

Multilevel Bargaining and the Negotiation of a Regional Trade Agreement: A Classroom Simulation

Yann P. Kerevel, *Louisiana State University*

Philip Hultquist, *Roosevelt University*

Margaret E. Edwards, *Truman State University*

ABSTRACT This article introduces a regional trade agreement (RTA) simulation for undergraduate students. The simulation uses a multilevel bargaining framework, in which students can represent not only governments of negotiating countries but also domestic interests. By allowing students to experience international bargaining at different levels, they gain a deeper understanding of controversial international trade processes.

In recent decades, dramatic changes in higher education have led to new practices and methods, extending classroom styles beyond traditional lecture formats. Active learning and/or learner-centered teaching has burgeoned in discussions of enhancing student knowledge and skill-building.¹ Other than purely academic goals, many professors view active learning as a means for “setting students’ minds on fire” (Carnes 2011, A72). Student knowledge and skills may increase through these methods, and they may be more motivated and involved in the learning process (Frederking 2005; Giovanello, Kirk, and Kromer 2013; Krain and Lantis 2006; Shellman and Turan 2006). As a result, professors have incorporated experiential learning, classroom simulations, “flipped” classrooms, web-based learning, and other techniques into their teaching practices.

This article introduces a new classroom simulation that resembles the multilevel negotiations of a regional trade agreement (RTA). The concept of free trade and the practice of negotiating trade agreements continue to be a source of considerable controversy and confusion, exemplified by the ongoing case of the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations. In our experience, students find that they lack the knowledge of how trade agreements work to engage the issue beyond simplistic partisan talking points. We believe a classroom simulation provides an ideal opportunity for students to learn through experience not only the basics of international trade but also the complicated domestic politics involved.

By simulating multilevel bargaining, the simulation described in this article puts students in the position of various domestic

interests and requires them to negotiate at both the country and international levels. By disaggregating domestic interests, we move beyond existing country-level simulations (Switky and Avilés 2007) to give students a deeper understanding of how domestic politics—that is, coalition building, agenda setting, and the role of veto players—affects international politics.² This framework also allows cross-country interaction among similar groups (e.g., transnational labor cooperation), which reminds students that states do not always operate as unitary actors.

Building on the structure of Stodden’s (2012) simulation concerning the provision of humanitarian aid, we adapted it to RTA circumstances. Although the simulation is loosely based on real-world RTAs,³ we use abstract countries. Our experience with using real countries is that students either try to replicate how that country acted or believe they do not know enough about its history to act on its behalf. We also introduce worksheets that serve as a practical tool for students to track their interests and to limit the scope of the negotiations, as well as for instructors to record student progress. Furthermore, because our simulation includes multiple levels of bargaining at the domestic and international levels, its design is flexible enough to work within a single classroom, across multiple sections of the same course, and across universities.

The article is organized as follows. We first explain the benefits of using simulations in the classroom. Next, we describe the design of the simulation, noting for which classes it is most appropriate as well as our suggestions for a smooth simulation experience. We then discuss the important debriefing phase and offer several options for maximizing student learning and participation. Finally, we discuss several extensions and modifications that readers may find useful in adapting the simulation to fit their own courses.

BENEFITS OF SIMULATIONS

Classroom simulations are used in various disciplines, and their presence in international relations has been the strongest, at least

Yann P. Kerevel is assistant professor of political science at Louisiana State University. He can be reached at ykerev1@lsu.edu.

Philip Hultquist is assistant professor of political science and director of the international studies program at Roosevelt University. He can be reached at phultquist@roosevelt.edu.

Margaret E. Edwards is assistant professor of political science at Truman State University. She can be reached at mejedwards@truman.edu.

among introductory-level political science coursework (Archer and Miller 2011). Proponents of classroom simulations in international relations contend that they provide many learning benefits to students (Wedig 2010). Classroom simulations have been examined for their ability to increase knowledge acquisition, skill building, and student motivation. Most important, professors who use simulations investigated whether simulations provide greater knowledge acquisition than through traditional lectures and discussions (Frederking 2005; Krain and Lantis 2006). Frederking (2005, 392) found that students involved in simulations demonstrated higher grades on two out of three exams. Shellman and Turan (2006) reported that students perceived simulations to be helpful in acquiring course information. Although Krain and Lantis (2006, 402) found that both traditional lecture and simulations improve students' learning, they demonstrated that

each domestic-level interest group must negotiate how to advance their interests in the national and international negotiation stages (modifications for larger class sizes are described in a subsequent discussion). The students' objective is to negotiate an agreement that maximizes the preferences for their domestic interest, even though their group's preferences may thwart an agreement.

