

Bracket Chats: Promoting Bureaucratic Knowledge through Tournament Brackets*

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In-class games engage students in active learning through the application of theoretical concepts, sparking class discussion, and creating interaction between instructors and students. While students often know a great deal about the presidency, many have little knowledge of the executive branch beyond the Office of the President. The bureaucracy is more abstract and unfamiliar to students, in terms of its breadth, responsibilities, and power. To increase knowledge of bureaucratic organizations, as well as their importance and functions, students complete a March Madness-style tournament bracket of executive departments, agencies, and bureaus. Students must navigate the tricky venture of seeding, evaluating, and comparing agencies, always mindful of a potential upset. The completion of individual and collective brackets spurs classroom discussion on the purpose, roles, and variety of bureaucratic agencies, including the influence of executive agencies on our everyday lives.

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Introduction

One of the common challenges in teaching introductory courses is capturing the interest of students enrolled primarily to fulfill general education requirements rather than out of a genuine curiosity for the subject. This challenge spans across course design and administration, from setting learning objectives and selecting course content, to engaging students in the classroom. Pedagogical research demonstrates in-class simulations and games are a useful mechanism to help students understand and actively engage learning materials and concepts (Asal 2005; Shin 2021). Simulations often place students into roles to mimic institutional structures and actions, allowing them to “engage in actual experiences” (Pautz 2011, 648). Games are characterized by “competition and rules” (Ellington et al. 1998, 3). Games thus represent “an abstraction of reality for the purpose of explanation, understanding, or prediction” (McCarthy 2014, 404).

Game-based learning (GBL) refers to the use of “games or simulations for the purpose of fulfilling one or more specific learning objectives” (Wiggins 2016, 19). GBL is an effective pedagogical tool to “to re-engage students who have lost interest in traditional instruction” (Wiggins 2016, 20). We believe GBL may be especially useful in lessons students often find less engaging, such as the bureaucracy. This is because GBL “incite[s] greater student excitement about the topic and, thus, bring[s] about deeper understanding and longer retention” of material (McCarthy 2014, 403). GBL thus “enhance[s] learning and teaching” (Wiggins 2016, 18). Consequently, games allow students the opportunity to learn and apply key themes as well as demonstrate knowledge in creative ways.

This article details a game designed to engage students through the application of a familiar and popular concept: tournament brackets. We begin by surveying existing literature on

the use of tournament brackets in higher education, highlighting how their gamification serves as an effective tool for enhancing students' understanding of bureaucratic structures and actions. Next, we describe multiple iterations of the game as implemented in our classrooms and outline how the activity may be adapted to suit the objectives of other courses. Finally, we explore how debriefing and reflection is used to encourage debate and solidify student learning, before concluding with broader implications for GBL.

Thinking About the Bureaucracy and GBL

Employed widely every spring, tournament brackets are a common fixture of American sports and culture. In 2024, more than 25 million brackets were completed for the men's and women's college basketball tournament challenge through ESPN (Associated Press 2024). From March Madness to the College Football Playoff, bracketology—the study of predictive outcomes via brackets—has become popular. However, the use of tournament brackets in higher education is not new. Brackets have long been seen as “a way to organize debate on an academic topic,” as well as a “fun, tension-lessening way to approach big decisions that require many students to vote” (Doyne and Schulten 2010).

In the classroom, bracketology represents “an active learning strategy” through which students, individually or collaboratively, create tournament brackets to satisfy learning objectives (Hursman et al. 2024, 2). Such games have been applied in horticulture and pharmacy education courses, for instance (see Miller 2019; Hursman et al. 2024). Literature demonstrates active teaching techniques, dependent upon structure and other factors, are often positively associated with the achievement of learning outcomes (Sivan et al. 1991). In other words, fun in the classroom—through activities and delivery—is good for student engagement (Tews et al. 2015).

Brackets represent a fun game that “may teach concepts relevant to several courses” and “which may be adapted, as needed, to emphasize different concepts or to fit other courses within the instructor’s teaching portfolio” (Brown 2018, 511). For our purposes, we utilize tournament brackets as a component of our bureaucracy lesson. While students often know a great deal of knowledge about the presidency, many know little about the executive branch beyond the Office of the President. In fact, amongst students, “the bureaucracy is one of the least understood topics in American government” (Miller et al. 2010, 245). The bureaucracy is “more abstract and measureless” than other areas of governance and policy despite the near certainty that students have interacted with many bureaucratic agencies and bureaucrats (Miller et al. 2010, 245). Afterall, students, minimally, have dealt with academic bureaucracy. Moreover, bureaucracy is often caricatured and attacked as bloated, ineffective, and Orwellian.

