

# Congressional Committee Simulation: An Active Learning Experiment

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As many universities are pressured to maintain high levels of academic instruction with fewer and fewer resources, faculty often find themselves teaching not only larger classes but also those outside of their areas of specialty. Since SUNY-Brockport has only seven political scientists to cover more than 20 courses every semester, I often find myself teaching a freshman introductory course in American politics even though my specialty is political theory. While I was trained to teach American politics, I often find myself wondering whether I present the general material with the same interest and energy as I do the more specialized material covered in my theory courses. For this reason, I began to seek new ways to enliven the American class. I felt it was especially important to entice freshmen to become interested and involved in a course that many view as a general education requirement and nothing more.

To increase students' interest in and engagement with the course topic and to offer them hands-on experience with the difficulties and rewards of the legislative process, I developed, with the help of my colleague Dena Levy, who specializes in American politics, a congressional committees simulation. We chose this topic largely because students responded negatively to the standard textbook explanation of how Congress functions. We also felt a con-

gressional simulation would change students' perceptions that representatives did little work of any importance. We wanted students to appreciate the difficulties present in writing, negotiating, and passing responsible legislation. Moreover, we believed that if students could come to understand the challenges of meeting constituent and partisan demands and dealing with complicated policy issues, they could develop a more realistic view of the legislative process. In the final analysis, our goal was to allow students to discover on their own how Congress operates by participating in a committee simulation.

## Foundations and Format

We implemented the simulation during the fall of 1999 in our respective sections of Introduction to American Politics. Because my class was larger, I was able to divide the class into four groups, with two groups serving as independent House Commerce Committees and the other two as House Judiciary Committees. Levy was able only to organize her class into one group representing the House Judiciary Committee. We established identical committees so we could check whether the legislative outcomes were similar in both classes. Moreover, we specifically chose these two committees because they were both policy committees, that is, because the members of the Commerce and Judiciary committees are driven by specific issues which, when turned into legislation, have long-term impact (Deering and Smith 1997, 72-73). Policy committees in the House include Judiciary, Foreign Affairs, Education and the Workforce, and Commerce. As committee members, students, like their real-world role models, would have difficulty balanc-

ing their political and ideological concerns. Additionally, the high levels of "fragmentation" common to these two policy committees would further complicate the deliberative process; various outside groups would put pressure on members to yield to a variety of issues and needs represented by these broad policy committees (Deering and Smith 1997, 88).

Once students were broken up into groups, they were given a piece of proposed legislation for consideration. The first bill, "The Public Smoke-Out Act," was assigned to the two Commerce Committees. For purposes of simplicity, we assigned the bill directly to the full committee (Barone and Ujifusa 1987, 1585). In a more sophisticated simulation, the bill could initially be assigned to an appropriate subcommittee. The bill read, in its entirety, "As of the year 2000, all restaurants, businesses, and school campuses will be smoke free." The two Judiciary Committees received the "The License Not To Kill Act" (Dewhirst 1997). This bill read as follows: "As of the year 2000, all persons who wish to purchase a gun must obtain a license from the Federal Government. This will entail successfully completing a written test, background check, and psychological evaluation." We chose to write the legislation for the committees for two reasons. First, we wanted the language of the bills to be extreme and controversial, making the negotiating process difficult. Second, since none of the students had any exposure to the legislative process, we thought it best to provide them with a starting point.

Students were given two weeks to research all aspects of their legislation, but were not told whether the character they would be playing supported or opposed the bill. We included this element of ambiguity for

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several reasons. First, we wanted students to do balanced and comprehensive research. We feared that if they knew too much about their characters, (e.g., their party, funders, years in office, etc.,) they would focus their research efforts to the appropriate position on the bill. Second, we wanted students to be prepared to understand their opponents' views and to realize that few issues are ever simple or clear cut. Third, we wanted students to study both sides of their issue before they made a personal decision as to which was the correct view. We also hoped they would recognize that their personal beliefs would not necessarily guide their conduct in the committee proceedings. Depending upon the social, moral, and economic needs of their constituents, members of Congress often have to suppress their own views on matters and vote for the interests of those they represent. In the end, our goal was to have students appreciate that what representatives may view as "right" may not be politically defensible and/or desirable to their constituents, especially on controversial policy matters.

After spending two weeks researching their assigned legislation, each student was given a character. The makeup of these characters and their committees reflected the basic partisan makeup of the 104th Congress. For example, each Judiciary Committee consisted of 10 students, five of whom played Republicans and four of whom served as Democrats. One student served as a lobbyist for the NRA. Ideally, given more students, further outside interests and expert testimony would be a welcomed addition to the committee deliberations. This same Republican to Democrat ratio was set for the Commerce Committees: six Republicans, five Democrats, and a lobbyist for R.J. Reynolds.

