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Simulating the Legislative Process with LegSim

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ABSTRACT

The use of active learning pedagogies gives students a more applied experience and aids in the retention of material, improvement of critical thinking, and overall student satisfaction. Among these pedagogies, long-form (complex, extended) simulations provide an excellent vehicle for teaching students about the legislative process. However, these simulations can be time-consuming and organizationally taxing. We use LegSim, an online simulation platform, to overcome these difficulties. LegSim allows for the easy execution of key simulation activities, such as bill introduction and referral and voting. It facilitates the organization of large quantities of information including legislative proposals, party rosters, caucus rosters, committee rosters, committee reports, and member participation. As a result, we have been able to incorporate substantial complexity into our legislative process simulations while keeping the task of administering the simulation manageable. Students represent real districts/states, introduce and cosponsor legislation, work in party groups and in committees, develop familiarity with legislative procedures and norms, and debate and vote on legislation. In this essay we discuss the key features of LegSim, explain our primary goals and design choices for the simulation, and reflect on students' reaction to this kind of pedagogical activity.

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Introduction

In the last several decades, political scientists have increasingly embraced active learning pedagogies. Rather than delivering course content solely or primarily through lectures and reading assignments, active learning places greater emphasis on the learner “through such methods as collaborative learning, simulations, structured debates, or other forms of group and individual work” (Oros 2007, 295). By giving students a more applied experience, active learning aids in the retention of material, improvement of critical thinking, and overall student satisfaction. As Asal and Blake (2006, 2) observe, this type of learning “helps to increase students’ understanding of the subtleties of theories or concepts and draw in students who can be alienated by traditional teaching approaches.”

We have both taught classes on the U.S. Congress and used extended, multi-week simulations to teach the legislative process. Simulations are exceptionally well-suited to teach this material, as they provide a way to model the complexity of “real political

processes as closely as possible” (Baranowski 2006, 34). Students study the material and apply what they have learned. In doing so, they gain a deeper understanding of the material. And yet, whatever benefits accrue to students, implementing these techniques can be burdensome (Baranowski 2006; Glazier 2011; Mathews and Latronica-Herb 2013). It can be time-consuming and organizationally taxing—we are well-acquainted with these difficulties.

We focus specifically on what we call “long-form” simulations. By this we mean simulations that occur over multiple class periods and incorporate substantial complexity into the simulated environment. Ciliotta-Rubery and Levy (2000) have developed a long-form simulation focusing on congressional committee processes; Baranowski (2006) has developed a valuable one-day legislative process simulation. We commend these approaches. Our goal, however, has been to take students through multiple stages of the legislative process over the course of a 16-week semester. We want students to represent real districts/states, introduce and cosponsor legislation, work in party groups and in committees, develop familiarity with legislative procedures and norms, and debate and vote on legislation. The challenge lies in implementing this kind of complex and time-intensive simulation without, as Glazier (2011) says, ruining your life.

Our solution has been to adopt LegSim.¹ LegSim is an “established, server-based, political science simulation. Each class gets its own dedicated legislature that the instructor customizes according to considerations such as class size and time available. It is designed to be used over an entire semester in conjunction with a conventional didactic, college-level political science course. LegSim can mimic any legislative assembly” (Wilkerson and Fruland 2006, 3). LegSim was originally created by John Wilkerson for use in his own classes and was first made available for adoption by other instructors in 2003.² The current cost of adoption is \$16 per student. Instructors/institutions can pre-pay for their sessions or require that students pay for their session fee when they register for a LegSim account. Between the two of us, we used LegSim for six courses between 2014 and 2017. We have run three House simulations and three Senate simulations in classes with between 35 and 48 students. In our experience, LegSim mitigates many of the difficulties related to simulation adoption. In this essay, we discuss the key features of LegSim, explain our primary goals and design choices for the simulation, and reflect on students’ reaction to this kind of pedagogical activity.

