Teaching Electoral Institutions Using In-Class Simulations

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Abstract: Understanding how such institutions shape political outcomes is an incredibly useful skill for students of political science to develop. I argue that facilitating simulations where students can participate in mock-elections structured by real-world institutions can serve as a potent tool to aid students' learning. In the fall semester of 2021, I implemented several electoral simulations into my class on political parties and elections in the United States. The most comprehensive of these was a mock Iowa Democratic caucus. I significantly updated this simulation in the spring semester of 2023. Following formal procedures used at the actual Iowa caucuses, students engaged in discussions and debates over which candidate to support, and ultimately came to a final decision for their simulated precinct. The simulation helped students understand the complex rules and procedures which structured the real-world case of the Iowa caucuses, and helped them form conclusions about the virtues of those institutions.

Introduction

Most Americans do not give much thought to the way candidates for elected office are chosen in the United States. Many of the peculiarities of the United States, when compared with other democratic nations, stem from the electoral institutions it uses. If, for instance, the United States scrapped its current model of congressional elections for a national system of proportional representation, American politics would be transformed entirely. Far less sweeping changes which have occurred in the history of the United States have changed the incentives confronting candidates. The transition from choosing presidential candidates in elite-driven national party conventions to selecting nominees in state-level primaries and caucuses in the 1970s dramatically altered the landscape of presidential politics. In the spring semester of 2023, I designed a mock Iowa caucus for my class on political parties and elections in the United States. I had employed a more rudimentary simulation the first time I taught the class in the fall semester of 2021. While that simulation was generally well-received by students, that initial version had significant limitations: students had been randomly assigned a candidate to support, and were not given much time to research other candidates' positions. Furthermore, I had not systematically assessed students' views on the simulation overall, and on its strengths and weaknesses in particular. The redesigned simulation aimed to improve upon the flaws of the original, and to construct a more active, engaging classroom activity for students to participate in. My hope is that the simulation will be an enjoyable learning experience for the students, and will encourage them to consider the ways in which the electoral institutions of the United States and other democracies contribute to different political outcomes in those systems.

The Benefits of Simulations

Simulations and games can be used as meaningful teaching tools across all subfields of academic political science (e.g. Shellman, 2001; Asal, 2005; Gorton and Havercroft, 2012; Asal

et al., 2018). By obligating students to apply key concepts from class in scenarios mirroring real-world political situations, simulations may help students think critically about the course materials and deepen their understanding of fundamental concepts and specific subjects (e.g. Frederking, 2005; Jenkins, 2010). Shellman and Turan (2006) show that students in political science courses often respond well to well-constructed simulations, and that these exercises may provide an enjoyable experience which helps them understand key concepts in a given course. Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984)[1] has been employed by political scientists seeking to help students understand and engage with important political concepts. Brock and Cameron (1999) highlight some ways in which Kolb's model may be applied in different political science courses and assert that simulations may help students learn through concrete experience and active experimentation. Shellman (2001) likewise argues, and finds, that simulations are a potent teaching tool in the social sciences, affording students an opportunity to directly engage with the subject matter in a way lectures cannot match. Previous literature has shown that strong in-class simulations are preceded by thorough preparatory work by the students, and followed by a debriefing session aimed towards the facilitation of further critical thinking on the simulation's topic (e.g. Asal and Blake, 2006; Dacombe and Morrow, 2017). Asal and Kratoville (2013) emphasize that simulations in political science courses ought to be built around concrete goals, designed to get students to think critically about the materials before, during, and after the simulation itself, and actively encourage all students to participate. As Raymond and Usherwood (2013) emphasize, instructors must assess students' responses to the simulation to glean whether a given exercise was a valuable learning experience.

[1]Kolb's model divides the process of learning into four stages: concrete experience, reflexive observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Goals of the Simulation

The first and foremost goal of this situation is to furnish students with an illustrative example of how electoral institutions affect outcomes in a democratic system. For decades, political scientists have known that the way in which candidates are chosen and elected has a tremendous influence over the workings of government and the number of viable political parties in a system (e.g. Downs, 1957; Riker, 1982; Epstein, 1986). Even within the United States, different electoral institutions structure disparate incentives for candidates, parties, and voters to consider, and accordingly lead to differing outcomes. While the electoral college is perhaps the most prominent example, there are others. Some states and municipalities have recently adopted forms of ranked-choice voting for primary or general elections. Many others have abandoned caucuses in recent years, adopting primary-driven presidential nominations instead.[2] I wish for students participating in this simulation to come away with an understanding of how the Iowa caucuses work, and how the hundreds of precinct-level caucuses contribute to the final delegate allocation. I also wish for them to understand how different institutions would have contributed to different outcomes. Accordingly, while most of this simulation will focus on the Iowa caucus itself, I will also illustrate to students how other institutions would likely have lead to different results.