Students received their member "personalities" one week before the actual simulation (see Appendix for a description of Commerce Committee members' personalities).<sup>1</sup> We modeled the personalities upon the variables Richard Fenno identified as most important for influencing the outcomes of committee debates:

"member goals, environmental constraints, strategic premises, decision-making processes, and decisions" (1973, xiv). We put a particular emphasis on member goals and environmental constraints. According to Fenno, members seem to be motivated largely by "reelection, influence within the House and good public policy" (1). He further noted that members tend to seek out those committee assignments most likely to facilitate their achievement of said goals. In practical terms, then, members who wish to impact broad policy decisions are likely to choose a policy committee like Judiciary or Commerce. Those most concerned with reelection will seek constituency committees like Agriculture or Interior, which will enable them to deliver tangible programs to their districts (Deering and Smith 1997, 64).

For the most part, we adhered to these patterns when developing the personalities of our committee members. However, we also created some characters who did not feel comfortable with policy issues and who would rather have preferred to serve on constituency committees or "prestige committees" like Appropriations or Budget. Other student legislators were to view such members as committee "misfits," who viewed their presence on these committees as troublesome. Students playing the unhappy representatives were instructed to avoid all controversy that might endanger their tenure in office. We thought that the presence of the miscast representatives, though rare in the real House, would add some controversy and interest to the deliberative process of the committees.

Each member's tendency to support or oppose the proposed legislation rested largely on past experiences and how said experiences shaped their future goals. For example, our gun control bill was introduced by Ms. Hale, a liberal Democrat from California, whose child was killed in a random act of violence at a fast food restaurant. She ran on a gun control platform and has sought to shape policy on this matter. However, Ms. Hale would likely meet some challenge from Mr.

Sorenson, a fellow Democrat from Texas, who serves as the highest ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee. Mr. Sorenson, a long-time hunter, receives NRA contributions and has many constituents who see the right to bear arms as protected by the Second Amendment. He is a moderate on all policy matters and would prefer that this bill simply go away, especially given that many of his fellow Texas officials are Republican.

In order to ensure that students' policy decisions would be their own, we opted to create wholly fictitious characters. We feared that assigning students the names and backgrounds of actual representatives would lead them simply to follow the example (i.e., votes) of the actual representatives. This would provide students with the full opportunity to grapple with the difficult balance between constituent demands and personal views.

On each committee, the chair and ranking member of the minority party were asked to use their seniority to either suppress or bolster support for the legislation before their committee. To make these students' jobs particularly difficult, we provided chairs and minority leaders with information on why the proposed legislation would be very attractive or unattractive to their constituents and also asked them to use their own policy views to influence the committees' treatment of the bills (Fenno 1973, 77). In short, we presumed that the chairpersons, all Republicans, would exert "negative power . . . the ability to defend the status quo in the face of those who favor change" (Deering and Smith 1997, 6). This, of course, is accomplished best by either doing "nothing" or making sure the bill never leaves committee. Similarly, we presumed the ranking minority leaders, all Democrats, would exert "positive" power, employing all measures necessary to sway colleagues to vote for change, contrary to their earlier policy views.

Finally, the student legislators had to deal with students cast as lobbyists from R.J. Reynolds and the NRA as well as the knowledge that the Clinton administration supported

stricter gun control and more restrictive public smoking laws, while the majority of the members in the full House did not.

## Outcomes

Students met for two class sessions (approximately three hours) to deliberate in full committee. In my class, both Commerce Committees passed modified versions of the gun bill, and only one of the Judiciary Committees passed a modified version of the smoking ban. The second Judiciary Committee decided to kill the bill completely. In Dena Levy's class, the committee ultimately passed a much modified version of the gun control legislation, but on a straight party-line vote. At the end of the exercise, students handed in written reports that included both their research and commentary on the difficulties and concerns raised during the committee hearings. To our satisfaction, many of the concerns students reported were those we hoped to raise.

We expected that partisanship, constituent demands, the influence wielded by the chair, and the determining influence of lobbyists would prove fundamental to the legislative outcome. To our satisfaction, they did. For example, the chairs of both my two Judiciary committees played decisive roles in determining their bills' fates. While both shared similar concerns regarding the psychological exam and its prohibitive cost, only one Judiciary Committee passed a modified version of the bill. Where the bill was defeated, the student playing the chair effectively invoked party loyalty, raised fears of increased costs to taxpayers, and deployed compelling data on low and falling crime rates in "right to carry" states to stop the bill at committee. Most importantly, this student chair managed the debate by limiting members to certain topics and moving on from issues when he believed enough had been discussed. This powerful managerial style, along with persuasive data and a strong personality, ensured the defeat of this Democratic bill.

