Political and International Affairs Simulations and Civic Engagement on Campus

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Introduction

Political science professors have been using simulations to try to enhance student learning for years. Simulations are interesting, a nice change of pace from the traditional lecture, and allow for more student participation in class. Much of the literature on simulations is heavily practitioner-focused, centers around pedagogical strategies of implementation, and rests upon author experiences with a single case or two (Asal, 2005; Asal & Blake, 2006; Wright-Maley, 2015b). But while simulations appear in the literature as examples of experiential pedagogy, they are rarely investigated for their own sake. Do they really make a difference? We study whether participation in classroom and Model United Nations simulations leads to increases in civic attitudes and behaviors by comparing student survey responses before and after taking part in a simulation.

While the consensus among scholars in this area is generally that simulations are not the most effective strategy for promoting rote learning of content knowledge, they are effective tools for fostering engagement, complex thinking and problem-solving, and soft skills development (Wright-Maley, 2015a). Simulations create situations in which students can practice skills they might use outside the classroom, can increase participation and engagement, create opportunities for critical thinking, analysis, and appreciation of diverse viewpoints, and may allow risk-taking in a safe environment (Dack et al., 2016; DeLeon, 2008). Thus, rather than focusing on simulation as a means of improving knowledge development in the classroom, in this paper we ask whether and to what extent simulations are related to civic engagement on campus, both in terms of student activities and engagement in political conversation.

Simulations and Civic Engagement

Prior research on whether simulations are related to civic engagement have suggested that the opportunity to engage with complex ideas and to take on the role of a political actor through simulation can be an effective means for developing students' civic interest and political efficacy. Lo (2017) used semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and questionnaires to conduct a qualitative cross-case analysis of the experience of two students participating in a series of in-class political simulations. He found that role play "informed the development of their civic identities" and that authentic simulations helped them link their behavior during class to "how they might participate in politics in real life" (Lo, 2017, pp. 200–201).

One way simulations might increase civic engagement is by increasing awareness of and interest in global challenges or disasters. Zappile, Beers and Raymond (2017) ran simulations in four courses across three campuses related to the situation in post-earthquake Haiti and found that students reported gains in global engagement and increased feelings of global citizenship. In addition, political simulations can increase student interest in the political process. Caruson (2005) ran a long-term simulation of a campaign in her course that included aspects such as interest groups, web-based campaigning etc. During the evaluation of the simulation, 97.6% of the students indicated that the simulation caused them to be more interested in the election process, and 71.4% indicated that they would seriously consider working for a political campaign in the future. Mariani (2007) also created a multi course campaign simulation and found that students who participated reported that they would follow campaigns more closely. The author concludes that the simulations gave students the tools to understand how campaigns work and encouraged them to participate in politics more.

Simulations may also improve students' civic engagement outcomes by altering their beliefs and perceptions about the world, their role in it, and their sense of efficacy in terms of actively participating in it (Bredemeier & Greenblat, 1981; Ganzler, 2010; Gehlbach, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2008; Ioannou et al., 2009; Yukhymenko, 2011). Niemi and Junn (1998) found that participation in social studies simulations among high school students led to more frequent discussion of current events and had significant positive effects on political attitudes, including trust and efficacy. Discussion of current events has been associated with appreciation of diverse viewpoints, acceptance of the democratic process, interest in current events outside of school, as well as empowerment, efficacy, and improved interpersonal communication (Bellon, 2000; Campbell, 2008; Hess, 2009; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Mirra et al., 2016; Mutz, 2006).

Thus, based on evidence which suggests that simulations are positively associated with civic engagement, we consider whether and to what extent participation in simulations is associated with students' civic engagement on campus, efficacy, and understanding of diverse viewpoints.

Method

Sample

This study uses a comparison group, difference in difference design to estimate the effects of participating in a simulation on student civic outcomes. Participants were students at a university in the Southwestern United States who were enrolled in at least one of four political science classes or an academic Model United Nations club during at least one of two semesters during which data collection took place. All of these groups had a political science focus, and some of them involved political simulation.

