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The Colombian, Polish, and U.S. borders: A comparative analysis for social studies teachers

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Abstract

Borders play a critical role in shaping national identity, governance, and social interactions. This study presents a comparative analysis of the Colombian, Polish, and U.S. borders, focusing on their historical, political, and social dimensions, with the goal of providing social studies teachers with contextual insights for classroom instruction. By examining border policies, migration patterns, security measures, and cross-border cultural exchanges, the study highlights similarities and differences in how borders influence society. The Colombian border demonstrates challenges related to internal conflict and informal crossings, the Polish border reflects European Union regulatory frameworks and transnational cooperation, while the U.S. border emphasizes immigration control and economic considerations. Understanding these distinctions enables educators to foster critical thinking and global awareness among students. This comparative framework equips social studies teachers with practical examples, teaching strategies, and discussion points to engage learners in analyzing border dynamics in diverse geopolitical contexts.

Keywords: Borders, comparative analysis, social studies education, migration, national policy, cross-border relations

Introduction

Over the past few years, I have been able to work extensively at the U.S.-Mexican border and also to travel to the Polish-Ukrainian, Colombian-Venezuelan, and Greek-Turkish borders. Though there are many borders around the world, these three in many ways serve as prime examples of more open borders (Colombia), more restrictive borders (the U.S.), and simultaneously open and closed borders (Poland). Understanding these three settings can have great implications for how we understand immigration and can be a strong starting point for helping students understand the realities of immigration. It should be noted that the U.S. context examines the border during the early Biden Administration when the border was relatively restricted but not nearly as much as it was during the second Trump Administration.

Colombia

In the Summer of 2023, I had the privilege of traveling to the Colombian-Venezuelan border in the city of Cúcuta. What I saw there was quite surprising to me as the border was completely open for Venezuelans, both those migrating to (or through) Colombia or those just coming for a short time to visit their family or buy food and supplies. At the border, due to my U.S. passport, I was not allowed to enter Venezuela, but we walked halfway across the bridge and returned to Colombia. We were not even asked for any identification. One of the locals talked about how the more open border had been a great opportunity for the local economy. You could see this economic reality with little stands being set up to sell phone chips and other supplies just feet away from the border.

In order to help teach about this topic with the students over the course of 1-2 days, teachers could give the broad overview of why people are immigrating from Venezuela as this might not be completely clear to many students, especially in the U.S. context. There could then be a greater examination of what Colombia's policy has been under both recent left-wing and right-wing governments. Teachers could discuss why this more open policy has been present in Colombia, including the stronger belief in the rights of migration than in some other wealthy nations in North America or Europe.

Teachers could use the article from Buschschlüter (2022) ^[1] that details some of the history of the refugee crisis in Venezuela and the migration of Venezuelan migrants throughout South America and the United States. Some possible questions that could be used after

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reading this article include:

- *What were some of the different experiences that migrants have faced as they have left Venezuela?*
- *What countries did the Venezuelan migrants primarily migrate to? Why do you think they chose these countries?*
- *Are there any other historical examples of mass migration that you think would be similar to the situation with Venezuelans currently?*

The students could also examine the declaration both of the former center-right president of Colombia, Iván Duque Márquez, who allowed Venezuelans to legalize their status and the more recent decision of the more left-wing government to open the border completely. Leila Fadel (2022) ^[5] from NPR has a short interview that was done right at the start of the opening of the border with the election of Gustavo Petro. Some questions that could follow this analysis include:

- *Why did Colombia decide to open up their border?*
- *What possible economic impacts could this have in Venezuela?*
- *What might be some of the pushback to this policy?*

Teachers could also then look at the broader issues of Colombians being more open to migrants because they too had once been migrants, which was something that was clear in my discussion with some individuals in Colombia. Many had ironically migrated to Venezuela in the past. I met individuals whose families had migrated to Venezuela and then come back to Colombia in recent years. The article by Janetsky (2019) lays out some of this background and the possible effect on the thinking of Colombians as well as what this massive migration from Venezuela means for Colombia.

Some possible questions that could be used after reading this article include:

- *Why do you think being former immigrants themselves possibly influences Colombians to have more pro-immigration policies? Is this a different dynamic than in the U.S. context?*
- *What are some of the realities that Colombians are facing because of this massive surge of Venezuelan migrants?*

Finally, students could discuss what the implications are of this type of policy where there is essentially open immigration with very few even security measures. Students could imagine not only what this would look like in the case of Colombia, but how this could also look like across the world more broadly and what it might mean to have a more open border. Some possible questions that teachers could use as a point of discussion on these larger themes are:

- *How could having open borders be positive and what possible drawbacks could there be?*
- *What do they think of the idea that some Colombians have expressed of immigration being a human right?*
- *Do they think if the Venezuelans had a different language and vastly different culture than Colombians the same type of policies would apply, why or why not?*

Some follow up activities on this could include having students looking at similar more open immigration policies

for Venezuelans that have happened in places like Peru, Ecuador, and Chile and discuss why this is the case. Students could also do further research on the situation of Venezuelans in one of these countries and then present the information to the class.