The second goal of this simulation is for students to think critically about how different voters make decisions in elections with different institutions. Before the simulation takes place, each student will be assigned a unique character. They will be provided with the character's name, age, and a brief backstory in addition to the character's issue preferences and their first choice for the Iowa caucus in 2020. While some students will likely hold similar worldviews to their assigned characters, others undoubtedly will hold very different opinions on politics and society than their assigned characters. Those students who do not identify with or lean towards the Democratic Party will necessarily be assigned to support

[2]Democratic presidential caucuses were held in 14 states in 2016; ten of those switched to primaries in 2020, and an eleventh – North Dakota – adopted "firehouse caucuses," which are more akin to primary elections than caucuses (Cohn, 2019).

a candidate they disagree with in this context, and those students who do are likely to be assigned a different candidate than the one they would have chosen. In an era of heightened affective polarization in the United States, where many citizens view those who disagree with them with suspicion and contempt (Iyengar et al., 2012; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015), I believe it is of paramount normative importance for students to consider how others' lived experiences and backgrounds may bring them to different conclusions about events and policies. I want the students engaged in this simulation to seriously consider their characters' reasons for supporting their preferred candidates, and to seriously weigh how that character would act if they were a real person partaking in an actual contest.

The third goal of this simulation is to help students develop or reinforce the skills required to research political issues and make informed choices. I expect that many students already have these skills, as this simulation is being run in an upper-level political science course. However, not all students will have taken classes that have featured exercises where they actively sought out information about contemporary political debates. While some scholars argue that voters do not need to be well-informed on the issues to make informed decisions at the ballot box (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998), the key heuristic that voters may use to make such choices at the general level – partisan affiliation – is absent in most nominating contests, which pit copartisans against each other. Admittedly, running this simulation three years after the caucus it is based on is not the most ideal scenario for this goal. All of the presidential candidates' primary campaign sites have long since been taken down. However, some resources that were available to voters in the 2020 primaries are still available to students, both online and through the University's libraries. I want students to gain experience interacting with this sort of resource in the run-up to this simulation so that they might be better able to capitalize on similar resources as they make their own decisions on political matters in the years to come.

The Institutions of the Iowa Caucus

Unlike most states, which hold presidential primaries, Iowa holds caucuses. Primary elections and caucuses are dramatically different institutions. While primaries are not monolithic overall, presidential primaries tend to feature very similar dynamics across state lines. The only notable difference is which groups are able to participate. Some states hold closed primaries, in which only registered partisans may participate in a party's primary; others hold open primaries, in which any voter may choose to vote in any party's primary; still other states hold semi-open primaries, where voters may register for a party on primary day, or semi-closed primaries, where parties may choose whether to allow unaffiliated voters to vote in their primaries. In all cases, the primary vote totals in the state determine the allocation of that's state's delegates to the national party conventions. Democratic presidential primaries typically use proportional methods of allocation, with every candidate who meets a certain threshold of the vote (almost always 15%) receiving a share of the delegates relative to their performance. Republican presidential primaries, on the other hand, tend to feature winner-take-most or winner-take-all methods of delegate allocation, with the plurality winner receiving the lion's share of the delegate haul.

Caucuses feature dynamics which make them decidedly distinct from primary elections. Whereas primary voters' role in the process ends once they cast their ballots, caucus attendance is a much more involved process, which typically takes up significantly more time. On caucus day in Iowa, interested voters The Iowa caucus is a semi-open nomination, wherein partisan voters and unaffiliated voters may choose to participate in any party's caucus.[3] Caucus-goers arrive at their precinct's designated caucus site in the evening. These are typically community centers, school cafeterias, gymnasiums, and the like. Before they arrive, precinct captains appointed by the presidential campaigns take up positions in the loca-

[3]Cases where partisan voters or caucus-goers vote in the other party's contest for a candidate they think will be easier for their party to beat do occur in states with open and semi-open nominations (e.g. Rojas, 2020). However, such cases typically compose a slim fraction of the total – slim enough that I did not feature any such caucus-goers in this simulation.

tion. After signing in, the caucus-goers congregate around the captain of their preferred candidate's campaign. These groups form the first alignment.

