

Get Up, Stand Up: Teaching Students about the Challenges of Mobilization

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Abstract

Mobilizing people is difficult as indicated in the literature. However, the challenges of mobilization are not always clear to students. The collective action problem and challenges of risk can be difficult to convey to undergraduate students; simply lecturing on the concept may not sufficiently capture the nuances of individual cost-benefit analyses. In this paper, we present a game that engages students by asking them about when and why they would likely participate in a protest. Through asking successive questions attempting to induce nonparticipation, this game illustrates to students why collective action may not happen. In the subsequent discussion, students are asked to reflect on theoretical explanations of the game by applying the rational actor, structure, and culture framework put forth by Lichbach and Zuckerman (2009). We argue that this exercise effectively conveys the concept of a collective action problem to students by asking them to relate mobilization to their own personal preferences and experiences.

Keywords: simulations, mobilization, pedagogy, comparative politics

Introduction

“Learning by doing” is a pedagogical technique that has been increasingly used in political science to clarify difficult concepts and theories to students. We find that this approach is particularly useful for demonstrating to students how to apply theory to real world phenomena. A challenging concept in comparative politics to relate to students is protest mobilization. Although most students are exposed to contemporary protests and social movements, such Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and March for Our Lives, they struggle to apply comparative theories to them. To demonstrate how and why mobilization can be difficult, we designed an exercise where students are “lab rats” in their own experiment as they decide the circumstances that would motivate them to protest. We found that through the exercise, students were more able to use comparative theories, specifically the rational actor, structure, and culture framework of Lichbach and Zuckerman (2009), to explain why mobilization does or does not happen.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the literature on the merits of simulations and games. Then, we explain our protest exercise in detail, followed by how to relate students’ responses to comparative theories and our qualitative impressions of the exercise.

The Merits of Active Learning

There are many active learning techniques used in political science. Active learning can include simulations, games, structured debates, case studies, small group work, and in-class writing (Asal et al 2017; Archer and Miller 2011; Bromley 2013). Utilizing these approaches is mutually beneficial for instructors and students.

First, instructors can accommodate different learning styles (Shellman and Turan 2003; Brock and Cameron 1999) and see the material in a different way (Nowell and Sin 2014, 12). Conversely, students can learn by being the primary units of analysis, or “lab rats” in their own experiments (Asal 2005). In addition, classes that use active learning tend to have higher student satisfaction (DeNeve and Heppner 1997; Miller and Groccia 1997). Engaging in role play and collaborative exercises is tied to better performance on standard evaluations (McCarthy and Anderson 2000; Frederking 2005). Active learning can be a more effective learning technique than lectures because in the latter, professors or several students often dominate the discussion (Brown and Atkins 2002, 1988; Bean 2011; Asal et al 2017).

Arguably, simulations are the most studied and utilized active learning technique in the political science literature. Simulations specifically provide opportunities for students to be “lab rats” in their own exercises (Asal 2005). Furthermore, simulations give “students the opportunity to exercise judgment, simulations can bring material to life – without sacrificing content learning” (Hess 1999, 1). Simulations make concepts tangible to students in a way textbooks or lectures cannot (Nowell and Sim 2014; Asal et al 2017).

Simulations demonstrate that “the world can be modeled”, a fundamental understanding which is necessary in teaching theories and their applications. Through this modeling, “we understand that a set of relatively simple rules can encapsulate the fundamentals of a given situation” (Asal et al 2015, 305). Separately, simulations demonstrate that “the world is complex ... despite such simple rules, the results are intrinsically uncertain and non-linear, because of the chaotic nature of human interaction” (Asal et al 2015, 305). Simulation proceedings and results can vary from iteration to iteration: it is that uncertainty that instructors can convey to students through this active learning technique (Asal et al 2015, 305).

Early pedagogical studies using active learning seemed to be concentrated in the American politics subfield (Galatas 2006). Recently, comparative politics pedagogical literature seems to be increasing, on a breadth of topics, including elections and coalition-building (Shellman 2001); public policy (Endersby and Webber 1995); cabinet formation (Kaarbo and Lantis 1997); regional studies such as the Middle East (Doughtery 2003) or the European Union (Galatas 2006). In a study of the use of active learning techniques in political science, Archer and Miller (2011) find comparative politics introductory courses are on par with political theory classes in using active learning; they are second to international relations and ahead of American politics (433).

The Utility of Games

Political simulations can take a great deal of time given that they are trying to simulate an actual event or process in politics and require students to actually do the reading before the simulation. Games, however can be much easier to use to teach: instructors can complete short illustrations that are grounded in active learning. While games can still suffer from students not completing readings, they are often completed in a way that be beneficial for students, independent of them having completed the assigned readings and learning materials.