Another activity that students could undertake is to examine the historically open borders of the United States not only at Ellis Island, but also at the Mexican-American border up until the 20th Century. McCorkle (2018) ^[10] examines how we can specifically look at U.S. History in advocating for a more inclusive immigration stance.

The United States

I have spent most of my time at the Mexican-American border working with asylum seekers and refugees from across Latin America. Many are forced to stay in very difficult and dangerous situations on the Mexican side of the border due to the highly restrictive immigration policies. This was especially the case during the first Trump administration, but it was also the case of the Biden Administration especially when they continued with the Title 42 COVID restrictions for over 2 years.

After spending a day or two examining the realities of Colombian migration, students could then examine the policies of the U.S. government as it applies to immigration. In some ways this is a more difficult task to understand as the policies change so dramatically from one presidential administration to another. However, nevertheless, there are some quite strong similarities. One aspect that the students could examine is the spending on immigration enforcement per year. The students could look at this graph from Statista ("Enacted Border Patrol Program," 2023) that shows the strong increase in spending from 1990 to 2020 and examine why there was such an increase. Some questions the students could consider include:

- *Why did the U.S. decide to spend this money on border security?*
- *Why do you think the budget on the border patrol has increased 4-fold since 2000? What has changed nationally and politically during this time?*
- *Do you think this spending is effective, why or why not?*
- *Why do many Americans still feel that the border is not secure?*

Another reality that teachers could use with students is to have them read an article or show them a video on some of the encampments. A particularly poignant source is from *This American Life* in the wake of the Remain in Mexico Policy introduced by the Trump Administration (Glass et al., 2019). Some questions that could be discussed in light of this include:

- *Why did so many of the asylum officials feel extreme guilt over the new policies that denied asylum to almost all migrants?*
- *How did the new Remain in Mexico policy affect the safety of individuals that were returned to Mexico?*
- *What role did the cartels play at the border after this policy was implemented?*
- *How do you think the U.S. government justified this type of policy?*

Another powerful source is the last episode of *Immigration Nation* (Clusiau & Schwarz, 2020) on Netflix where they

show the human costs of extremely restrictive borders with interviews with family who have lost their loved ones trying to cross the desert. They detail how the border policies in the U.S. have led to an increase in deaths as more people have to cross more remote and often dangerous areas in order to enter the United States. Some questions that teachers could ask around this theme include:

- *Does the U.S. have moral culpability in the deaths of the migrants crossing the desert, why or why not?*
- *Why were the family members almost relieved when they finally learned that they found the remains of their loved ones?*
- *Have you ever gone through a period where you have lost contact with someone that you care about? What was that experience like?*

If so desired, teachers could also lead students through the some of the additional recent policies such as the implementation of Title 42 during COVID, the differences in the Trump and Biden Administration policies, and the end of Title 42 and the extension of Title 8. They could also examine the use of the phone application (CBP One) that was used to enter the country and the actual decrease in illegal border crossings after Title 42 ended, which is something that we found from our research talking with migrants in the camps. They were more afraid to cross at the end of Title 42 than when it was in place, as there was more danger of deportation.

It could also be interesting to have students examine some of the rhetoric from politicians and the media in regard to “open borders” even when the evidence points squarely in the other direction. This might also be a good opportunity for students to find their own sources or video and then have them write a reflection on the arguments the author/outlet made and whether or not they believed it was a fair or unfair argument. The broader question that teachers could examine is why so many people believe we have open borders when the reality is that we spend more on border security than any other nation in the world. *Where does the disconnect between the two of those realities intersect?*

Students could also then also explore other restrictive immigration policies around the world. A particularly important example may be in the United Kingdom with the increase in the more restrictive and even draconian policies under the previous Tory leadership including sending asylum seekers to Rwanda. Another country that students could examine would be Australia, which also has a history of often problematic human rights policies for immigrants and refugees.

Students could then examine the differences in the border policies between Biden where there were some restrictions put in place to the Trump Administration where there are absolute restrictions on the border and no asylum seekers have been allowed to enter even though this defies international and national human rights policies.

