) membership in a minority group. Ten students provided an answer to the question of an Albanian urban underclass.

### Student responses

Albanian and American students differ dramatically in how they understand urbanism and urban problems. Americans were more likely to define ‘urban’ as a process of individual identity formation, using terms such as ‘lifestyle’, ‘demeanor’, or ‘mindset’, while Albanians identified urban life in collective terms such as ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’. The six Albanians (46%) who defined ‘urban’ as a way of life, referred to it as “all the characteristics of a well-organized life”; “a civilization center”; “The most important cultural activity takes place”; “rich cultural, social and political life”; and “the cities that are big and civilized”. Ten Americans (37%) defined ‘urban’ in terms of a lifestyle that was “open-minded”; “fast paced”; “forever changing”; “an attitude of compassion and unity with those you live close to”; “anonymous”; “a lifestyle that embraces technology”; and “something modern and updated”. Along with their more individual-level explanations, three Americans (11%) defined ‘urban’ as something that could exist independent of cities: “‘Urban’ means something that is associated with cities even if its not in a city itself”; “Urban style or life can be found anywhere”; and “Clothing in my opinion is urban mostly because of the style not location”. By contrast, all of the Albanians referred to spatial constraints, such as “a city”, “a specific place”, “an area” or “regular spreading of population”.

Americans’ more individual-level definitions of ‘urban’ are likely connected to their identification of ‘urban’ with diversity. Five American students (19%) associated ‘urban’ with some type of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political ideology, or religion. No Albanians mentioned diversity in their definitions of ‘urban’, which possibly reflected their limited ability to broadly define a concept in English, but which also no doubt reflected the homogeneity of a country whose borders had largely been closed to in- or out-migration for half a century.

Table 2 lists the most important problems facing the city and city government of Tirana identified by Albanian students, in order of frequency mentioned. The

Table 2. Student responses to the question ‘What, in your opinion, are the most important problems facing the city and city government of Tirana?’ ( $n = 19$ ).

Problems identified	Frequency
Environmental pollution	15
Infrastructure (general)	8
Condition of the streets	6
Overpopulation	6
Absence of water	5
Illegal construction of buildings	4
Absence of electricity	4
Corruption	3
Suburban development	3
Poverty	2
Lack of urban planning	2
Undrinkable water	1
Traffic	1
Lack of public space	1
Organization of the population	1
‘Economical problems (taxes)’	1
Absence of respect for the law	1
Destabilization of government	1
Elite control of policy	1
Unemployment	1

student responses (and in-class discussion) depict a city that has experienced massive population growth in the absence of any real land-use controls (Felsthausen 1999; United Nations 2002), with an overburdened infrastructure, most notably the streets, waterworks, and electric grid. The influx of cars in the 1990s (which had not been allowed under Communism), combined with non-existent emissions standards, into a city surrounded by mountains, has resulted in an obvious problem of air pollution, identified by the majority of students.

I had never asked American students similar questions about problems facing American cities, but some had identified problems in their definitions of ‘urban’ that provide grounds for speculation. One difference between American and Albanian students is the salience of crime as an urban problem. Three American students volunteered that crime was a central element in defining ‘urban’—for instance, “it denotes a place where . . . you are exposed to violence” and “these areas are heavily populated and have a high crime rate”—while no Albanian student mentioned crime, either in their definitions of ‘urban’ or in their identification of problems facing Tirana. Apparently, the open gang warfare and looting in Tirana and other Albanian cities during 1997 did not reflect a broader problem of street crime. When I asked Albanian students about crime, the consensus was that it was a problem in the countryside, not in Tirana.

The student responses suggested other likely differences between American and Albanian conceptions of urban problems. For instance, living in a country with national air quality regulations, American students would probably not rank pollution as urgent a problem as Albanians. Indeed, the one American student

who identified environmental problems in their definition of 'urban' also noted that urbanism is possibly a solution, since "the environment is helped by having people populate a small area rather than sprawl out across the whole country". No Albanians expressed similar sentiments. American students would also probably be less likely than Albanians to identify inadequate infrastructure as an urban problem. American cities face challenges in maintaining their infrastructure, but there is simply no equivalent to the problems of Albanian cities, where, for instance, people have access to running water an average of two to four hours a day (World Bank 2002). No American students mentioned inadequate infrastructure in their definitions of 'urban'.

