The rising cost of college textbooks

It is no secret that college is expensive, but decades of stagnation in real wages coupled with state and federal disinvestment from higher education have made that expense almost unattainable, at least without the assistance of significant student loans. While tuition and room and board costs are largely out of the hands of course instructors, one aspect of the cost of attending college rests squarely with the instructors: the cost of
books and required materials. The College Board reports annual student budget numbers for books and supplies at $1240 at public and private, nonprofit 4 year institutions and $1460 at public 2 year institutions (Ma et al. 2020, 10). The high cost of books causes students to spend time looking for ways to save money on their textbooks, which is time they could be using to study (Katz 2019); students may also resort to buying older editions of the book or not buying the book at all. Research indicates that high textbook costs are challenging for students at both public colleges and universities as well as their costlier private counterparts (Murphy and Rose 2018). The 2018 Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey (2019) conducted by the Florida Virtual Campus found that while student spending had declined since the 2016 round of the survey, it was still quite high, with 45.8% of respondents saying they spent more than $300 on textbooks for Fall 2017 (9). Despite the decline in textbook prices, the survey found

The cost of textbooks continues to negatively impact student access to required materials and learning. The top 5 highest percentage answers reported by students when asked about the impact of textbook costs are: not purchasing the required textbook (64.2%); taking fewer courses (42.8%); not registering for a specific course (40.5%); earning a poor grade (35.6%); and dropping a course (22.9%). (13)

Alternatives to high textbook costs: Free-to-Student options

Clearly, high textbook costs can jeopardize student’s academic progress. The affordances of digital technology have allowed several alternatives to expensive traditional textbooks to develop, and these options have overlapping but distinct definitions, which can be extremely confusing. To help sort things out, we can classify these responses according to whether students have to pay for access to their course materials or whether the materials are free for students enrolled in a course. Free-to-students options include simply using web-based materials, either those that are completely free to access online, such as open data sets or YouTube videos, or those that are available through campus libraries’ holdings and subscriptions, such as books (reserves, ebooks, and print), scholarly journals, and newspaper articles (Pfannenstiel, Redcay, and Albert 2022, 555). Another free-to-students alternative to high textbook costs are Open Educational Resources (OER), which are defined by UNESCO as “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions” (2012 Paris OER Declaration). This definition is narrower than just “things that are free on the web,” but still extremely broad, as it applies to both items that were under copyright previously but are now in the public domain, such as Jowett’s translations of Plato’s The Republic, as well as newly created materials that are released with a license that explicitly permits sharing, such as American Government 2E from Openstax. OER come in many different forms, from whole courses to individual modules, articles, books, digital textbooks, videos, podcasts, and other forms besides. OER have 5 R permissions, either through explicitly open license, or by being in the public domain (a status which grants all 5 Rs): the permission for users to retain, revise, reuse, remix, and redistribute (Open Education). The 5 Rs help operationalize the difference between OER and other free-to-
 Alternatives to high textbook costs: Fee-to-Student options

Turning to alternatives to high textbook costs that charge students for access to materials, one sees that textbook publishers have responded to free alternatives with several innovations. Digital rentals are often the least expensive way for students to access the traditionally published textbooks their instructors assign; such a rental gives a student temporary access to an online version of the textbook. Traditional textbook publishers have also branched out into courseware, wherein a student pays a fee (either to the publishing company directly, or through a so-called “Inclusive Access” deal where students are billed for the course materials through their institution) for access to the required readings as well as access to a homework system (Cuillier). To make matters even more confusing, some courseware options that charge fees to students are built out of free OER textbooks. Investigation into instructor perceptions of OER and digital teaching materials is an important research area as the distinctions between library resources, OER, and digital courseware can be so blurry.

Textbook cost and OER in political science

While they have made major strides in many institutions and disciplines, particularly in STEM fields, OER have had a more difficult time penetrating the social sciences. The APSA Departmental Survey does not report any data about textbook use or cost (2017–2018 APSA Departmental Survey). Examining the coverage of textbook cost in two major political science journals, *PS: Political Science*, which contains a regular section called “The Teacher,” and *The Journal of Political Science Education (JPSE)*, the teaching and learning journal of the American Political Science Association shows how
little attention textbook costs receive in political science. There are two articles in *JPSE* that contain the searchword “textbook cost*,” Lawrence & Lester (2018) and Brandle (2018). When “OER” is searched in *JPSE*, seven total articles, including those two articles and a separate article by this author, are returned. There is 1 article returned for either of these searches in the *PS* archive, which was written by this author (Brandle 2020).