The variables of partisanship and constituent demands were seen

largely in my colleague's Judiciary Committee. Initially, students from both parties came to agreement in amending the language of the bill. The Republican majority used their numbers to persuade the Democratic sponsors to eliminate the psychological testing requirement from the bill by indicating they might support a limited version of the bill. In the final vote, however, both Democrats and Republicans toed their party's line, with Democrats failing to support a bill they considered incomplete without requirements for psychological exams and Republicans failing to support a bill they believed to be unnecessary and overly intrusive.

Moreover, members from both parties expressed concern over the meaning of certain language included in the bill and how such broad language might be misinterpreted by constituents. Dena Levy noted that students in her Judiciary Committee spent a great deal of time defining the term "gun." Fearing that their constituents might interpret the legislation as being applicable to such things as water guns and flare guns, student legislators went to great lengths to include language specifying which gun purchases required licensing. Students' attention to minutiae accurately reflected that of actual legislators who must try and accommodate constituent concerns.

In my class, a particularly persuasive and dynamic NRA lobbyist played the principal role in ensuring the defeat of the gun legislation. The lobbyist's presentation of conclusive data combined with shrewd application of financial pressure, enabled him to convince Republicans to vote against the bill. The bill passed the other Judiciary Committee and those committee members noted that the NRA representative's testimony and input had little to no impact on their final decision.

## Afterthoughts, Recommendations, and Student Reactions

The purpose of this simulation was to provide students with first-

hand experience in the art of legislative compromise. Having students serve on policy committees and debate highly contested social issues allowed us to expose them to the challenges of meeting constituent demands, responding to party pressures, and answering to their own ideological convictions while attempting to formulate sound policy on issues the public views as important. To our delight, students acknowledged dealing with all the challenges named and uniformly remarked that the committee simulation was one of the most substantive learning experiences of the semester.

As part of a post-simulation questionnaire, we asked students "Did you learn anything about the committee process through this simulation?" On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement, students gave a mean response of 4.32. In written responses to this question, students often expressed how difficult it was to compromise. According to one student in Dena Levy's class, "I learned how intricate and inept the process is. It allowed me to have more respect than I already do for the process and for the members; how they make decisions through various obstacles on a day-to-day basis." When asked if they were surprised by the outcome of the exercise, students gave a mean response of 2.87, suggesting that they were somewhat surprised but not fully. Asked if the exercise was useful, the students' mean response was 4.43, suggesting again, a very high level of approval.

Finally, we asked students whether they had any suggestions for improving the simulation. Here, the responses were few but similar in nature. First, and most commonly, students asked for more time to negotiate. Second, some thought a bigger role for outside groups, such as lobbyists and expert witnesses, would make the deliberations even more interesting. Finally, and most pleasingly, many students said that no change was necessary, as they learned a great deal from the simulation as it stood.

Of all of the responsorial data, we believe the most important to be the

rating of 4.43 for the usefulness of the simulation. While my colleague and I had hoped that students would refer to what they learned in the simulation occasionally, we had no idea that the exercise would provide the most significant and applicable lessons of the term. After the simulation reports were handed in, we conducted a forum during which students asked questions about access of lobbyists, their influence upon staff, the amount of time allotted to representatives to debate, the responsibilities of the chair, and the rules governing a committee. When answering their peers' questions, students related their own experience in committee to these general House rules or patterns. Even after the classes dedicated to Congress, my colleague and I intentionally and unintentionally integrated simulation lessons into lectures on campaigns and elections, interest groups and PACs, parties, and the presidency. For example, during a class discussion about the role of interest groups, one student commented that his character received money from R.J. Reynolds in his last campaign and wanted to know what the standard donation was to a congressman during an election year and whether donations were directed to one party exclusively. This type of question was common throughout the course.

### Structural Changes

While this simulation was designed to expose freshmen to the basics elements of legislative compromise, we believe it can be easily expanded for use in upper-level classes. First, we observed that the tone of the committees was often shaped by the personalities of the chairpersons. We randomly assigned the chair position, which we still recommend doing, but acknowledge that it may be helpful to provide chairs with a list of "background powers" they could refer to while shaping the content and direction of the bill. For example, in *Congress: Games and Strategies*, Frantzych and Schier argued that chairs seem to take one of two roles. They either "place themselves at the center of the policy vortex, introducing legisla-

## Appendix Personalities for Members of the Commerce Committee

### MS. JONES—Democrat

Liberal from New York City  
Presbyterian  
Served six terms; won last election by a 65% margin  
Former public defender  
ADA rating: 93%  
Married; 3 children; husband is a professor  
Goals: She sought out a constituency committee and is very interested in serving the public. Very interested in bringing home legislative packages that improve urban life. She ran on the platform to make New York City livable again.

