

Who Are Our Legislators? A Simulation about National Legislative Party Politics

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Abstract

Power and power structures are prevalent in any aspect of government. In particular, the national legislature of a nation presents an interesting case due to the dynamic of party members and party factions falling in line with the directives of their respective party leaders. The power structures and composition of a legislature makes the concept interesting to explore via a classroom simulation. In this simulation, students find themselves as elected legislators of the same political party and the instructor serves as the party's leader, everyone ready to fulfill the national legislative agenda of the party. The classroom serves as a setting for the party's caucus room to discuss legislative agenda items before the upcoming congressional year starts. Students are placed into committee groups to suggest policy ideas which are supposed to align with the national party's interests. However, everyone is made aware of some intel that suggests members of the opposing political party have infiltrated our own caucus meeting. These opposing party members are supposedly grouped together in just one of the committees, as a way of interrupting our agenda and ensuring that their ideas get implemented instead. The goal of this simulation is to determine who the opposing members are within a three-round limit to avoid our party's agenda being ruined for the year. After the conclusion of the three rounds, a debriefing is held where students find out there were actually no members of the opposing party infiltrating our caucus meeting, and that the intel was ultimately not credible. Aspects of human behavior are examined through this simulation when information and time are limited. The simulation serves as a reminder of the importance of teaching political science and incorporating different approaches in class lessons. Key skills to gain through this simulation include communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving with a time constraint, and the ability to adapt to an evolving situation. These skills are applicable to a political science classroom setting, but they

can also be utilized in the job market after graduation. Being able to teach political science lessons in a way that emphasizes a variety of useful skills in this manner is what makes the discipline unique and important for academic engagement.

Introduction and Background

Government is the system of structures implemented to regulate a state's activities (Brogan, 1998). In this sense, government can be considered the way in which society is arranged to have order. At the national level, this type of organization involves an entire country. Power and hierarchy are deeply embedded in any governmental structure (Toelstede, 2020; van Kleef and Cheng, 2020). As such, the concept of power structures exists in various types of government and is not solely beholden to a specific governmental structure (Toelstede, 2020). For example, power and hierarchy can be examined in a more democratic nation, though it could also be examined in a more authoritarian nation as well. This can present an issue in a scenario where there are competing interests. Someone who wields a lot of power or is higher up in a chain of command can potentially make decisions that are unpopular among others.

This reality described in the previous paragraph may reflect the nature of some legislatures, in that hierarchy and power may both dictate the decisions being made. Legislative leaders sometimes have to use persuasion techniques to get their allies to support certain policy measures (Edwards, 2018). This may include legislators begrudgingly agreeing to vote in favor of something, possibly including instances in which it goes against their personal morals, the values of their constituents, or if they feel it even goes against what their political affiliation represents. In this sense, it is also important to consider the role of factions within a party structure and their potential effect on legislative effectiveness and success (Brady and Bullock, 1983). More recent findings still prove that there are incentives to maintain strict party discipline to gain resources and opportunities in order to avoid being penalized by party leadership (Pearson, 2015). This implies factions agreeing to policies and provisions with the legislative leaders of their party to support initiatives, even if they are not completely supportive of the

measures. Ultimately, power structures are always present in legislature which drive the actions, behaviors, and decisions that are made.

About Simulations

Scholarship has indicated several benefits of implementing simulations into classroom learning. First, having a proactive goal-oriented approach helps students understand the content in a different context while also employing transferable skills that can apply beyond the specific simulation (Chernikova et al., 2020; Levin-Banchik, 2023). It is important for instructors to state these goals clearly ahead of the simulation. This ensures that students pay attention to what is required of them for the simulation, exhibit the course knowledge required of them to be active simulation participants, as well as develop skills such as communication or critical thinking that students can utilize in other courses or even outside of the classroom altogether. Simulation-based learning has also been previously shown to be effective in student retention of course materials, especially when a debriefing occurs following the simulation as a wrap-up analysis (Levin-Banchik, 2018). As a result, students seemingly would perform better on quizzes and potentially hold onto more course-related knowledge after the course's completion by implementing this approach.