Students in the simulation, or "treatment" group participated in Model United Nations (MUN) simulations either as part of a MUN club or a class. Students in the class prepared for and participated in Model United Nations-style simulations during class time. Students in the club undertook more serious preparation for a conference simulation, as well as participating in a number of smaller practice simulations. Students in the comparison group took political science classes but did not participate in political simulations. These students took either a 200-level political ideologies course, or a Senior capstone course for Politics and International Affairs majors.

A total of 264 students were surveyed as part of the study, but only those who took both the pre- and post-semester survey were included in the analytical sample of 184 students. Of these, 125 students (or about 68% of respondents) participated in one of the simulation groups. Observable characteristics of the sample are displayed in Table 1. Overall, students who participated in the simulations were slightly younger and earlier in their college careers when compared to the rest of the sample, and much less likely to be Political Science or International Relations majors. However, it is worth noting that if anything, we would expect these characteristics to lead the simulation group to perform lower overall on measures related to civic engagement, since we typically consider political experience and interest to have positive associations with engagement. Nevertheless, in order to further account for these differences, we include these covariates as controls in the model, as well as including fixed effects for each class/club group.

Procedure

Students were administered pre-test surveys in the second week of class in hopes of being able to survey a stable set of students after the add/drop period at the beginning of the semester

had died down. Surveys were about 28 questions long and divided into five sections: personal information, political engagement & interest, factual test questions about current events (both domestic and international), political alignment within their community, and civic engagement and participation on campus. Students were administered the same survey at the end of the semester. Responses were matched for individual respondents at both time points in order to identify changes in students' knowledge and engagement.

Measures

We estimate the relationship between participating in simulations and measures of positive civic engagement outcomes which the literature suggests simulations might improves. We use two student self-reports of involvement in campus life with a social or political focus as measures of civic engagement. The first measure is an absolute count of the number of different types of social/political activities students report taking part in, and the second is a measure of how much time they spend on those activities each week, ranging from 0 "none" to 3, "more than 10 hours per week." At time 2, the mean activity count was 1.92 with a minimum of 0, maximum of 8, and standard deviation of 1.77. The mean of the time spent scale was 0.89 with a range of 0-3 and a standard deviation of 0.85.

We also measured students' engagement in political conversations, efficacy, and ability to understand different points of view using a series of lichert-type questions. Students were asked "How frequently do you discuss political issues with people whose opinions are different from yours?" and given response items ranging from (0) "never," to (4) "daily." Questions about efficacy and perspective taking asked students how confident they were defending their opinions, how willing they were to change their minds when learning new information, and how easy they

found it to understand where people with different opinions were coming from. Each of these item response scales ranged from 0-3.

Independent variables included an indicator for participating in the simulation group, and pre-test scores of the same items. We also included covariates to help account for baseline differences between the simulation and non-simulation groups, including indicators for majoring in political science or international relations and prior experience with Model UN. Majoring in political science serves as a proxy for interest and/or investment in the subject matter of the simulations, and prior experience controls for people who may not have participated in simulations this semester but who may have already received some of the potential benefits. All of these measures were self-reported on surveys and verified by matching pre- and post-semester responses. Students responded consistently to questions across survey administrations in all but two cases, where previously undeclared freshmen later declared an intended major. Demographic controls for age and being a first-generation college student are intended to proxy for access to social capital and resources that may also be associated with increased political engagement. Finally, we also include fixed effects for the five class groups in order to account for baseline differences between each group.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Student surveys indicated that participating in a simulation was significantly associated with increases in both the number of civic activities in which students participated and with the amount of time students dedicated to these activities, even after controlling for pre-simulation levels of civic engagement as well as demographic indicators and fixed effects by group. Participation in a simulation was associated with an increase of 2.98 in the number of civic activities, or an effect size of 1.68 standard deviations. For time spent, the effect size of