LegSim functionality

In the context of our simulations, we need students to be able to do the following:

- Write legislation
- Access legislative proposals submitted by other members of the class and offer amendments to those proposals
- Cosponsor legislation
- Refer bills to committee
- Work in committee groups to hold hearings, markup legislation, and prepare committee reports
- Schedule floor debates

- Debate and vote on bills and amendments
- Communicate efficiently with one another

Moreover, we as instructors need to be able to monitor these activities efficiently. These features are central to fulfilling our pedagogical goals for the simulation; they provide students with opportunities to write policy, collaborate with colleagues, implement legislative strategies, and more generally sharpen their analytical skills. While it is possible to facilitate these activities absent an online platform, the organizational challenges render an efficient and effective simulation difficult to achieve, as Oldmixon experienced when she implemented Bell's (2004) simulation several years ago.

Asal and Blake (2006, 5) note that "[w]hat you are able to accomplish with your simulation will be limited by the time and technology available." The use of a learning management system (LMS), such as Blackboard or Canvas, may aid in simulation implementation (Mathews and Latronica-Herb 2013). LegSim, however, is more closely tailored to our needs, and because it was designed as a legislative process simulation tool it eliminates the need to force simulation components into the handful of tools available in an LMS. LegSim has an intuitive interface (see Figure 1), it houses records of all formal simulation activity (bills introduced, status of each legislative profile, member profiles, party rosters, caucus rosters, committee rosters, committee reports, and recorded votes), and it facilitates the processing of legislation in accordance with the appropriate legislative procedures for either the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate. For example, LegSim includes a mechanism for members in a Senate session to place holds on bills and House sessions are equipped to connect rules proposed by the Rules Committee to the appropriate piece of legislation. Individual members can offer amendments to other bills and those amendments can be seen by other members of the class. These types of features would be difficult to incorporate into an LMS-based

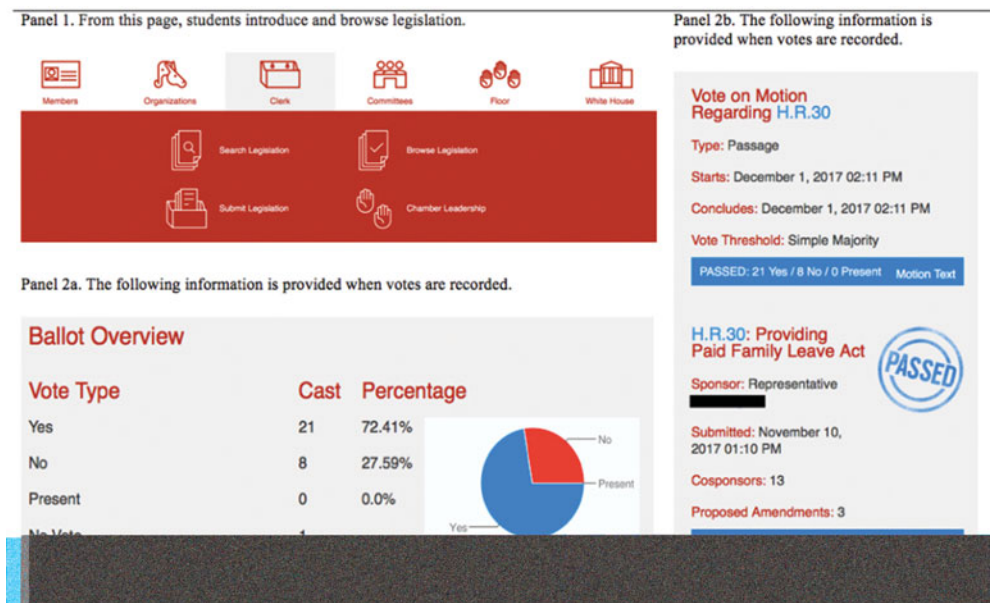


Figure 1. LegSim functionality images.

simulation and would be very burdensome for instructors to manage outside of an online platform.

For additional information on the background of LegSim, we direct readers to Wilkerson's (2005) reflections on the creation and use of the platform. For more detailed information about LegSim features, the documentation and tutorials at LegSim.org are rich with details and answers to frequently asked questions. Our simulations build on many of the suggestions offered by Wilkerson in the aforementioned materials and we have adopted several assignments from the LegSim Instructors' Resources Archive for inclusion in our courses. We have benefited greatly from the generosity of early LegSim adopters.