Textbooks, however, are not ignored in these journals, as a search for textbook* returns 51 *PS* articles and 217 *JPSE* articles. In fact, *PS* published a symposium in its “The Teacher” section in Volume 50, Issue 2: “Symposium: The 2017 Guide to Choosing Your Textbook.” In the four articles that focused on introductory undergraduate course textbooks, two of the papers, Monogan (2017) and Moore (2017) made no mention at all of cost as something instructors might consider; Knutson (2017) mentioned in passing that textbooks were available in multiple formats for instructors concerned about cost, and only Hicks and Newmark (2017) admitted that “text prices are substantial” (547). Hicks and Newmark (2017) do not provide individual prices of the 7 state and local textbooks they review, but do include the prices in their paragraph-long discussion of cost. The most economical textbook they review starts at $119, ranging to the most expensive they reviewed at $235; they do note that different formats are available, including ebooks, which substantially lower the price, ranging from $46 to $95. The other symposium papers include list prices for the textbooks they review, with the average price of the 5 American Government textbooks reviewed in Knutson (2017) coming in at $176.60, the average cost of the undergraduate methods texts reviewed in Monogan (2017) at $71.49, and the average of the 7 political theory texts in Moore (2017) at $50.84. None of the 24 books reviewed in these four studies were OER, despite the existence of several open textbooks in those subfields prior to the writing of the articles. Between the lack of research or publications on textbook cost, and the unexamined costs of reviewed textbooks, one could easily conclude that political science as a discipline is not very concerned about the cost of the textbooks we require or the burden that textbook costs may impose on our students.

**Methodology: survey of political science instructors OER usage**

It is possible that there could be lots of political scientists using OER, just not publishing about it, so I conducted an online survey of those teaching introductory level political science, primarily using email and Twitter-based recruitment. Ultimately 73 instructors responded and 70 responses will be analyzed here; these are the 33 responses from those who identified as instructors at public 4 year institutions and the 37 instructors from private 4 year institutions. There is a good regional distribution of responses, as shown in Figure 1, although New York is overrepresented.

Because the survey sample skewed heavily toward New York, a brief discussion of some data on student opinions of OER and textbook costs from New York is warranted. First, the CUNY Zero Textbook Student Survey Project collects and shares student opinions on Zero Textbook Cost courses. During four semesters of data collection, 106 CUNY students took the survey for introductory political science classes at
Kingsborough Community College, Hunter College, Borough of Manhattan Community College, and John Jay College. 84 of the 107 said their zero textbook cost materials were easier to access than traditional textbooks, with 15 saying they were about the same and only 7 saying they were more difficult to access. 105 students answered the question of whether they would recommend a zero textbook cost course to their friends, and the overwhelmingly reply (102 out of 105) was yes.

Analysis of the current introductory political science textbooks assigned at 5 of the senior colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) provides context for the costs part of the story. In the Fall 2019 semester, 99 sections of introductory level political science courses were listed on the CUNY-wide registration system, CUNYFirst at Baruch College, Brooklyn College, City College, Hunter College, and Queens College. Of these, 17 were zero textbook cost courses, 48 had required texts listed, 32 were listed as To Be Announced, and 2 had books that were recommended, but not required. Using the textbook prices listed in CUNYFirst, the average textbook cost for an introductory level political science course at these colleges was $51.92. Even in a system that has experienced multiple years of million dollar state grants to encourage the adoption of OER, almost half of the sections offered at these colleges still require a traditional textbook. It does appear that some of the instructors who require textbooks to be purchased are sensitive to cost concerns; several courses have special notes in CUNYFirst specifying that older editions or rental versions of the textbook are acceptable. At the same time, three sections require the purchase of a subscription to a courseware system, specifically Revel or TopHat. These course systems provide automated homework, but make it difficult for students to save money by using library reserves, borrowed copies, or used versions of the textbook, as they must purchase their own unique subscription password; furthermore, should a student fail to complete the course that semester, they would have to repurchase the access code to retake the class.