The debriefing process is also important to examine with respect to simulations. A debriefing usually follows the conclusion of a simulation to discuss the results. Previous studies have found positive effects of utilizing a debriefing in a classroom setting (Fanning and Gaba, 2007; Wedig, 2010; Wang et al., 2011). For example, failure to achieve a team goal can be a teachable moment in a simulation as a way to learn a valuable lesson from a course. It is also important to conduct the debriefing immediately following the simulation to recollect many of the main points of the simulation (Wedig, 2010). Especially when involving a very complex area

in political science, this is a good strategy to follow to make sure that students understood the significance of the simulation.

Thus, it would seem prudent for me as instructor to take notes based on my own observations during the simulation. This would be helpful for the debriefing process to be as effective as possible for student learning. It may also help to reflect on the decisions and outcomes throughout the process of the simulation for the same reason. Following this, an additional step that can possibly be taken is to ask students to write a paragraph of their honest thoughts of the simulation. This may include any frustrations, rationales for decisions, or any similar lines of thought regarding the simulation process. Students' honest reflections and considerations of the simulation are just as important as those of the instructor. It may also help with knowledge retention if students recall information on their own as another learnable moment.

Simulations are also important because they allow for the development of complex skills that supersede students' prior knowledge (Chernikova et al., 2020). This is due to real-time communication and feedback among the student participants while in the simulation setting to allow them to expand their learning opportunities, especially for students who are not as familiar with the course material prior to learning about the subject (Chernikova et al., 2020). Simulations are also generally good motivators of knowledge and offer an overall better way to promote student participation and engagement with the course material (Gleek, 2015). In a political science classroom, students may be better equipped to understand the nature of introductory political concepts and processes.

These can be rather abstract ideas to grasp, especially for students beginning in political science, so introducing a simulation for a class unit or section would be advantageous to become

more familiar with fundamental ideas. In the section that follows, I shall outline a simulation proposal involving the legislative branch of a fictitious nation as a way to offer students a hands-on experience pertaining to various challenges of a party's legislative agenda. Knowledge of various types of legislative responsibilities is one aspect that is ingrained in an introductory political science course, so the hope is that implementing this simulation aids students in their understanding of concepts relating to a national legislature and why it can be difficult for members of the same party to cooperate.

Generally, it is also found that simulations are able to effectively bridge the gap between academic learning and discipline-specific practice (Hertel and Millis, 2002). This suggests that being able to introduce simulations effectively in a classroom setting would benefit students to be more successful if they choose a career path in the field. Especially if students perceive any type of disconnect or detachment between classroom learning and a job in the field after graduation, then introducing simulations may help to ease some worries about their futures. If there are any questions from students about the relevance of the course material, then the simulation should also be able to address those concerns. In this regard, a simulation should be able to demonstrate the importance of learning the material in the classroom while simultaneously being able to prove its worth for students in a practical manner.

Establishing the Legislative Simulation

Many students have a general idea about the main functions and responsibilities of a legislature prior to taking an introductory political science course. They know that legislators are elected by the people, and the goal of a legislature is to be the foundation of crafting laws for a nation. Other intricacies such as the relative power of a legislature, or even the distinction between a unicameral and bicameral legislature, are expanded upon in the classroom, but

students understand the gist of the basic role bestowed to a national legislature. It is thought that legislatures have an inordinate amount of influence and power in determining how society is run (Melia, 2010). If this is the case, then a simulation involving an influential entity such as a legislature should be important for students to experience. This presents a good opportunity to expand students' knowledge about a legislative body by creating a simulation so that they can get a hands-on experience and perhaps see more about a legislature from this perspective. However, one challenge is to implement the simulation in a way that is realistic from the perspective of a party trying to get national agenda items brought to the legislature's floor, while also detaching the legislative simulation from American politics. Classes can become contentious with partisan bias, while the course material and simulation suddenly become secondary when the simulation becomes too familiar (Niemi and Niemi, 2007; Journell, 2017). Thus, the solution to circumvent this obstacle is to present ideas to the class that do not closely affiliate with either of the main political parties of the United States, while still allowing for realistic discussion about the legislative topics.

Here's the setup of the simulation: students are given an instruction and organization packet containing all the relevant information prior to the day of the simulation. Students discover that they all have been elected as a legislator at the national level for the "Federalist Party" for the nation of Leblancia (a completely made-up party and nation). As such, they have to caucus together before the start of the upcoming legislative session to establish the party's yearly agenda. As instructor, I would act as the party leader to guide and moderate the caucus session, though mainly allowing the students as party members to discuss the agenda. However, everyone is also informed of some intel suggesting that a small group of members from the rival "Nationalist Party" (again, completely made-up party) intend to disrupt our initial caucus

meeting to sabotage our party's agenda so that theirs can be implemented instead of ours. This is why it is important to utilize problem-solving skills to determine which party members are actually members of our party's caucus.