Population growth and suburbanization are also different problems in Albania than in the US. In Tirana, the 'suburbs' are the growing ring of illegally constructed housing around the city, built mostly for poor, rural migrants from the Northern part of the country. Rather than the American dilemma of 'sprawl', where affluent cookie-cutter housing eats up farmlands and spoils natural resources, the 'suburbs' in Albania represent in large part the dilemma of an emergent urban underclass. Suburbanization in both the US and Albania is characterized by inadequate land use controls, but here too student answers indicate that the problem is conceived in very different ways. Albanians experience urban and suburban growth in the context of a history of population movement strictly controlled by the Communist government. Thus, one student described population growth as a problem of 'uncontrolled movement'—a point of view that would probably never occur to American students, who would assume freedom of mobility.

In Tirana, suburban development has occurred alongside population growth in the central city. For Americans, especially those from the Rustbelt, suburban growth is often associated with depopulation and disinvestment from the central city. I thus expected that the distinction between 'urban' and 'suburban' would be less clear to Albanians than to Americans. I had never asked my American students to define 'suburban', so my findings are only suggestive, but they do indicate a difference between American and Albanian understandings of the suburbs. Six American students (22%) compared to only one Albanian (8%) defined 'urban' in contrast to suburban or rural areas. The Americans noted that suburbs had more trees and grass than cities, that urban areas are more diverse than suburban or rural areas, and that people in urban areas had a different mindset or lifestyle than people in suburban or rural areas, while the Albanian student defined 'suburban' as "A smaller, quieter area that is based in a less noisy life and in stronger relations". By contrast, seven Albanians (54%), but only one American (4%) defined 'suburban' as a subset of 'urban'. The fact that the Albanians were writing in a second language may be largely responsible for this difference, as the Albanians may have understood suburban to literally mean 'sub-urban', without the cultural connotations that Americans would probably attach to the term. The American noted that 'suburban' meant "a moderate to large populated area that still identifies itself to an urban structure". Albanian explanations included "a miniature format of the urban area"; "part of urban, the periphery of urban area"; "some kind of unit or division of a big town, which include the elements of the term 'urban'"; "all those areas near the center or the downtown zones"; or "going to be urban". Finally, four Albanians (31%) defined 'suburban' without any reference to 'urban': "the rural places"; "a

small area, for instance, ... a village"; "smallest areas" and "concept used for towns and villages".

If the Albanian urban experience is different from that of Americans, we might expect that Albanians would not find models of urban politics developed in the American context relevant to their situation. In fact, students and faculty found even such classically American models as the political machine at least somewhat relevant to the Albanian experience. Six Albanian students (46%) said that Tirana was governed by a political machine, and gave several reasons: "because political leaders use the[ir] post[s] for the[ir] personal interest and not for public interest"; "because Albania lives in a transition period"; "because the two biggest parties are well organized and they engage trustful people (sometimes not specialized) who obey ... the heads of the parties"; "[be]cause there exist[s] a hierarchy"; and "because we know, that if a party win[s] the election the administration change[s] its officers". Of the seven students (54%) who said that Tirana was not governed by a political machine, four claimed that the city was actually governed by just one person, which two students identified as the mayor, Edi Rama, and another identified as the prime minister, Fatos Nano, and two provided no explanations. One student said that, rather than a machine, the government was responsive to the popular will: "Till now, the governance of Tirana was open-minded, that means, all the mayors had their time to do something for the city. And when that time was up, what came after was citizens will".

Like their students, the faculty were equally split on whether or not Tirana was governed by a political machine, with three responding 'no', two responding 'yes', and one responding 'partly'. The one faculty member who provided an explanation of why Tirana was not governed by a political machine noted the absence of 'professional' politicians holding office. The faculty member who answered 'partly' noted that "Also nepotism is very strong". One faculty member who responded 'yes' elaborated that during the last local elections, "politicians promised lots of jobs and offered money to take people's votes".