participating in a simulation was an increase of 2.6 standard deviations. These are both very large effect sizes, suggesting that there is both a statistically and substantively large relationship between simulations and campus engagement. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Among our sample, participation in simulations was not related to the frequency with which students talked about politics with friends or had conversations about political issues with people who had different opinions outside of class. However, students who reported having these conversations more frequently also reported that they were more comfortable defending or discussing their personal opinions, and that they were more willing to change their mind when they learned new information. These findings are in keeping with existing literature that suggests such conversations can have important civic outcomes (Bellon, 2000; Campbell, 2008; Hess, 2009; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Mirra et al., 2016; Mutz, 2006). While it is unfortunate that simulations did not appear to have an immediate effect on these outcomes, it is possible that over time increased engagement could lead to more frequent opportunities to have such conversations or more regular interactions with politically interested others and those with differing opinions.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

This study provides important empirical evidence tying participation in Model UN-style simulations to student civic engagement on campus. This is an especially important step for civic engagement outcomes, as prior studies in this area, such as Mariani (2007) and Caruson (2005) asked students about their intentions for engagement, rather than their actual behaviors. While this study was not able or designed to establish causation, these findings suggest that students who participate in simulations may take immediate and concrete steps to be more involved on campus in social and political groups. This is especially important, as participation in these kinds of groups in while in school is associated with increased political engagement in adults (Kirlin,

2003). Students who participate in extracurricular groups become habitually connected to civic group participation and connected to politically engaged cultures (Thomas & McFarland, 2010). Thus, the increased engagement of students who participate in simulations may have longer-term positive outcomes that stick with them as they become older adults.

While it was somewhat surprising that participation in classroom simulations did not appear to lead to increased political conversation outside of the classroom, further research is needed to explore how and why simulations might influence student on-campus behaviors beyond the activities explored in our survey. Additional studies that consider whether student opinions changed as a result of simulations and how these impacted political interactions with peers, family, or other acquaintances may help improve understanding of the mechanisms by which simulations influence student outcomes. We would also like to see follow-up studies that are more able to establish causality. In addition to non-random assignment, our simulation and comparison groups were not as well matched as we might like, though they are similar in many ways. Future work could employ an experimental or quasi-experimental approach that allows for more direct comparison between groups on a broader set of measures.

Overall, this study contributes to a growing literature on the role of classroom simulations in political science education and seeks to make an empirical contribution to our understanding of how participating in simulations relates to students' broader political socialization in terms of on-campus civic engagement. This is an important contribution to our growing understanding of the role of political science education in fostering civic development on college campuses.

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Tables

Table 1: *Mean Sample Characteristics*

	Full Sample	Simulation Group	Comparison Group
Age	19.26	18.94*	19.93
Year in School	2.18	1.87*	2.85
White	0.76	0.74	0.80
Male	0.45	0.42	0.53
Poli Sci/IR Major	0.48	0.33*	0.81
First Gen	0.36	0.34	0.40
Prev. MUN Exp.	0.22	0.26	0.14
n	184	125	59

*Indicates difference significant at $p < .05$. level

Table 2: *Models estimating the relationship between simulations and civic engagement*

Variable	# Activities	Time Spent
Constant	0.74 (1.61)	-1.15 (0.88)
Simulation	**2.98* (1.22)**	**2.21** (0.66)**
Pre-sim measure	0.63*** (0.06)	0.58*** (0.06)
Poli Sci/IR Major	0.46* (0.22)	0.23° (0.12)
Prev. MUN Exp.	0.60° (0.31)	-0.01 (0.17)
Age	-0.11 (0.07)	0.01 (0.04)
First Gen Stud.	0.39* (0.18)	0.05 (0.10)
Class 100	-1.51° (0.77)	-1.08* (0.42)
Class 200	1.54* (0.69)	1.06** (0.37)
Class 300	-2.37** (0.81)	-1.39** (0.44)
Class 400	1.43° (0.73)	1.25** (0.39)
MUN Club	-0.94 (0.81)	-0.64 (0.44)
Adj. R-squared	0.59	0.47

$°p < 0.10$ *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests). n=184
Coefficients shown for each independent variable, standard errors listed in parentheses.