On the day of the simulation, students are organized randomly by the instructor to serve as a committee member for a specific policy section. There are a total of ten different policy sections, though students only have to be concerned with being assigned to one. These policy sections are: agricultural policy, drug policy, economic policy, education policy, energy policy, environmental policy, fiscal policy, foreign policy, health care policy, and housing policy. Students are not required to have any out-of-class knowledge about any of these policy topics (it's actually preferred that way, for the sake of the simulation), but rather it is set up this way to maintain a relative level of reality with how legislatures discuss various topics. It is elaborated that members of the rival Nationalist Party are contained to only one policy section, so the class collectively has to determine which committee has the "Nationalist" members and evict them from our "Federalist" caucus before it's too late.

The simulation is played in three rounds. Each round, every policy committee in the simulation reads a prepared statement specifically for that round. These prepared statements are provided by me to students ahead of time. Simulations are more interactive when students interject more of their creativity, but having these statements prepared by the instructor ensure a realistic level of legislative ideas at a national level. The committees present these issues or topics they would like to address in the upcoming legislative session pertaining to our party's agenda. All members are aware of the party's focus for each policy section and can reference it during the simulation; again, this acts as a way to ensure that everyone knows what the party's purpose is and whether the prepared statement read by the committee matches the purpose.

After each committee reads their prepared statement at the beginning of each round, the class collectively needs to take a vote to determine which statement(s) did not align with the party's purpose. Everyone will discuss in their own respective committee for a few minutes to decide whether they want to "skip" their vote for the round (and thus, choose not to vote out any other committee), or whether they want to vote out a committee (and specifically, which committee). It is important to note that this is done by committee and not by individual; each committee is only allowed one vote per round, so only one person per committee shall present that committee's decision when prompted. This process also operates under the assumption that there won't be any "cross-talk" among the policy committees. In other words, everyone is expected to only communicate with the members of their own committee and cannot communicate or collude with another committee's members. The voting process is done with the sole purpose of determining which committee contains the rival party members so that they can be evicted from our party's caucus meeting.

There needs to be a total of five separate committees voting out the same committee in order for the members of that committee to be evicted from the caucus. This ensures that a majority of committees agree on which other committee to evict; anything less than the threshold of five committee votes would likely lead to unnecessary chaos each voting round. If this threshold is not met, then no committee is evicted; if the threshold is reached, then the committee that receives at least 5 votes shall have all committee members "evicted" from the caucus (the students of the evicted committee would remain seated in the classroom and can hear the rest of the activity, but they would just be unable to participate further in the simulation if evicted from the caucus). After the voting process has concluded and the result is announced, the instructor shall indicate if there is an evicted committee and whether the rival party members are still in the

simulation. I would make students aware of all the necessary information as possible at the end of each round as an effective way to communicate and make sure that everyone is on the same page with regard to the relevant information.

If there are any ties (i.e. two different committees each receive four votes in the first round, hypothetically speaking), then no committee is evicted. Furthermore, it is paramount for our party to correctly identify the committee with the rival party members. Accidentally evicting a committee containing our own party members would be detrimental to our party's agenda. If our own party members accidentally get evicted, then they cannot present their suggested agenda items in legislative bills once the congressional year starts. This means we would end up losing control of that specific policy area and would be subject to the Nationalist Party's ideas; they would have the leverage if we are unable to propose our own Federalist Party ideas. This addresses the theme of power in government and the behaviors of people when they feel as though they may lose their power.

Thus, students have to be able to evict the Nationalist Party members as efficiently as possible without accidentally evicting our own party members. However, it is important to consider that the students only have enough time for three rounds to identify the correct committee before having to go into a joint legislative session to present a proposed agenda for the upcoming congressional year. If the committee containing the rival party members is not evicted by the end of the third round, then the assumption is that they were able to seize our party's caucus and influence our own party members to unknowingly agree to their policy proposals during the joint legislative session, thus ensuring their party gets all the legislative power for the congressional year. This would be devastating for our party and our constituents if this outcome occurs.