While this survey draws on an admittedly limited sample, there is still much to learn from the responses. 67 of 70 respondents said they have complete control over the choice of what materials to teach with, 2 said they they are part of a group of instructors who teach the same introductory course and who decide together on a common book(s)/materials, and 1 respondent said they have no input into the selection of the
textbook or materials with which they teach. All respondents were asked how familiar with OER (Open Educational Resources) they were, and the responses were split fairly evenly between the three choices: roughly one third each to “I regularly use at least some OER in my teaching of political science” (24), “I have heard about OER, but have not adopted them in my teaching” (25), and “I have never heard of OER” (21). The distribution of responses here shows the surveyed political scientists to be more aware of OER than faculty members at large, according to the most recent survey from Spilovoy, Seaman, and Ralph (2020), which found that in a national sample of all higher education instructors, 56% of faculty members were unaware of OER and Creative Commons.

The distribution of respondents on familiarity with OER stayed roughly stable when responses were divided between instructors of public 4 year (n = 33) and private 4 year (n = 37) institutions, as shown in Figure 2. From these results, it does not appear that the type of institution affects whether instructors know about or use OER.

Many different arguments can be made about which type of instructor would be most likely to know about or use OER, full-time, part-time, tenured, tenure track, or non-tenure track. Some would argue that full-time tenured instructors are more likely...
to adopt OER, since temporary, contract, and graduate student workers do not have the extra time to work on OER while permanent instructors do. Some argue the opposite, that tenured faculty have no incentive to update their teaching, and tenure track faculty are incentivized to spend as little time on their teaching as possible. Of the 70 instructor responses analyzed here, employment status does not seem to have an impact on OER knowledge or use, as shown in Figure 3. This is consistent with Palmer, Brimeyer, and Schueths’ (2018) finding in sociology that “faculty at all levels of the academic hierarchy are using OER’s” (124).

The links between OER and Open Data or Open Research appear to apply to political science instructors as well, as shown in Figure 4. Instructors who were not familiar with Open

![Figure 3. OER knowledge and adoption by employment status.](image)

![Figure 4. Knowledge of Open Data & OER Knowledge and adoption by political science instructors.](image)
Data or Open Research were much more likely to have never heard of OER, while those who were very familiar with Open Data or Open Research were much likelier to regularly use OER in their teaching.

OER were officially recognized by UNESCO in 2002, but OER creation and adoption have taken time, with open textbooks for introductory political science courses becoming more widely available in 2013, 2016, and 2017. National surveys have found increasing levels of OER awareness in their annual results since 2014 (Spilovoy, Seaman, and Ralph 2020). It is therefore not surprising to see that instructors who have been teaching longer have less familiarity with OER, as shown in Figure 5. Of 69 instructors teaching introductory political science courses, more than half of respondents who said they regularly use at least some OER (14 of 23) have been teaching 6 years or less.

Instructors were asked how much the cost for students influences their process for selecting teaching materials, with a great deal, somewhat, and not at all as the answer. Only one respondent said that cost did not matter at all; this respondent is a contingent faculty member who indicates in other responses that they have no control whatsoever over the materials they teach with. The other 69 respondents all said that cost matters either a great deal or somewhat, with those who have more knowledge of OER more frequently answering that it matters a great deal, as shown in Figure 6.

**How much does required assigned reading in introductory political science cost?**

Instructors who had never heard of OER were asked how much their required assigned reading cost students. 20 of the 21 respondents answered, including four instructors who said their materials cost $0 to students, because they are provided as PDFs by the instructor (1 respondent) or are accessed through the library’s subscription to scholarly journals (3 respondents). Prices ranged from $0 to $175, and the average of all 20 prices comes to $61.65. It is worth briefly discussing the four zero-cost-to-students responses,
as it highlights the challenges that come from using zero cost materials. First, the three respondents who taught using journal articles available through their libraries were correct in self-identifying as not using OER, though they would properly fall within the category of a zero textbook cost class. The instructor who said they provide PDFs, on the other hand, may or may not be unknowingly using OER, depending on the licensing of the materials the instructor shared. If the documents shared were either public domain or openly licensed for sharing, then the instructor was actually engaging in OER use, even if they do not know that they were. If, however, the files shared were not openly licensed (such as a scan of a book chapter) then, while the instructor was making the materials accessible to their students for zero cost, the instructor sharing them was likely violating copyright protections intellectual property law.

**How often do you change your teaching materials?**

Half of the 21 instructors who say they have never heard of OER responded that they rarely change their course materials, with 7 replying they do so with more frequency, either annually (3) or every semester (4). The 25 instructors who say they have heard of OER but have not adopted them were less likely to say they rarely (3) or only every 4–5 years (2) changed their materials, with 9 replying they change their teaching materials every 2–3 years and 6 responses for every semester or year. It is understandable that instructors who are not often looking to change their teaching materials would not find OER, which are still relatively recently developed in political science, while those who are more frequently on the lookout for updated materials would at least have heard about OER.