In terms of its breadth, responsibilities, and power, knowing the contours of government bureaucracy is important since “agency officials play a major role in determining the content of the public policies we encounter in our everyday lives” (Balla and Gormley 2017, XIV). It represents the “most visible point of contact between the state and citizen” (Barberis 2012, 84). Yet, faculty believe teaching bureaucracy “presents significant challenges” (Miller et al. 2010, 256). It is therefore important to consider alternative techniques to teach the bureaucracy and make students aware of its importance.

Simulations and GBL are sometimes eschewed in curriculum design as being time and resource intensive, whereby instructors struggle to gauge their effectiveness towards learning outcomes compared to the work necessary to administer them. However, we propose the use of brackets as a ‘low-intensity’ activity (see Glazier 2011). These require less of a time and resource investment for students, as the game works best when there are mixed levels of

familiarity with different bureaucratic agencies. It can also be adapted depending on available class time; it can be run with zero preparatory work by students or with a small amount. Further, the game may be adjusted to fit instructor or students' interests, as there is a wide array of bureaucratic agencies, with various ones receiving greater popular focus due to current events.

Brackets are an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing students' understanding of bureaucratic organizations, as well as their functions and importance. Modeled after the structure of March Madness, bracket games challenge students to complete a single-elimination tournament where either pre-selected or student-selected 'teams' compete. By the end of the tournament, students have selected a winner based on personal preferences or pre-selected criteria, encouraging critical thinking and engagement with course material.

The versatility of bracket games extends beyond the study of bureaucracy; it may be applied to a variety of topics such as treaties, party platforms, and more. It can be adapted across subfields and disciplines, including American politics, state and local government, international relations, and comparative politics. By leveraging the familiarity and excitement of a well-known game, brackets transform the study of complex governmental structures into an engaging and enjoyable learning experience for students, especially on oft-maligned topics.

Breaking Through the Red Tape: Game Design

This section outlines recent iterations of the game, providing insights into its implementation in different environments. To contextualize gameplay, it is important to consider the structure of our classes. We teach at a large public university where courses are delivered in a face-to-face format, with 50-minute sessions held three times per week. Class sizes range from as few as 40 for an upper-division class, to more than 200 students in a general education course.

However, based on the different priorities and preferences of the instructor, the game is flexible enough to use in classes of any size to engage students on the bureaucracy.

We assign the game during our bureaucracy lesson, which follows units on the legislative and executive branches. The game may be completed at the beginning or end of the lesson, serving as either a prelude to lecture or as reinforcement of key concepts discussed in-class. It is important that students complete the game with some knowledge of the bureaucracy—even through assigned readings—since many of our students are nonmajors.

Described below are versions of the game. They vary primarily based on student preparatory work and dedicated class time. The first, which we refer to as the single-class tournament, is conducted exclusively during class time. The second, which we refer to as take-home and in-class tournaments, includes an assignment completed by students outside of class as well as dedicated class time. Third, we discuss further adaptations of the game. The instructor may, if desired, highlight in-game dynamics and strategies in debriefing or via a reflection assignment.

Single-Class Tournament

This iteration has been conducted in a single class period with a smaller class of 10 to 50 students. Students are assigned standard homework, usually a textbook chapter, on the basics of the American bureaucracy. They are given no indication that this is anything other than a standard course module. When class begins, students are put in groups of three to four and given a list of federal agencies.

Students are given 5 to 10 minutes to research and familiarize themselves with the full range of agencies. On a board that all students may see, the instructor draws a blank 32-team tournament bracket, with half of the chosen agencies on either side. Students are then provided

10 to 15 minutes to discuss the agencies and fill out a version of the bracket in their group. This step may be done on a piece of paper or on a laptop; they simply need to be able to reference their choices later. While groups are deliberating, the instructor wanders among the groups, clarifying information about the agencies as needed. However, at this point it is important not to give students criteria for their selections; they must decide that amongst themselves.

Once each group has completed their brackets, the instructor leads them in a brief discussion comparing their criteria of choice. For example, did they choose based on their own familiarity with the agency, popularity among the public, the ‘importance’ of the work they do, or the amount of people they affect? The instructor then provides a core criterion to work from: which agency is the most helpful? Students are given two minutes to reflect on their group’s existing bracket and how well it follows ‘helpfulness.’ The class then collaborates to complete the bracket on the board. Pairs and winners are decided based on a vote using a quick show of hands. If the vote clearly favors one side, then it is chosen without debate. If the class is evenly divided, then one student volunteer is asked to justify their choice to the class. This continues until the board bracket is completed and a champion is selected. A debrief and review of relevant content material—a lesson on the bureaucracy leveraging their experiences in the game—follow.