Once all the caucus-goers have made their initial choice, the precinct chair tallies the number of votes for each candidate, and the percent of the total each constitutes. Every candidate who receives greater than 15% of the vote is eligible to receive a portion of the precinct's county-level delegates. Those caucus-goers who supported these candidates are not eligible to change their votes. However, caucus-goers who supported non-viable candidates on the first alignment are eligible to vote for another candidate. Before the second alignment, representatives from the viable groups will attempt to persuade these caucus-goers to back their candidates. The voters in the non-viable groups may choose to continue supporting their candidate, or they may switch their vote to one of the viable candidates, or, perhaps, one of the other non-viable candidates. If enough voters from the non-viable candidates support one non-viable candidate, that candidate may become viable, and eligible to receive delegates. These second groupings form the final alignment. All candidates with at least 15% of the vote on the final alignment will receive a portion of the precinct's county-level delegates, which ultimately determine the proportion of at-large state delegates.

Why Iowa?

I selected the Iowa caucus as the model for my simulation for several reasons. First of all, the Iowa caucus features very different dynamics from most other state-level presidential nominating contests. On a logistical level, the discussion-driven nature of caucuses, particularly between the first and second rounds of voting, provides for more opportunities to students to fully engage in the simulation than simply having them hold a mock primary election would provide. In addition to the previously-discussed differences between the institutions employed in Iowa and in states which use primaries, Iowa's traditional place at the beginning of the primary calendar contributes to a different set of trends and incentives. The field of

candidates is generally larger during the Iowa caucus than it will be afterwards: less-serious candidates with no hope of securing the nomination often drop out before most other states hold their contests.[4] By choosing the Iowa caucuses, I ensured that students participating in the simulation would be confronted with a wider range of alternative choices, and would need to give the exercise more thought than they would have if I had assigned a later contest with fewer candidates.

Another reason I chose the Iowa caucus was the disproportionate impact it often has on the course of presidential nominations. For decades, political scientists have considered how the serialized nature of presidential primaries influences the outcomes of these contests. While no two nominations are identical, the earliest contests typically influence the dynamics of the rest of the race (Keeter and Zukin, 1983; Bartels, 1988; Haskell, 1996). The Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary set the tone for the competition going into Super Tuesday.[5] Sometimes, the candidates who exceed expectations in these competitions go on to greater successes. However, these early successes tend to draw a great deal of scrutiny, which can backfire for the candidates' campaigns (Bartels, 1988). In 2020, for example, Bernie Sanders's strong performances in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada – the first three contests – lead to widespread concern among many Democratic elites and voters, who felt that Sanders's policies were too far left for him to be competitive in the general election (Berman and Harris, 2020). Focusing on the Iowa caucus allows the simulation to proceed without an undue amount of focus on prevailing narratives which arose later in the calendar. By way of example, in late February and early March of 2020, the New York Times published articles with titles such as "Why Swing-District Democrats Don't Want Bernie Sanders as the Nominee" (Feb. 24), "Democratic Leaders Willing to Risk Party Damage to Stop Bernie Sanders" (Feb. 27), and "Pelosi, Trying to Save House Majority, Fends Off

[4] In 2020, three Democratic candidates dropped out of the running in the immediate aftermath of the New Hampshire primary, the first contest following the Iowa caucus. These were former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, Colorado Senator Michael Bennet, and entrepreneur Andrew Yang.

[5] "Super Tuesday" is the day which determines more primary delegates than any other; it is typically the first or second Tuesday of March.

Angst Over Sanders" (Feb. 27). These articles are indicative of a wave of news coverage that highlighted many moderate and liberal Democrats' fears that nominating Sanders would damage the Democrats' chances of winning the presidency and the Senate and would threaten their House majority. These concerns about electability ostensibly drove many Democratic primary voters – and some withdrawing candidates – to rally around Joe Biden on Super Tuesday and beyond. While electability was a concern for some voters in the Iowa caucuses, it was not a superlative consideration.

A final reason I chose the Iowa caucuses was the normative concern that some scholars and political figures have raised surrounding its position and prominence. Ever since the McGovern-Fraser Commission made primaries and caucuses the norm for selecting delegates to national party conventions, many scholars have taken issue with this system for choosing presidential candidates. The chief concerns are that primary electorates tend to overrepresent stronger ideologues at moderate voters' expense, and that states which hold contests earlier have more influence over the nomination than those that come later. As such, many political scientists have questioned the wisdom of having Iowa and New Hampshire – small states with electorates that tend to be whiter, older, and more ideological than the national medians – hold a position of such prominence in the primary calendar (e.g. Ranney, 1978; Haskell, 1996). The Democratic Party, at President Biden's behest, has moved towards placing South Carolina's primary at the beginning of its primary calendar in 2024.[6] In my admittedly limited experience teaching undergraduates, few have ever entered my classes with concerns about the wisdom – or lack thereof – of holding primaries and caucuses in such a manner as the United States has in recent decades five decades. After the simulation ends, I will show students evidence indicating that the attendees of Iowa's 2020 Democratic caucus were demographically and ideologically unrepresentative of those Iowans who went on to vote for the Democrats at the general election. I do not necessarily wish for them to come away from the simulation with a categorically negative view of our system of choosing presidential