**Where do political scientists find out about OER?**

Instructors who regularly use OER were asked where they found the OER they currently use, with Google, Twitter, and colleagues as frequent responses: 8 responses mention
web searches, 8 mention social media, and colleagues, whether friends, senior instructors, or department chairs, featured in five responses. Other responses included on-campus Centers for Teaching and Learning (3), academic conference (1), and discovered while doing research on Open Access (1). Instructors who had heard of OER but not adopted them had similar answers in a different order: 8 responses mentioned colleagues as where they heard about OER, while 5 said Twitter, 1 online, and two pedagogical workshops. While individual searching happens, it seems clear that there is a social aspect to the spread of OER awareness, either in person through colleagues or online through social media.

**What OER do political scientists use?**

Instructors who had heard about OER but not adopted them largely left the question of what OER they have heard of unanswered (10) or could not recall a specific OER (8). Four responses referenced OpenStax and two mentioned the OER Commons. 20 of the 24 instructors who regularly use OER listed OER they use; OpenStax was the most frequently named with 7 responses. The customizability inherent in the revise and remix properties of OER is often touted as a selling feature, which seems to appeal greatly to several respondents, who mix and match different resources, such as “Project Gutenberg, Prometheus, some of the MIT classes,” “Swirlify to teach R programming, various Open Data sources, Trochim’s Research Design Knowledge Base,” and “Primary source texts (original works in the public domain), also make available an OER American politics textbook for students who want one for reference (I do not assign readings from a textbook in my courses).”

**Why do political scientists use OER?**

When asked why they use OER, almost all of the instructors (23 out of 25) who used OER regularly included costs for students as their reason; the ability to get up to date materials and high quality materials were also mentioned in several responses. Two respondents, both from public four-year institutions in New York, mentioned the funding they received to convert their course to OER as a reason they use OER; none of the other respondents who use OER, including the 4 other public four-year instructors from New York and the one private four-year instructor from New York, made any mention in their response. This means that either these instructors did not receive funding to convert their courses, or that the funding was not a significant enough reason for using OER for them to mention it in their response. Either way, this is an interesting finding for OER advocates, who often bemoan the lack of funding to compensate instructors for converting their courses. More research into individual faculty members’ decisions to adopt OER or not is clearly warranted.

**Conclusions**

As a discipline, political science has neither explored nor adopted OER in a significant way, but there are many compelling reasons why we should consider it: skyrocketing
textbook costs contribute to student loan debt and limit access to higher education generally and the study of political science specifically.

Conclusions that can be drawn from the survey of instructors are necessarily limited by the limitations of the sample—it is not a randomized sample, nor is it a large one, nor does it include community college faculty, who do a great deal of the introductory level teaching of political science. Nevertheless, important conclusions can be drawn. Only one third of surveyed instructors of introductory political science regularly use OER, while another third has never heard of OER. Neither institution type, whether public or private, or employment status, whether contingent or full-time, seem to affect whether an instructor used OER, though those who have been teaching longer are less likely to have heard about or use OER. Social media, online searches, and colleagues are the primary sources of information for instructors who either use or have heard of OER.

These results are also limited by the time period in which they were collected. They do not capture the seismic shifts in the teaching of political science caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19. With most American colleges and universities switching to emergency remote learning during Spring 2020, and many institutions choosing remote and hybrid learning through Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 (or reverting to it after infection rates spiked), it is likely that instructors of introductory political science have been more exposed to OER, as they would encounter information about them while searching for digital learning materials for their now-online courses. Yet COVID-19 has definitely not been solely a boom for adopting free learning materials. In addition to the higher workload caused by the emergency switch to distance education and supporting students through an ongoing pandemic, as the pandemic has continued, publishers who initially offered free access to digital versions of their traditional print materials have not only ended that free access but dramatically increased the price of accessing the digital versions (Fazackerley 2021). At the same time, traditional textbook publishers and new courseware startups alike have responded to COVID-19 by aggressively marketing their digital textbooks and coursewares, touting their ease of use for online classes. As students and instructors alike have struggled to continue learning and teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, such marketing appears as so much disaster capitalism (Moore, Jayme, and Black 2021); while courseware can help faculty who have not previously used online modalities for collecting student work, they are by no means the only way for instructors to do so, and they come at considerable cost to students. In research conducted before the pandemic, US PIRG found 17% of students enrolled in courses that require courseware purchases did not purchase the codes, despite that possibly locking them out of required quizzes, tests, and assignments (Nagle and Vitez 2020). Even for those students who purchase codes for a semester, as they face unprecedented challenges to their physical health, mental health, and finances due to the pandemic, should they find that they cannot complete their course and need to retake it in a subsequent semester, they will have to repurchase an access code, as they lose access to the materials they already paid for at the end of the semester (Gumb 2020).