Overall, the simulation happens in five phases: preparation, three stages of negotiation, and debriefing. In our experience, instructors need to dedicate about two weeks of class time (with approximately 2.5 hours of class time per week) to complete the preparation and each stage of the simulation. For each class session, instructors need printed simulation materials, including interest sheets and negotiation sheets for student use. In addition, the instructor should have a 20-sided die to introduce random exogenous shocks. If an instructor cannot provide a die, various

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one of their simulations resulted in a broader understanding of a country's strategic motives, as perceived by students. Overall, the literature supports claims that simulations enhance student knowledge.

Professors and students also view simulations as more fun and involved than other classroom styles. Various scholars have discussed the engaging nature of classroom simulations and how they benefit diverse student-learning styles (Wedig 2010). In particular, Giovanello, Kirk, and Kromer (2013) showed that students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate in large-scale international-relations simulations. Moreover, simulations provide the opportunity for students to improve their communication and negotiation skills as well as to acquire other benefits, including heightened civic engagement, increased cultural sensitivity, and enhanced interest in foreign affairs.

THE DESIGN: SIMULATING AN RTA

Using the simulation for negotiating an RTA is appropriate for several courses in political science and related disciplines. It is perhaps most effective for introductory international relations courses because it helps students who are otherwise unfamiliar with international trade to understand the basic complexities of the process. We expect it to be especially useful for upper-level courses on international political economy and comparative political economy. Because the simulation emphasizes the domestic aspect of international trade, we think it also is appropriate for courses in comparative politics and area studies.

The activity simulates a trade-agreement negotiation among three neighboring countries in a region that is experiencing an economic recession. Within each country, there are three groups: government, business, and labor. A class must have a minimum of nine students to carry out the simulation, with at least one student representing each interest in each country. However, class sizes of approximately 18 to 27 students provide a more dynamic experience because groups of two to three students representing

websites can be used for virtual die rolls. Recommendations such as these shocks, which may help an instructor to slow down or accelerate negotiations and ensure that all stages are completed in a timely manner, are discussed in the next section. A specific debriefing session is included; however, we encourage instructors to listen throughout the process and manipulate the simulation to ensure timely completion, promote student involvement, and discourage unproductive efforts.

Phase 1: Preparation

Before students begin the simulation, they should prepare with introductory readings as well as one or two classroom lectures on trade politics. We use Frieden, Lake, and Schultz's (2013) chapter on trade and supplement it with Cameron and Tomlin's (2000) chapter 3 (i.e., "Assessing the NAFTA Bargain"). These sources describe the contents of free-trade agreements and prime students to think about how different interests in various countries will view certain commodities. Other readings also suffice but they should entail dumping, levels of integration, and the basics of protectionism.

It is preferable to assign students to their position and country after the preparatory lecture or in the next class period. In this way, they will not interpret the concepts of international trade as directly relating to their position. At this time, the instructor also distributes the interest sheets: one per domestic interest, per country (nine total), with general preferences for what to obtain from an agreement. The entire set of nine interest sheets, along with other supporting documents, is available in the online appendix.⁴ The instructor should advise students to review the interest sheets before Phase 2.

Phase 2: Intra-Country Negotiation

In the initial negotiation phase, each country group is instructed to make a list of negotiation demands (i.e., a national proposal), to which all of their country members must agree.⁵ The first stage

no domestic interests receive the benefit of its provisions. This point is crucial to underscoring the idea that not all domestic interests will win or lose equally when a country joins an agreement. This stage can be accomplished relatively quickly at the end of the Phase 3 class period or in the next class period before debriefing.

Phase 5: Debriefing and Assessment

There is wide agreement among active-learning proponents that “debriefing” is required for students to achieve the maximum learning from the experience (Stodden 2012; Switky and Avilés 2007; Wedig 2010). Debriefing connects the students’ simulation experience to class concepts, reinforcing what they learned by discussing it with classmates. During debriefing sessions, students often see connections to the class material in ways they had overlooked, and they recognize that they are developing a more nuanced view

(e.g., different businesses have different interests, perhaps even within the same industry). Finally, as the discussion flows from their personal experience to conceptual and theoretical issues regarding trade, we connect the discussion to broader issues in international relations, such as how countries relate in a state of anarchy or the role that international organizations (e.g., the World Trade Organization) have or should have in the future.