[6]South Carolina's Democratic primary electorate tends to feature many more people of color and many more moderate voters than the Iowa caucuses.

candidates. However, I do wish for them to consider how our current electoral institutions elevate certain voices in our politics and muffle others. In other sections of the course, I wish for my students to likewise weigh the virtues and defects of other electoral institutions, including as the Electoral College, Senate apportionment, and the redistricting process.

Tasks

Rather than have students pick one candidate from Iowa's 2020 Democratic caucuses, I created forty-five distinct characters for the class, and randomly assigned each student one. Each character was given a name and assigned a most-preferred candidate.[7] In addition, each character brief paragraph detailing which issues the character was chiefly concerned with, and how they viewed those issues. For some of the characters, these concerns were grounded in one or two specific political issues. For others, they were based on more general, normative views on how politics ought to function and how leaders should behave. Table 1 provides four examples of characters who featured in the simulation. The assignments were distributed two weeks before the mock caucus was held.

Once each student received their character, they were tasked with writing a brief paper about that character's political views to prepare them for the simulation. Given that the campaign websites for these candidates had long since been taken down, I provided students with a link to an online resource on the candidate's positions, which had been published by *Politico* during the 2020 nominations. Students were encouraged to seek out other sources of information on the candidates as well, and were provided with advice on how to access contemporary news articles. They were tasked with using the *Politico* database and any other resources to develop a ranking of their character's preferences. In addition, they were asked to identify which candidates they felt their character would be willing to support in addition to their first choice, and whether there were any other candidates they felt their

[7]Eleven of the forty-five characters had Bernie Sanders as their first choice; ten had Pete Buttigieg, eight had Elizabeth Warren, six had Joe Biden, six had Amy Klobuchar, three had Andrew Yang, and one had Tom Steyer.

Character	First Choice	Description
Alan	Bernie Sanders	Alan is a 51-year-old who works in a factory that manufactures airplane parts. He is deeply concerned about economic issues – he and many of his friends lost their jobs during the 2008 recession – and while he isn't a fan of Donald Trump, he shares the president's suspicion of foreign trade deals. He strongly supports Bernie Sanders's message about fighting for the working class and creating better living conditions for blue-collar Americans.
Andy	Elizabeth Warren	Andy is a 45-year-old defense attorney who grew up poor in Chicago. His parents worked hard to help put him through college. Now that his own kids are getting ready to attend college themselves, he's shocked by how expensive things are. He also has a chip on his shoulder against the rich – he's never forgotten what it was like to barely scrape by, living from paycheck to paycheck. His first pick is Elizabeth Warren, whom he thinks has the right mix of idealism and gumption to lead America into the 21st century.
Anna	Pete Buttigieg	Anna is a 56-year-old surgeon. Perhaps predictably, she feels very strongly about healthcare policy. She is not in favor of Medicare-for-All – she thinks that a degree of privatization in the healthcare industry is necessary to drive innovation and save lives. However, she is deeply disturbed by the crushing weight healthcare costs impose upon the uninsured – and strongly supports protecting and expanding the Affordable Care Act. She prefers Pete Buttigieg for the nomination, viewing him as a dynamic new force in American politics who strikes a good balance between progressive idealism and moderate common sense.
Bea	Joe Biden	Bea is a 71-year-old who runs a toy store. She doesn't feel very strongly on most of the issues, but she is very concerned about stability in government and in the economy – her business barely weathered the 2008 recession. She thinks Joe Biden is a very boring politician, and that's precisely why he's her first choice for the nomination. In her eyes, politics has gotten out-of-hand as big personalities and people with out-there ideas have gained prominence on both sides of the aisle. She wants the president to a competent, professional person who will get the job done with as little drama as possible.