Simulation Decisions Rationales

The first question that is probably asked regarding this simulation is along the lines of: who is supposed to be the committee that contains the other party's legislators? Is it a different committee each time the simulation is played? The answer to this specific rationale is that there is actually no committee with legislators from the Nationalist Party; all committees only have members of our own Federalist Party. As it would be explained during a debriefing after the conclusion of the simulation, the intel received turned out to be not credible, and everyone was acting on imperfect information with the assumption that the intel was accurate. This creates an open dialogue to reflect on the decisions (or non-decisions) made throughout the simulation and why many of the committees seemed untrustworthy despite all committees being formed of solely our own Federalist Party members.

It also reinforces previous notions of power and party discipline mentioned previously. Power is a serious motivator for a lot of people. There is a generally accepted proposition that the fear of losing power causes those currently in power to become corrupted and wield their power in a way to ensure they maintain it (Wisse et al., 2019). In the case of this simulation, students act as members of a political party with the idea that they are proposing ideal legislative items that would further advance the interests of the party. Doing so creates a benefit for the party since the party would be able to obtain the resources necessary to enact these pieces of legislation. However, most proposed legislative items in the simulation intentionally misalign with the core objectives of the party; certainly there are aspects of each item that is embedded in the party's identity, but not a single proposed item completely fits (100%) with the party. This generates the obstacle of party discipline (or lack thereof), since most committees in the simulation are set up to be self-serving rather than being altruistic to the party.

The above dilemma also establishes the fact that the party becomes wholly ineffective at producing policy-oriented goals that are beneficial to the party and to the party's constituents who elected them. Under the Situated Focus Theory relating to power, people will change their behavior in order to maintain their power (Guinote, 2007, Guinote, 2017). As such, party members are theoretically expected to be more careful when it comes to the voting process during each round of the simulation. However, it is possible if behaviors would vary if students wanted to act quickly to remove the other party's legislators in this simulation, given the limited number of rounds. Even though each committee is purposefully constructed to be selfish, an interesting facet to watch is how the voting phase is handled since the implication is that losing our own party members from the caucus meeting results in a loss of power for the Federalist Party.

In turn, the power in governing that specific policy would be handed over to the Nationalist Party. Does this matter to the students who are acting as party members in this simulation? Do some committees take part in the simulation more cautiously or aggressively, knowing what's at stake with respect to the power our party could wield? Ultimately, the exercise creates a learning experience centered around behavior and making decisions with a time constraint. It is also a clear demonstration as to why party discipline can be stricter or easier to find in some national legislatures, while being more difficult to find in other national legislatures.

A second rationale that is made with this simulation is the concerted effort to design already-prepared statements for the committees to read in the starting phase of each round during the simulation. As the instructor (party leader for the simulation), it is important to allow some flexibility for creativity with a simulation while also maintaining a realistic approach to incorporate the simulation with the course in a direct manner. This minimizes the probability of

discussing any off-topic matters to allow for a smooth progression of the simulation. Students would not have to spend time inventing their own ideas to give them as much time as possible to participate in the actual simulation itself, as well as having enough time for debriefing following the simulation.

Prepared statements for each committee to read each round would also limit any sense of arbitrariness. This method aims to avoid any potential biases or haphazard guesses in conversations within committees. It would be easy for any committee to point a finger at another committee claiming they are the other party's legislators. Committees theoretically have a myriad of random reasons once the voting phase is reached in how they make their respective decisions. This can become exacerbated if committees have to write their own statements for the beginning of each round. Yet, any potential arbitrary reasons are diminished if there are prepared statements with the sole purpose of making most committees appear untrustworthy each round. Thus, it helps to streamline the logistics of the entire simulation to be an exciting educational exercise while mitigating the possibility of any biases or haphazardness.

A third rationale for the decisions made in creating this simulation relate to the overall organization and composition of the simulation. There is a known limitation in assessing the true results of a simulation based on how it is implemented (Chernikova et al., 2020). For example, it would be impossible to determine whether a simulation helped expand a student's knowledge about that specific section's course material for a few different reasons, such as: the student was already well-adept in the course material prior to the simulation, the simulation did not meet the expectations of the learning outcomes, or the quality of the simulation itself did not meet the expectations of students pertaining to the course material. I acknowledge that these are some of the most common types of limitations for simulation learning. One potential way to address this

is to have students write an essay for completion where they give their honest and candid thoughts anonymously. This would be done following the simulation, debriefing, and student reflection in the debriefing period, as a way to gain the honest opinions of students concerning these areas. The questions of the essay would act as a self-assessment for the applicability and generalizability regarding the effectiveness of the simulation.