Much of the political science pedagogical literature focuses on the efficacy of active learning writ large or simulations specifically. Games are another form of active learning technique. Through active participation and role-playing, games force students to construct and perceive knowledge (Asal et al 2017; Pettenger, West, and Young 2013). Like in Asal et al (2017, 2), our design of games uses:

adopted techniques described by Schacht and Stewart (1990; 1992) as “gimmicks” in the sense that students themselves are the data points or objects of theory applications. This type of user-friendly and interactive approach has proven to effectively attract students’ attention and increase their interest (Schacht and Stewart 1990; 1992).

Games may be more manageable than simulations for both instructors and students. Games are short, guided discussion-based exercises, often with some kinesthetic aspects, while simulations often require more than one class and involve multiple teams and scenarios. For instructors, games can be easier to plan: they can focus on one concept or theory and devise a short activity to make it relatable to students. In contrast, simulations can require significant preparation and research. For students, games do not require the same level of reading preparation or attention span that simulations do. While designed to promote student engagement, some individuals may be less invested than others. Students may fail to do the reading or intermittently attend simulation classes (Nowell and Sim 2014, 12). It seems more manageable to complete one day’s readings in comparison to a simulation background manual and related substantive readings.

The Exercise

Given the previous scholarship and successes in using games, we constructed an exercise to help students apply the theoretical arguments in comparative politics to the choices people make related to protest and mobilization. We should note again that when we teach comparative politics we use the meta-theoretical approach of Lichbach and Zuckerman (2009) of rationality, structure, and rational actor; this is the way we frame the questions about theory with the students. In terms of reading for this particular class, we use Lim’s textbook (2006) on comparative politics and specifically the chapter on social movements. We also have the students watch an episode of the PBS show Frontline called “The Tankman.” The “Tankman” was a

protester in the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests in China who stood in front of a column of tanks that were likely going to be used to crackdown on the protesters. We believe though that people using other theoretical models should still be able to use this exercise applying the theoretical models they are using in class. The key advantage of this exercise is that the students are not applying theory only conceptually or to a case study to which they cannot relate but to their own potential behavior – at least theoretically. We have done this in classes of over 170 students and in classes of 25 and regardless of the number of students in the class, a large portion of the class gets very involved in the exercise. Students have told us that it greatly helps them to understand the factors that impact people's participation – or lack thereof- in protests.

To start the exercise, we first ask the students to tell us things that they believe would motivate them to go to a protest. We then make a list on the board of the various things the students tell us. Often the list is fairly long, very diverse, and sometimes very surprising- for example, one time we had a student (who seemed quite serious) that they would be in the streets protesting if their favorite TV show was ever taken off the air. That being said many of the things students have said they would protest are not surprising at all. A partial list of things students have said they would be willing to protest are:

- Tuition being raised
- Sexual assaults
- Racial or ethnic discrimination
- Discrimination against women
- LGBTQ discrimination
- Against or in favor of certain politicians
- Foreign policy decisions by the United States Government
- Behavior of certain governments (for example Israel)
- Behavior of certain nonstate actors (for example Hamas)
- Bad behavior by a fraternity
- Unwarranted shooting of a civilian by police – usually tied to racial discrimination

Once we have this list, we tell the students that we are going to ask them to vote on each if it is something that they would be willing (at least theoretically) to go to a protest to make their voices heard. We record the votes by each item on the list and ask the students why they think some items got so many more votes than others. We then erase all the items on the list that got less than half of student votes. This sometimes upsets certain students who feel very strongly

about items that erased which in its own right opens up interesting avenues for applying different theoretical arguments.

We then start to ask the students what factors would incentivize them to protest. We ask students if they would be more likely to go a protest if:

- Their friends were going
- If it is an issue that will directly affect them either negatively or positively
- If they would get a half grade bonus in the class if they went
- If they thought lots of people would think better of them if they went
- If they were paid to go

In addition to the examples, we also ask them to offer suggestions of things that would incentivize them to go. We then ask them to help us rank which of these factors is likely to have the biggest impact- and explain why.

Afterward, we go in the other direction and ask the students what factors would disincentivize them to protest. We ask students if they would be more likely to go a protest if for example:

- No one they knew was going to be there
- It would offend friends
- They would miss work
- They would miss classes (though often a student will note this as an incentive if they get permission to miss classes)
- If they don't really care about the issue
- If they thought lots of people would think worse of them if they went
- If they would be likely to get arrested

Again, in addition to the examples we give them we also ask them to offer suggestions of things that would disincentivize them to go.