Poland

In the Summer of 2022, I had the opportunity to travel to Poland and see first-hand the Polish-Ukrainian border, and it was amazing to see the outpouring of support by the Polish people for the Ukrainians seeking to come into the country. We talked to some Ukrainian refugees but also to aid workers, journalists, and humanitarian workers about the issues. We found out that how many Polish people just

allowed migrants to come into their house and how the government showed overwhelming support to the Polish people in the wake of the Russian attack. However, it also became clear that there was a double standard as the Polish-Belarusian border where more migrants were coming from countries like Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan resembled much more the Mexican-American border if not even worse. They told us of human rights abuses and people freezing in the no man’s land between Poland and Belarus. This was also the case with the rejection and discrimination against Russian asylum seekers, including those who may have been trying to flee from Putin. Some of the activists and journalists expressed their dismay over the double standard and were almost exacerbated for the overwhelming support to only one group of people.

Students could first examine an article that looks at the overwhelmingly positive response of the Polish government and people to the Ukrainian people fleeing the war. Students could read the article from the United Nations (2022) where the leader of the human rights for immigrants praised the Polish people for their actions in regard to Ukrainians. There is also a broader overview of the Polish support from Ukrainian migrants from McMahon (2022) ^[11]. Some possible questions that teachers could use for discussion include:

- *Why did the official say that there were no refugee camps in Poland?*
- *What were some of the statistics that surprised you about the Polish level of support?*
- *Why do you think there was this almost overwhelming and unequivocal support for the Ukrainians?*
- *How was the response of Poland similar or different than the response of other nations to the influx of Ukrainians?*
- *What about Poland’s own history might have made them more sympathetic to the plight of Ukrainians?*

The students could then watch a documentary or articles about the Polish-Belarusian border including some that deal with the harsh realities that migrants face there. Depending on the maturity level of the class, the teacher could show them the article about how the Polish agents sought to demonize the migrants for some particularly offensive pornographic material found on one of the migrant’s phones. Teachers could have their students read the article from Human Rights Watch (2022) that describes some of the harrowing stories of migrants who sought to cross the Polish-Belarusian border and some of the horrific treatment that they faced by Polish officials, but even more so by the Belarusian officials. Some questions that teachers could ask after reading the article:

- *What was the mistreatment that the migrants faced by both the Belarusian and Polish officials? How was it similar and how was it different?*
- *Why do you think the treatment of those coming from Belarus is so harsh, why does it differ so strongly from the treatment of Ukrainian refugees?*
- *What type of tactics is the Polish government using to keep migrants out?*
- *Why do you think the coverage on Belarusian migrants received much less coverage than that of the Ukrainian people?*

Teachers could proceed with a follow-up activity where

students examine some of the unequal policies for immigrants in other countries around the world. Teachers could discuss about the identities and characteristics of immigrants that give them a better chance to legally migrate. In the U.S. classroom, students could examine specifically the role of class and nationality in determining certain access to the immigration system.

Comparative Analysis

After spending several days examining the policies of each country, a larger class discussion or debate could take place on the different approaches that Poland, Colombia, and the United States take in regard to their borders and migration. Some overarching questions that could be considered include:

- *What do you think accounts for the highly different policies of the Polish, Colombian, and U.S. borders?*
- *What role does the wealth of the receiving and sending nations play into this dynamic?*
- *What are the advantages and disadvantages of a more open border; likewise, what are the disadvantages and advantages of a more closed border?*
- *Is it moral to treat certain groups of immigrants differently, why or why not?*
- *What are the implications of these immigration policies to human rights?*

Teachers could then have students read the 1951 UN Convention on refugees as well as the 1967 Protocol and discuss why they were written in the aftermath of World War II and how they think it applies to the modern-day issues of asylum seekers and migrants. Furthermore, students could then create a final project through a presentation/video, writing a paper, or drawing a poster board on how they believe the border policies of all three nations either align with or are in contradiction to the UN Convention and Protocol.

Additional ideas for activities would be for the students to examine one of the nation's border policies in more depth create a presentation on some of the other nuances and issues with the border policies of each nation that might have not been covered in the initial class discussions. If possible, students could interview an immigrant from the U.S. (or their home country) and then compare how their experiences related to this broader comparative analysis.

Conclusion

The research from Monreal and McCorkle (2021) ^[12] has shown that immigration topics are sorely lacking in the social studies curriculum or are often treated as merely “controversial issues” instead of considering the human rights aspects (DaBach et al., 2018) ^[3]. If even understanding of national immigration is lacking, the immigration realities of other nations likely have almost no coverage in most social studies classrooms. This article gives an opportunity for teachers to teach a comparative analysis of three very distinct nations and how they relate to their borders and immigration. In the end, this might allow students to critically examine the true implications of immigration and how it relates to broader themes like justice and freedom, which are core to the ideals that the U.S. claims to uphold (McCorkle, 2019) ^[9].

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