Table 1: Character Examples

character could be potentially swayed to support. For the purposes of the simulation, I instructed students to limit their rankings and considerations to the top eight vote-getters in the actual Iowa caucuses.[8] In addition to assessing each candidate, students were tasked with writing a defense for their character's first choice. If their candidate were to meet the 15% threshold that would lock in their support, how would they try and persuade other caucus-goers to support their candidate? Which aspects of the platform would they highlight? Would they emphasize their candidate's character, or their policy positions? What makes a given candidate a better choice than the other options? What other germane arguments could convince other attendees to switch their vote to support the character's preferred candidate? Students were tasked with bringing their rankings, and their case for their character's candidate, on the day of the mock caucus.

Course of the Simulation

In advance of the simulation itself, I will set up the classroom for the mock caucus, clearing the space of chairs and setting up positions around the room for each of the eight campaigns. Rather than designate certain students to serve as precinct captains, I will simply tape signs with the candidates' names and faces to the walls. As the simulation begins, students will be reminded of the structure of the caucus, and that all the candidates who receive at least 15% of the vote on the final alignment will receive at least one of the mock-precinct's ten county-level delegates. Once the simulation begins, the students will be directed to position themselves in their preferred candidates' designated places, and the first alignment will be tabulated. Barring any absences, which would necessarily affect the denominator, those caucus-goers backing candidates who receive at least seven votes on the first alignment – Sanders, Buttigieg, and Warren – will be locked in for the second alignment. At this stage, those caucus-goers backing the candidates who did not meet the 15% threshold will be

[8]These were Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Amy Klobuchar, Andrew Yang, Tom Steyer, and Tulsi Gabbard.

informed that they may choose to switch their vote if they so desire. From this stage, I will designate twenty minutes for the students to make their cases to one another. I will expect the students to use the materials they have prepared previously as the basis of their arguments for their own candidates and against others. I will also expect the final votes for those students whose candidates did not meet the threshold on the first alignment to reflect their prior assessments of the other candidates. To incentivize students to participate fully in the exercise, those who wrote strong papers and engaged in meaningful discussions about during the simulated caucus would be eligible to earn extra credit on their upcoming midterm exam.

At the close of the twenty minutes of debate, the second and final alignment shall be held. Once the results are tabulated, all those candidates who reached the 15% threshold will be allocated a share of the ten county-delegates proportional to the final number of votes each received. I will also perform calculations to illustrate to the students how the delegates would have been proportioned if their characters constituted a representative sample of the electorate in a state that held Democratic primaries. At this stage, the students will be informed about the results of the actual 2020 Iowa caucus. They will also be informed that their characters were likely not a representative sample of Iowa Democrats. Calculating turnout in the Iowa caucuses is somewhat difficult, as unaffiliated voters are eligible to participate. However, 172,300 Iowans voted in the final rounds of the 2020 Democratic caucuses; per the Iowa Secretary of State's office, there were 601,452 registered Democrats in the state in February of 2020, when the caucus was held. Even if every Iowa caucus-goer was a registered Democrat, the numbers would indicate that fewer than 29% of Democrats participated in these caucuses. Furthermore, 759,061 Iowans would vote for Joe Biden in the 2020 general election. As Table 2 illustrates, the caucus and general exit polls from 2020 indicate that self-described moderates were underrepresented in the Iowa caucuses relative to the general Democratic electorate. The close of the class will be spent on a discussion of the mathematics of politics. Students will be introduced to the Condorcet criterion, and

Table 2: Ideology of Iowa Democratic Caucus-Goers and General-Election Voters, 2020

Ideology	Caucus	General
Liberal	68%	40%
Moderate	30%	53%
Conservative	2%	7%

Source: CNN/Edison Research Exit Polls

provided with illustrative examples where this criterion manifests – or fail to manifest.[9]

The simulation is set to be held on February 20th, 2023. After class ends that day, the students who participated will be asked to fill out a survey about their experience with the simulation. The goal for this survey will be to gauge whether students found the simulation to be a worthwhile, engaging learning experience. They will be asked to describe what they liked and disliked about the experience. They will also be asked whether their assigned character's first choice for the Democratic nomination would have been their first choice to serve as President of the United States – it may be that students who happen to be assigned a candidate they personally supported enjoy the simulation more than others. At the end of the semester, I will include questions on my teaching evaluations asking if students felt that the mock Iowa caucus was a useful experience that bolstered the course, and if they would suggest including this situation – and perhaps other simulations – in later versions of the class.

[9]In an election that satisfies the Condorcet criterion, the Condorcet candidate – the one that would win a one-on-one race with any other candidate – will win the election. In most American elections, including the Iowa caucuses, it is possible for the anti-Condorcet candidate – the candidate that would lose a one-on-one race with any other candidate – to win a plurality.

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