Take-Home and In-Class Tournaments

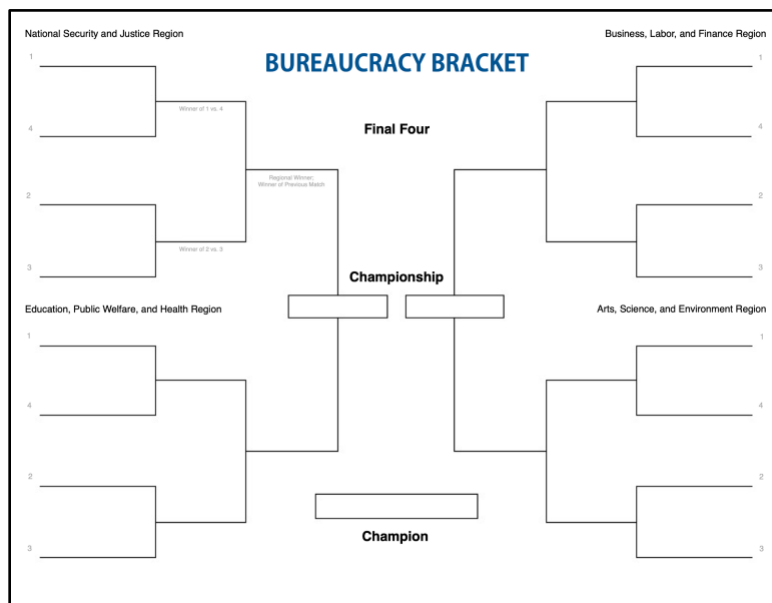
This version of the game has been implemented in an introductory American national government course, which typically has between 75 and 200 students per class. As the bureaucracy lesson typically stretches over three days, students are informed of the assignment at the beginning of the first day. They are told to review the assignment instructions and begin to review bureaucratic agencies and bracket selection procedures. Due to the size of the class, the

assignment is composed of two parts: an individual take-home bracket and a tournament completed in class.

For the take-home bracket, students are provided a fillable electronic bracket (i.e., PDF), as depicted in Figure 1. The bracket includes four regions: 1) national security and justice, education, public welfare, and health, 3) business, labor, and finance, and 4) arts, science, and environment. For each region,

students need to select four bureaucratic agencies to begin. To select teams, a [list of federal departments and agencies](#) is provided. Students can browse through bureaucratic agencies by keyword, name, or subject. While the list includes subdivisions of departments and agencies—such

Figure 1. Electronic bracket provided to students.



as bureaus, hotlines, etc.—students are free to choose any organization listed. We believe it is worthwhile for students to learn about and play any bureaucratic unit, as a point of the game is to demonstrate the diversity of bureaucratic functions and tasks.

Once the sixteen teams are selected for the initial bracket, agencies will then compete in a single-game elimination tournament. Agencies are seeded as a first, second, third, or fourth seed. In the initial round, the first and fourth, and second and third teams compete. The winners of those matchups play for the regional championship, and the four regional winners face off in the Final Four. The winners of the two Final Four games matchup for the championship.

After completing the bracket, students are instructed to write a one-paragraph reflection analyzing their decision-making process. They are prompted to explain how they selected the sixteen agencies for the bracket, describe specific matchups, detail any upsets (unexpected or surprising results), and discuss why the winning agency ultimately prevailed. In larger classes, this reflection is a crucial component of the activity, as it encourages students to critically evaluate the criteria they used—such as budget, perceived significance (i.e., coolness), relevance to current events, or personal preference—and how these factors influenced their outcomes. Students submit both their completed bracket and reflection paragraph before the final class meeting on the bureaucracy. This timing allows students to play the game with a foundational understanding of bureaucratic organization, activity (e.g., policy implementation, rulemaking, etc.), and importance.

During the last lecture on bureaucracy, time is allocated at the end of class to complete the in-class tournament portion of the game, which typically requires 15 to 20 minutes. The instructor begins by providing a brief overview of the process, which students are familiar with from the first part of the game. At this point, the instructor may highlight notable findings or interesting bracket outcomes from student's individual submissions. Once the electronic bracket is projected, or a bracket is drawn on the classroom board, the game begins. Students are invited to suggest agencies region by region, and if more than four are proposed for any region, the class votes by a show of hands to finalize the selections. This same voting method is used to seed the agencies, ranking them from one to four. The tournament then proceeds, with each match-up's winner determined by class vote, until a champion is determined.