EXTENSIONS AND MODIFICATION OPTIONS

For larger class sizes, an instructor can add students to the different interests in the following order: government, business, and labor. Because the addition of each student will be accompanied by another vote, it should reflect the bargaining power of the real world. After each interest has three or four students, we recommend creating a “parallel world” to conduct a separate simulation. More students

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of international trade. It gives them a chance to build a better understanding of current events or specific real-life cases. Debriefing also can open the question of how well the experience simulates real life, which in itself is a useful analytical exercise (Smith and Boyer 1996).

Our preferred assessment and debriefing method is to assign a response essay after Phase 4, in which students organize their thoughts before discussing them with the class. The response essay requires them to discuss (1) what they learned from participating in the simulation versus reading the textbook, (2) any criticisms of simulations⁷ or recommendations for future use, and (3) what they liked most and least about the experience. The response essay also can be used to evaluate students’ attentiveness to the negotiation process by requiring them to compare and contrast the agreements reached in each stage of the simulation; explain why certain compromises were made; and critically evaluate which domestic interests they felt gained and lost the most as a result of the final agreement.⁸ To encourage participation, instructors may notify students before the simulation that they will be required to evaluate the simulation and its outcomes for credit.

During the class period after the simulation (or at the end, if time allows), we lead a debriefing discussion by first asking students to simply describe their experience. As the discussion evolves, we introduce more theoretical and conceptual questions to help them tie their experience to their thoughts about international negotiations in general, as well as free-trade agreements. Asked the right questions, students generally arrive at several important points on their own. The main organizing question is: Why are free-trade agreements relatively rare, when economists generally agree that free trade benefits all countries? Students typically arrive at these points during the discussion; however, if they do not, we emphasize that (1) multilevel bargaining presents complications to simplistic, country-level theories; (2) although free trade may benefit each country, the benefits are not equally distributed across countries; (3) overall free trade may benefit both countries but some domestic groups will lose; and (4) even the domestic interests in the simulation are not monolithic

added to an interest group increases the complexity of bargaining but also increases the likelihood that some will avoid participating or be sidelined by other group members. It may be advantageous to have only one student in each role, thereby forcing participation. In this way, instructors can create several parallel worlds within the same classroom. Doing so can result in difficulty in classroom management but also can provide comparisons across worlds.

We also believe this simulation can be relatively easily modified for an online format, thereby using classroom time for traditional lectures and other activities. Instructors can use an online forum for negotiations, in which each country has private negotiations in addition to a public international negotiations page.⁹ Moving the simulation online allows instructors to modify the simulation to work across multiple sections of the same course—or even across similar courses at different universities.

CONCLUSION

The simulation we developed has several unique features of interest to instructors of international relations, international political economy, and comparative politics. The multilevel nature of the simulation creates a number of teaching opportunities to highlight the complex nature of politics surrounding RTAs at the national and international levels. Moreover, the simulation simplifies an often-complex topic, thereby increasing student motivation and interest in the politics of international trade and political economy.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651600322X>

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NOTES

1. For a review of active learning content in political science syllabi, see Archer and Miller (2011).
2. Switky and Avilés (2007) provided for a transnational civil-society group to negotiate alongside country-level actors. For a recent trade simulation that accounts for more disaggregated domestic interests, see Nance, Suder, and Hall (2016).
3. Readers will recognize that issues in the simulation are modeled after NAFTA and, to a lesser extent, Mercosur (Cameron and Tomlin 2000; Gómez-Mera 2013).
4. The online appendix is available at <https://phultquist.wordpress.com/research/publications-and-data/>.
5. Instructors may want to force unanimous agreement within a country to avoid certain students from being sidelined from the negotiations early in the discussion. However, instructors also may allow for majority agreement among country members.
6. Instructors may elect to eliminate certain commodities in larger classes.
7. We have found that asking students to directly evaluate simulations allows them to think critically about them and how closely they resemble the real world.
8. We have found it useful to scan and upload all of the different agreements reached to an online course-management system so that students have access to the materials when writing their essay.
9. The discussion board should allow for document sharing, public and private messaging, and ideally also should be available as a mobile app to increase ease of access.

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