Lastly, ten committee groups may seem like a lot, and having only three rounds may not seem like a feasible amount of time. However, given the number of students typically enrolled in the type of course where this simulation could be implemented, each committee group would have about 7 or 8 students. This group size seems manageable to be able to communicate with the rest of the committee group members. Having fewer committee groups would mean larger group sizes, which may make it nearly impossible for everyone to communicate effectively and make decisions pertaining to the simulation. As for the timing aspect, I wanted to strike a balance between ensuring enough class time to allow the committee groups to make decisions across multiple rounds while also implementing a “time crunch” as a way to influence everyone to quickly think about their group’s analysis and make proper judgments based on their committee group’s deductions.

Purpose

Part of the objective of implementing a simulation is to provide a different learning environment as an opportunity to engage in the course material. This also presents a different style and mode of allowing students to apply the knowledge obtained from class. Rather than only relying on auditory and visual learning skills, a simulation can help develop kinesthetic skills by learning through experience. Simulation scenarios are intended to be as realistic as possible in a classroom setting while also focusing on course concepts, so being able to learn and

apply the material while being presented with a real-life simulation can develop a variety of useful skills. In turn, these skills generally benefit students for learning and applying various course concepts to real-world situations.

Moreover, students can gain competencies from simulations that can apply in practice beyond their academic career. For example, this simulation heavily relies on communication. Students have to communicate with other students within their respective committee group to make appropriate decisions regarding the simulation each round. This teaches the importance of clear communication and being effective in describing intentions among their group members. It also focuses on working together with others to achieve a similar goal and how to collaborate. Specifically in politics and in the legislative branch of government, communication is vital for members of the same party to cooperate in achieving policy goals and governing society. More broadly speaking for students, the communication skills learned from this simulation can be applied in other areas of academia as well as in the job market after they graduate. This is why it is important to establish strong communication skills in a simulation.

Another skill introduced in this simulation is the ability to critically evaluate an evolving situation over time. Within the simulation, students only have three rounds to evict the legislators from the other party, so they are operating under a measurable limit. It also doesn't help students make a proper determination when the simulation intends for most committee groups to sound untrustworthy in all three rounds. Situations can even change between rounds that may cause some committee groups to adapt their ways of thinking, such as another group sounding extremely untrustworthy in round 2 when they were thought to be safe in round 1. There are only 3 total rounds for the student members to act and evict the "correct" group, so it is interesting to see how each group goes about making their respective deductions. In politics, this speaks to

motive and why some politicians act at times. There are intrinsic benefits to fully cooperating with the party's national agenda and introducing items that only go along with the central position of the party's interests. Sometimes, politicians could be motivated by introducing an item that is supported by their constituents, as a way to avoid electoral punishment so they can remain in their position. Other times, special interest groups may be playing a role behind the scenes in influencing politicians to introduce an item for which the special interest is specifically advocating. Thus, the goal is to demonstrate that there can realistically be situations of same-party legislators presenting a legislative item that is not completely aligned with party leaders and/or the central position of the party.

The purpose of introducing these skills is to allow students to discern difficult scenarios and learn to make independent decisions based on the information they have. This may teach students to acknowledge that politicians have different ways of communicating policy goals, as well as different motivations and interests regarding legislative bills. They can also be able to recognize a politician who still affiliates with a party, even if they do not agree 100% of the time with their respective party. Outside of purely political knowledge, these skills are important to have while looking for a job and on the job itself. It would be advantageous to show prospective employers that someone is able to communicate well and be able to solve problems or make decisions on their own for a job, which is why I want to introduce these types of skills to students through a simulation. Simulations are able to achieve multiple things simultaneously, with respect to skills learned and course knowledge obtained.

Future Direction

As for the future direction of this simulation idea, I would like to be able to implement it in an appropriate course setting. I think there is a little flexibility in that it could be implemented

in an introductory American politics course, or it could be implemented in a class solely about the legislative branch of government, or even a course about the process surrounding public policy implementation. Since I am a graduate student at the time of presenting this paper, I have not had an opportunity to implement this idea yet. However, I believe that this is an interesting simulation that can be very helpful for students for a variety of reasons, as mentioned throughout the paper. After the simulation is implemented, a future paper would also discuss observations and results, based on the events of the number of times it would be utilized.

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