Further Adaptations

Beyond the two games presented, we discuss further adaptations that suit courses across disciplines and with different time and assignment constraints. The substance of tournament brackets may be adjusted to explore the bureaucracy differently or used to explore subjects beyond U.S. bureaucracy. We first offer some options appropriate to U.S. bureaucracy before turning to other areas of political science.

First, there are several elements an instructor may change to direct students' learning: the leading question/agency options, the vote/debate element, and debrief/reflection. Depending on the instructor's learning objectives, the leading question may be left vague or crafted narrowly. If the goal is simply for students to become more familiar with what agencies and organizations exist within the federal bureaucracy, then you may simply ask students to choose agencies however their heart desires. Debriefing can then include a discussion on the variation of students' decision-making paradigms. Otherwise, questions on effectiveness, independence, usefulness, importance, public support, constitutional relevance, and more can steer students towards other key concepts. It may be pertinent to the lesson to craft the pool of agencies along a particular theme (e.g., cabinet departments, independent executive agencies, or along a substantive theme), which may be matched with a leading question. We recommend including some agencies students are familiar with and others they may know less about.

The voting and debate process may also be altered. For classes focused on developing argumentation and debate skills, students may be assigned one or more agencies to research beforehand. Students may then be tasked with presenting evidence in favor of their agency and/or to provide a short speech to persuade their classmates. The latter can especially be useful for lessons on public opinion, the media, and party platforms. As an adjustment to the single-

class-tournament—which brings in some of the benefits of the take-home-and-in-class tournament—a hidden vote can be held at the start of the activity where students are asked to vote for their single preferred agency in the pool. The results of the vote should not be revealed until the full-class bracket is completed, at which time the results may be compared in the debrief, bringing in variations of voting behavior and rules.

A short pre- and post-test on students' knowledge of different bureaucratic agencies or on the purpose and function of the bureaucracy, may also improve student learning. Having students calibrate their knowledge beforehand helps identify gaps in their knowledge, provides an opportunity for the instructor to adjust the activity to better address those gaps, and helps students identify their own learning after the activity (Baranowski and Weir 2015; Druiliolle 2017). It may also be used as a starting point for the debrief or a reflection component.

Debriefing may also be modified to satisfy course needs. A well-structured debrief is paramount; however, depending on the structure and content of the debrief we can lead students to focus on different components of the game and lesson. The two presented herein are ripe for discussions on people's preferences and perception, the effect of different criteria, operationalization of criteria, and the direct comparison of agencies' roles and responsibilities.

Debriefing may take multiple forms: it may be contained in the last ten minutes of class, a written reflection turned in outside of class, or the first few minutes of the next class. We prefer a mixture of these options as different formats provide distinct benefits. Debriefing by class discussion at the end of the activity has several benefits including students' memories of the activity and the direct comparison of each other's experiences in real time. Written reflections allow students the time and space to (re)consider their own experiences and how it may apply to

the course. A short discussion at the next class requires students to recall their experiences, which helps solidify their learning and connects their experience to the rest of the course.

Second, tournament brackets are not just handy for teaching the U.S. bureaucracy. Brackets lends itself towards any subject where an array of actors or issues can be compared to each other. Within comparative politics, tournament-style brackets could be used for comparison of different nondemocratic leaders (e.g., who would you like to lead your country least?), elections (e.g., which was most representative?), or a comparison of other state characteristics (e.g., who does it best?). In international relations courses, brackets could be used for comparison of different international laws or organizations (e.g., which is most effective?), crisis areas (e.g., which is most likely to lead us to WWII?), Additionally, many options could be used across subfields, like UN Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., which helps the most people?), disasters (e.g., which harms the most people or had the worst/best government response?). Options may be varied as long as there are pairs of concepts, items, or actors to compete against each other in groups of eight, sixteen, or thirty-two.

Debriefing and Reflection

After the in-class game is completed, we review the bracket with students and debrief. Debriefing “is a time to reflect on and discover together what happened during game play” (Steinwachs 1992, 187). It is thus an important element of in-class activities and GBL because it “provides the analytical thinking needed to process the information that the students gained from the experience ... bringing meaning to the experience and for learning from that meaning” (Dorn 1989, 11). Debriefing takes part in multiple phases: with an emphasis on *describing* their impressions of the game, *analysis* of decision-making, and *application* of themes and concepts (see Steinwachs 1992).