Instructors of political science are also more likely to be aware of OER now that the American Political Science Association (APSA) has officially launched its online library for sharing openly licensed materials—APSA Educate (https://educate.apsanet.org/).
The Educate library requires all submissions to use a Creative Commons license, so that all materials are shared openly. This library not only provides a convenient place for instructors to find and share openly licensed materials, it represents an endorsement of the use, creation, and sharing of OER by APSA, which remains the preeminent professional organization for the discipline. This is a huge reputational boost for OER in political science. The reputational benefit, as well as the facilitation of finding, using, and sharing OER, provided by APSA Educate, coupled with many instructors being forced by COVID-19 to seek out more digital teaching materials, will likely mean that a future survey of political science instructors would find much higher awareness and use of OER.

Such a future survey of OER usage would ideally be more systematic than the one presented here. Rather than an individual survey, adding questions to the Departmental Survey run annually by the APSA would likely ensure a higher response rate from a wider variety of institutions, providing data that could be compared year after year. Questions would ideally ask about what kinds of materials departments use for their courses (textbooks, monographs, journal articles, videos, etc), as well as the costs of those materials. With this data, more fine grained research could be done to begin to explore why and how instructors of political science make decisions about their teaching materials. As APSA has invested resources in Educate and been open to discussions about OER, I am hopeful that such questions will be soon be added to departmental surveys, laying the foundation for important future research.

Notes
1. I refer here to legally free to access materials because most colleges and universities discourage their employees from violating copyright, such as emailing PDFs of copyrighted materials to their students, or posting or linking to copyrighted materials in their learning management systems. Please note that this is a clarification of the legal issues for the reader, and not a judgement of the practical, moral, or ethical ones, as copyrighted materials are easily obtainable on the internet and the moral and ethical arguments for open knowledge are beyond the scope of this article.
2. Library resources, whether ebooks, scholarly journal subscriptions, or other holdings, are not free to libraries, and therefore are paid for by students through their tuition and school fees. But since this is a collective use of funds, and not billed per course or library loan, individual, they are included here as a zero textbook cost option. https://www.cuny.edu/libraries/open-educational-resources/guidelines-for-zero-textbook-cost-course-designation/
3. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/150/pg150.html
4. https://openstax.org/details/books/american-government-2e
5. Pearson’s Revel (https://www.pearson.com/us/search-results-higher-education.html?_charset_=UTF-8&q=american+government) and Cengage’s Mindtap (https://www.cengage.com/s/?q=american%20government#) are examples of courseware that are sold with digital textbook access for traditionally published textbooks;
6. Odigia (https://www.odigia.com/openstax-american-government-2e/) and LRNR (https://www.lrnr.us/openstax-american-government/) are just two examples of courseware options built out of one existing OER, the Openstax American Government 2E.
7. Search conducted July 15, 2022. https://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?AllField=OER&SeriesKey=upse20
8. I used a convenience sample of email (via direct emails to CUNY political scientists and emails to colleagues and relevant listservs with request to forward to their networks) and Twitter recruiting, along with hard copy solicitation flyer at the 2018 annual meeting of the
American Political Science Association. My institution’s IRB reviewed the survey protocol (Protocol Number 2018-1055) and declared the survey to be exempt.

9. The three responses not analyzed here are from one community college instructor and two respondents who said they regularly teach at several different types of institutions.

10. Overrepresentation of New York is unsurprising for two reasons; first, the recruitment method leaned heavily on the networks to which the author belonged, which naturally flow along geographic lines. Second, the state and city university systems of New York (SUNY and CUNY) have been the recipient of $8 million each from the state government for the last three years specifically for the adoption and promotion of OER.

11. *American Government* by Lenz and Hollman was published in 2013, the first edition of *American Government* by Krutz was published in 2016, and *International Relations* edited by McGlinchey was published in 2017.

12. Quotes from survey responses, which are openly available at http://bit.ly/CUNYZTCSurvey

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