### MS. HALE—Democrat

Co-sponsored the Bill  
Liberal from California  
Served 2 terms  
Last election was very close: 50%-49%  
First election was close also: 51%-48%  
Ran on a platform of gun control  
Against the death penalty  
Child killed in a robbery at a fast food restaurant by a man with a history of psychiatric problems who used an unregistered gun  
Donors to campaign include Catholics Against Violence and Emily's List  
Many ACLU members contributed to her campaign  
Former school teacher; husband still teaches  
Catholic

### MR. SMITH—Democrat

Co-sponsored the bill  
Philadelphia-area moderate  
Served two terms  
Tough on crime  
Born again Christian  
Has received money from Christian conservative groups  
Does not like controversial policy issues  
Knows his name on the bill will be a problem with liberal "rights" activists in district. However, tough solutions to inner-city crime.

### MR. SORENSON—Democrat

Texas  
Highest ranking Democrat on the committee  
Served 10 terms  
Moderate  
Bill likely to be unpopular back home  
He is a big hunter; represents a rural part of Texas  
NRA contributes to his campaign  
Texas filled with Republican officials  
His profile is so moderate that he almost fits a Republican description better.

### MR. MORAN

Lobbyist for the NRA  
Good friends with Mr. Sorenson (D-TX).

### MR. MARTINEZ—Republican

Co-sponsor of the bill.  
Conservative, especially on foreign policy  
First-generation Cuban American  
Lawyer; former prosecutor in Dade County  
Served four terms  
Very secure seat: 67%-31%  
ADA rating: 15%  
Occasionally votes with Democrats on bilingual education and immigration issues  
Last year, tourists were killed by youth with an unregistered gun in his district.  
Receiving some pressure about youth violence

### MS. PETERS—Republican

Moderate from St. Louis  
Former administrator of the St. Louis Psychiatric Center  
Advocate for mental health patient rights  
Won last election 54%-43%  
Now in second term  
Mother of two; husband is a hospital administrator  
Has a nephew institutionalized for schizophrenia

### MR. DONNELL—Republican

Conservative from Colorado  
Big hunter  
NRA member and supporter  
He represents the area of Colorado that includes Littleton  
Anticipates a difficult reelection campaign. Expects that his opponent will exploit his affiliation with the NRA.

### MS. ADAMS—Republican

Moderate from Arkansas  
Chair of Committee  
Served nine terms  
Very concerned about budget issues  
Not particularly motivated by policy  
Worries about debt; thinks states should carry more burden.  
Arkansas has had problems with some random shootings by children at schools.  
Knows of her state's reputation as a poor, almost rogue state.  
Represents a rural district  
NRA contributes to campaigns  
Must manage the bill carefully

### MR. SCHWARTZ—Republican

Connecticut  
Served four terms  
Son held up with gun on campus at Yale  
Staunch conservative; but warms up on gun control  
Represents an upper-class district that is fiscally conservative  
Safe district  
Receives contributions from conservative groups  
Big balanced-budget person

tion and attempting to take full credit,” or they “observe the battle and wait for a consensus to emerge” (1995, 133). If student chairs are aware of these two different approaches to leadership prior to the simulation, they would have the opportunity to develop a chair’s strategy. For this simulation, the chair’s control of staff may not have any application, but his or her overall involvement, partisan pressure, and seniority may be used to pressure younger members into complying with the chair and preventing the legislation from ever coming out of committee. Conversely, chairs may wish to do nothing overtly, allowing members of his or her own party to fight the nasty ground battles in committee.

Beyond enhancing the role of the chair, other options may be included in the simulation to enrich its educational value. For example, before the simulation begins, the committees could adopt their own unique

rules of conduct, including rules for how votes will be taken and how long the topic will be debated. Moreover, after the committees meet and deliberate, the class may serve as the full House of Representatives. This would allow for all kinds of interesting rules to be attached to the bills. For example, “germaneness” rules could be attached, making it hard for House members to bring up topics or issues unrelated to the subject matter of the bill at hand. Finally, if the bill was to make it to the full House, the sponsor(s) of the bill could serve as committee bill managers on the floor, negotiating and clarifying the bill through opposition and adding amendments to appease concerned members (see Deering and Smith 1997, 7-8).

## Conclusion

The congressional simulation proved to be a unique opportunity

for both us and our students. While we were given the opportunity to try a new active learning exercise that allowed us to present old material in a new way, students were given the opportunity to experience the legislative process directly. This hands-on approach seemed to make a lasting impression, as many students noted the great benefit of the simulation in their year-end evaluations for the course. In the end, even our most far-reaching expectations were met, as students came to understand how legislation is formed and to recognize the legitimacy of counter positions and the restraining factors that make one adhere to an opposing view. Coincidentally, as a result of their simulation experiences, students completely revised their evaluations of actual congresspersons. Beginning the semester with the view that federal legislators did nothing, students ended the term surprised at how much House members accomplish. For a freshman class, such a metamorphosis must be seen as a sizable accomplishment.

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## Notes

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1 A complete set of profiles is available from the authors (arubery@brockport.edu;

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