We ask them to help us rank which of these factors is likely to have the biggest impact- and explain why. We then seriously up the stakes and ask the students if they would protest for the issues listed on the board if they were likely to get arrested. We erase any issue that no one says they are willing to risk arrest in order to protest. We then considerably raise the stakes and ask students to tell us which of these issues they would protest if there was a serious chance they would be shot. We circle the issues that at least one student says they would actually risk being shot in order to go to those protests. We then have a discussion about why people would choose the issues they chose even at the risk of getting shot as opposed to the other issues that were

listed. We then ask the students to engage explicitly with the theoretical arguments and ask them which theories best explain what issues people chose and what they were (or were not) willing to risk to a protest a particular issue. We have found this application of theory to choices related to protest very productive for the students in terms of understanding how to apply theory and for them building arguments about what is explaining mobilization and protest.

Our final discussion with the students starts by asking them if in real life they have ever gone to a protest and why or why not. We ask them if the previous discussion and the arguments they made apply in “real” life and how the theories we discussed apply.

Tying the Exercise to Theory

We follow the exercise with a debriefing where we tie students’ responses to the rational actor, structure, and culture framework, although by the end of the exercise students themselves often start to bring in the theoretical arguments. Incentives for protesting such as “it is an issue that will directly affect them” or receiving some sort of material benefit (such as money or bonus points) highlights the rational actor perspective. We point out to students the cost-benefit decision-making that can go into individuals’ decisions to mobilize: am I willing to risk being arrested if I get paid to protest? Furthermore, issues like economic inequality weigh differently in each person’s cost-benefit calculus: missing work to protest was a concern for some students but not for others, particularly those who do not work during the school year. We also ask students to relate the exercise to the free rider problem, where rational individuals avoid incurring the high costs of participation if they can obtain a public good through the participation of others (Olson 1965; Ostrom 1990; Lichbach 1995). For example, even though none would benefit from tuition being raised, some students would not opt to protest if they had to work or if their friends were not also going.

We then discuss structural explanations with emphases on grievance and political opportunity structure. We note that the influence of economic inequality can be explained by both rational actor and structural theories. Where fear of losing one’s job may influence their decision to protest (rational actor), a structural explanation would be that certain people are more dependent on working for their financial well-being due to their economic status, thus inhibiting them from protesting. We point out to students that grievance partially explains for what one is willing to protest. Studies of grievance suggest why individuals might mobilize despite the

potentially high costs of collective action (Gurr 1970; Lichbach 1995). In our experience, virtually every female student was willing to protest for women's issues, although very few male students were. We also highlight the importance of political opportunity structures, "consistent-but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national- signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements" (Tarrow 1996, 54). A high probability of being arrested, for example, is indicative of a restrictive political opportunity structure. We also note to students that regime type matters. In a democracy, arrests are less likely and violence against protesters is taboo. We invoke "The Tankman" and Tiananmen Square to highlight how in autocracies, protesters have no legal protections against state violence.

Finally, we highlight cultural explanations for the game's outcomes. We first highlight how one's culture influences for what one is willing to protest, specifically in terms of values. Culture and belonging to a specific group influences both the ways in which people view the world and the values they hold (Geertz 1973). For example, culture might lead someone to protest discrimination against any group, regardless of whether they are being discriminated against themselves. Additionally, simply protesting at all might be a cultural value (or not). Culture also influences whether a person protests based on reputational concerns, such as caring if people think positively or negatively about them protesting.

Possible Variations

One critique of the way in which this exercise solicits issues for which students would protest is that there might be some issues that students would protest but are not comfortable stating in class.¹ For example, students may not be comfortable suggesting that they would attend a pro-life rally if they believe many of their peers share a pro-choice stance. We have some suggestions on how to keep students' responses anonymous.² Instructors can utilize any of several free phone apps (such as Pear Deck or Formative) and ask students to submit responses about which issues they would protest. The instructor could then anonymize the responses and show them to the class. Instructors can also ask students to vote through the same method. This

¹ We thank participants of APSA's 2018 Teaching and Learning Mini-Conference for this point.

² We have not practiced this method ourselves but received this suggestion by reviewers of this simulation.

may be more time consuming, but it may yield different results and make students feel more comfortable.

Conclusion

We find that asking students to think about when and why they might join a protest is an effective way to teach about mobilization and social movements. To that end, this paper offers a useful exercise for those wanting to teach about these topics using active learning. The exercise does not require a significant amount of preparation on the part of the instructor. In addition, it is accessible for students who have completed the learning materials as well as those who have not. In our experience, students were able to walk away from the exercise better able to understand the challenges of collective action and how to apply comparative theories to real world issues.

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