My Albanian respondents' understandings of a political machine differed from the classic American definition. First, no Albanian mentioned ethnic politics when discussing machine politics in Tirana—not surprising, given that no Albanian students had described 'urban' in terms of social diversity or heterogeneity. Second, neither Albanian students nor faculty made strong associations between machine politics and corruption. Two out of five students who said that corruption was inherent to city government also said that Tirana was not governed by a political machine. All six faculty members agreed that some level of corruption was inherent to city government, yet only two said Tirana was governed by a political machine. Both students and faculty uniformly defined corruption as the use of public office for private gain, and in particular taking monetary bribes.

The biggest difference between the Albanian faculty and students was that all faculty, but only half the students (eight of sixteen respondents) agreed that corruption was inherent to city government. The faculty provided less elaborate explanations of their answers than the students, but there are several likely reasons for this difference. First, most of the faculty had studied abroad, and evidence of corruption in other countries may have convinced them of its staying power. Second, the likelihood among Albanians of believing that corruption is inherent to government may be a function of age, where the faculty was old enough to

remember corruption under the prior system. Finally, political science students, in particular, may be exceptionally idealistic about the possibility of eliminating corruption. Indeed, compared to the Corruption Perception Index, which lists Albania among the top quarter of the world's nations in terms of perceived corruption (Transparency International 2004, 285), the level at which Albanian students denied the inherently corrupt nature of government appears quite high. Students' idealism was reflected in responses such as "I'm sure that not even one level of corruption is necessary to city politics"; and one student who, while acknowledging that there was widespread corruption in city government, noted that "I'll never agree with this [that corruption is inherent to city government] . . . because I find [it] extremely nonsense the exist[ence] of corruption [in] the states which want to be democratic . . . So even at the [level of] city politics it's the same thing for me".

If Albanian faculty and students found the machine model relevant to Tirana, their explanations indicate that they did so for a variety of disparate reasons, thus confirming what American political scientists concluded long ago—that the machine model is a relatively blunt instrument to use in analyzing urban politics. My next question, regarding elite control in Tirana, provided a more fine-grained picture of the Albanian conception of urban politics that indicated a notable lack of consensus over the question 'who governs'? Students were equally split among all of the competing depictions of elite control. Three students (33%) agreed that an elite controls all major policy decisions and that the public has no input. Two of these students argued that the lack of public input was a result of an ineffective city council, while the third student argued that elections were not "regular and honest", resulting in a sense of powerlessness and resignation among the public. Two students (22%) believed that there was an elite brought together by their common interest in property values. One of these students noted that this was less an elite than a "union of common interests", while the other student indicated a more cohesive set of "elite leaders" and noted that "This situation cannot be changed if all the people, all the citizens don't want to change, to live better. Maybe it can happen only with a revolution, upheaval change, I don't believe in normal and natural changes". Two students (22%) thought competition among elites provided some democratic responsiveness from government. One of these respondents indicated that the competing elites were the leadership of the two major parties, the Democrats and Socialists, while the other student argued that the elite were "those people who ha[ve] a business (strong one) and, are th[o]se people who play an active role in city's policies". Finally, two students (22%) provided very different explanations for why there was no elite. One student saw the lack of elite control as a problem, noting "that 14 years of democracy weren't sufficient to form a 'good' political culture in the Albanian society". The second student claimed that no elite existed because under communism, "we were all equal and the elites didn't exist. And now that we thought that we live in democracy it doesn't exist an elite".

In contrast to students' disagreement over elite rule, all students agreed that there was an urban underclass, though definitions varied. Five students (50%) identified a growing underclass among the people who had moved to the periphery of Tirana after 1991—'new suburbs'—where they have limited access to education and other public services. One of the more detailed answers explained that

People who came from North had and still have another mentality that would be called better 'rural mentality', really different from the mentality of people living in Tirana. Those people with the goal of a better life tried to be integrated within the Tirana society but because of their poverty and low skills of education gradually they remained apart from Tirana society and became a concentrated and isolated group in the suburbs of Tirana. Their poverty is quite the same as they were before they came in the city, so they just changed the 'habitat' of poverty.