Emphasis in debriefing is placed on all aspects of the game to promote critical engagement: initial selection and matchup winners, as well as the diversity of bureaucratic functions and tasks, the variety of criteria to determine ‘success,’ and the interplay of popularity vs. services provided. The debrief may vary depending on circumstances; however, our base debrief falls into three pairs of questions. First: *which agencies were you most (least) familiar with when we began?* This question should be kept mostly descriptive and usually leads to a discussion of the vast array of bureaucratic tasks and Americans general unfamiliarity. Secondly, *what criteria did you use to choose between pairings and what did [criteria] mean for you?* It is here where analysis often begins for students. Open the discussion into a debate on the usefulness and measurement of the criteria. Third, *do you think your choices are representative of the average American, and how would you check?* With this last question, we bridge analysis and application. In some iterations, we have given students a short amount of time to search for data to discover whether their intuition is correct.

A structured, organized debrief ensures quality of discussion, that students connect their behaviors with class content, and the activity becomes not a single moment in time, but a touchstone for future classes as well. In our debriefings, students readily provided their own descriptions of what happened during the creation of their brackets. There is usually a common discussion on students’ unfamiliarity with many bureaucratic agencies, which is why many students’ selections are often unsurprising, such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), or a military branch. A breakdown of agencies selected in a recent iteration of the game—presented in Table 1—also demonstrates students use the assignment to discover new bureaucratic units, such as the Department of Agriculture’s Meat and Poultry Hotline, the National Cancer Institute, and the Office of Science

Table 1. Recent agencies selected by students in their tournament brackets.

Air Force	Federal Emergency Management Agency
Army	Fish and Wildlife Service
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	Food and Drug Administration
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services	Forest Service
Central Intelligence Agency	Internal Revenue Service
Defense Intelligence Agency	Meat and Poultry Hotline
Department of Agriculture	Mint
Department of Commerce	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Department of Defense	National Cancer Institute
Department of Education	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Department of Energy	National Park Service
Department of Health and Human Services	National Science Foundation
Department of Homeland Security	National Security Agency
Department of Justice	Navy
Department of Labor	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
Department of Treasury	Office of Management and Budget
Department of Veterans Affairs	Office of Science and Technology Policy
Drug Enforcement Administration	Secret Service
Environmental Protection Agency	Smithsonian Institution
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation	Social Security Administration

and Technology Policy. Selections such as these spur further debate. Additionally, agencies in the news gain popularity—for example, the semester NASA landed a rover on Mars, it won a higher percentage of brackets. Students explain these preferences, and their decision-making either via in-class discussion or a reflection paragraph completed outside of class time.

Discussion

Engaging students via GBL transforms often abstract topics into accessible and memorable learning experiences. Tournament brackets exemplify how GBL increases student understanding of the structure, responsibilities, and influence of the bureaucracy. By selecting, seeding, and comparing agencies, students actively grapple with the complexities and diversity of bureaucratic functions while applying critical thinking. The collaborative and competitive elements of the game foster class discussion, encouraging students to reflect on the role of executive agencies in shaping public policy.

Student feedback on the game has been overwhelmingly positive. Through mid-semester surveys, teaching evaluations, and informal conversations, students express enjoying the game

and a greater appreciation of bureaucratic structure and the diversity of tasks and functions managed by the executive branch. The in-class tournaments are particularly popular, as students compare their bracket choices, debate matchups, and advocate for their selected agencies. In-class tournaments foster a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere that reinforces learning objectives.

Debriefing and reflection deepen students' understanding by prompting them to consider and justify the criteria used in their brackets. Many students highlight the departments and agencies they selected, often discussing how the game introduced them to agencies they had not encountered before, thus deepening their understanding of the scope of the bureaucracy. Some of the most enlightening discussions revolve around the criteria students used to make their initial selections and determine winners. Upsets are common, and surprising agencies—such as the Meat and Poultry Hotline—sometimes claim the crown.

Tournament brackets are thus a creative, low-intensity activity for instructors to implement in small upper-division courses or large lecture sections, with minimal prep and as few as 15 to 20 minutes of class time. Student feedback and our own experiences confirm tournament brackets are an effective, adaptable, and enjoyable tool for helping students grasp the importance of the bureaucracy and its effect on public life and daily life.

Bureaucracy brackets challenge students to think critically about the factors influencing the department and agency structure and functions. Ultimately, the game demonstrates the value of interactive teaching strategies in promoting active learning and making abstract concepts tangible, creating an engaging classroom environment where students may better appreciate the complexity and significance of the executive branch beyond the presidency.

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