Another student located an underclass in 'small cities' that may have included the Tirana suburbs. Four students (40%) identified the Roma (gypsies) as an ethnic underclass, though not a geographically concentrated one. A final student noted the more general problem of the unequal distribution of wealth: "We have two poles. The poor, and those who are very rich".

### **The challenge: creating new models of urban politics**

Differences between Albanian and American conceptions of urbanism and urban problems suggest that Albanians would find the urban context a more likely venue for political activism. First, American students defined urbanism more often as a lifestyle choice rather than a specific place, and thus an arena for political action. Second, rather than identifying urban problems, American students were more likely to see urbanism as a solution to larger social problems, such as intolerance or environmental degradation. If American students identify urbanism as the object, rather than subject, of reform, they are likely to find political activism more meaningful at higher levels. Third, Albanian students identified urban problems that were more subject to change through government action, such as infrastructure development, environmental protection, and urban planning. The problem of crime identified by American students is notoriously unresponsive to local government action (Wilson 1968, 57–64). Finally, Albanian students' expressed idealism regarding the elimination of corruption suggests that they would have at least the motivation to become politically active local reformers.

If Albanian students are more likely to become politically active at the city level, the challenge is to devise helpful conceptual frameworks that could appropriately guide them by identifying the best methods and targets for activism. This initial foray into the subject suggests at least two things about the limits and possibilities for how American models of urban politics might inform the political activism of Albanian students. First, while Albanian students find some elements within American models of urban politics relevant, the models themselves are less relevant. Corruption, elite control, and the promise of democratic reform were all salient concepts to Albanian students, but when combined to form more elaborate models of urban politics—'pluralism', 'power elite', the 'growth machine'—there was a striking lack of consensus; equal numbers of Albanian respondents saw both the presence and absence of a political machine, a government controlled by elites, and a government subject to popular will.

Second, much of the Albanian urban political experience is not addressed by American models of urban politics. For instance, many of the problems identified by Albanians have not been problems in American cities for almost a century, such as the basic lack of infrastructure. The shape of urban poverty is also very different in Albania than in the US. In Tirana, poverty is in large part a problem of

accommodating a previously rural population, while in the US, urban poverty is, in large part, a function of a culturally specific legacy of race relations. Finally, the legal and political context of American cities is much different to that of Albanian cities, the latter being in a small country that follows the unitary model of the European state rather than the American federal model.

At least part of the point of a comparative model is to illuminate the differences in the cases being compared. Comparing Albania and the US is thus useful to point out how policy prescriptions derived from American models of urban politics would be inappropriate in the Albanian context—an important point for a country that emulates the US in many ways. At the same time, basic elements within American models of urban politics (if not the models themselves) were clearly salient to Albanian students, suggesting that relevant examples of American urban political development might be used to inform Albanian students as at least qualified parables. One example is infrastructure development, a pressing issue in contemporary Albania, and an issue that American cities struggled with in the late nineteenth century. American urban political development was fundamentally shaped by the existence of political machines that used lucrative public works projects to reward political loyalists in ways that often fell under the rubric of ‘corruption’ (e.g., kick-backs on contracts, insider real estate deals) (Dilworth 2005). Certainly, the example of corruption around public works in American cities could inform Albanian students about the possibilities for institutional provisions that would limit possibilities for graft. Yet any model of corruption that drew from American examples for Albanian students would also have to recognize culturally specific elements that shape corruption, such as the fact that perceptions of corruption in American cities have been shaped by ethnic prejudices that are not necessarily relevant to the Albanian experience.

In short, the challenge for teaching urban politics in Albania, and possibly in other developing countries, is to reconfigure the useful elements from American models of urban politics, to make them more relevant to students, as a way of channeling their evident idealism into a form of activism that addresses the many problems they identify. We might even develop a broader understanding of urban politics in the process.

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