Key features of a Long-form congressional simulation

The simulation is the central focus of the course

Our legislative process course is built around the simulation, rather than the simulation being a secondary component of the class. Roughly 70% of available course points are connected to simulation activities and assignments; the remainder are based on reading quizzes and exams. Students are tasked with becoming "effective legislators" and the course is oriented to build the knowledge and skills needed for success in the simulation. **In the early weeks of the semester, students learn about the institutional design and historical development of the U.S. Congress and engage with contemporary debates about the quality of the representation and "brokenness" of the institution before learning about parties, committees, legislative procedures, interbranch relations, and congressional elections.** Even when the bulk of material is delivered through direct instruction, students are being prepared for the simulation.

A key challenge is that in devoting so much time to the simulation, instructors lose lecture time and may have to eliminate topics. We cut our typical sections on domestic and foreign policy-making and interbranch relations when moving to this approach. In our view, this tradeoff is worth it. Fewer topics are covered, but those that are retained are covered in much greater depth. Our sense is that students internalize the material more fully.

Assignments are sequenced so that students who enter the course with minimal knowledge about the U.S. Congress acquire the background knowledge they need to be successful in the simulation. During the second week of class, students complete online ideology and partisanship quizzes and write a short reflection on the consistency between their quiz results and their perceptions of their political leanings. With this information in hand, students are better equipped to choose a district/state to represent in the simulation. In the third week of the semester, students complete a legislative profile assignment—they choose a district/state to represent, join (or create) a political party, write a brief statement introducing themselves to their classmates, and write a profile of their district/state. By the time students are asked to write and introduce legislation, they have undertaken significant research on their state/district, identified their own legislative priorities, met with their co-partisans to identify party priorities, and participated in multiple days of in-class bill-writing activities.

Table 1. Simulation activities and assignments by week.

Week	Simulation activities	Simulation assignments due
1	Instructors provide overview of simulation.	
3	Students choose districts/states in class.	Students join (or create) parties and complete their LegSim profiles.
6	Parties meet in class. Students introduce themselves and discuss priorities. Students decide what leadership positions they will create.	Students complete legislative agenda assignment in which they identify key issues they intend to focus on during the simulation.
7	Parties meet in class and elect leaders.	
8	Party leaders work with instructor to negotiate committee jurisdictions and ratios and to make committee assignments.	Students submit committee requests to their party leaders.
9–10	Bill-writing workshop, procedures practice, party and committee meetings. Legislature convenes for the first time, members are sworn in, organizing resolutions are adopted, Speaker is elected (if simulating House).	Students complete online quiz on legislative procedures.
11		Students are required to submit a minor piece of legislation by the start of the 11th week of class.
12–15	All remaining class days are devoted to simulation activities. Leaders determine how time will be allocated among legislative sessions, committee meetings, and party meetings. Debate and voting occur in-class and online. Final class day devoted to simulation debriefing and presentation of reelection campaign materials.	All students are required to submit a major piece of legislation by the start of the 12th week of class. Students complete 2-debate preparation assignments. Reelection strategy campaign assignment due at final class meeting.
16	Finals week—no class meetings.	Final exam administered. Report on legislative accomplishments due. Evaluation of another member's effectiveness as a legislator due.

The amount of class time devoted to the simulation increases as the semester progresses. In the final weeks of the course, all class time is devoted to simulation activities. In these weeks, party leaders determine how time is allocated among legislative sessions, committee meetings, and party meetings. Table 1 includes a list of simulation activities and assignments by week.

Students legislate as themselves

In some simulations, instructors may need to assign students roles and/or preferences to ensure the appropriate diversity of stakeholders for the decision-making context being simulated. Assigning students' roles or preferences may encourage more participation from students hesitant to share their personal views or from students who do not have strong views about issues. While we recognize these potential benefits, we believe that a long-form legislative process simulation works best when students represent real districts/states, but legislate as themselves.

First, allowing students to choose their districts/states requires that they reflect on their political values and issue priorities and consider their ability to represent different constituencies. Students clamor to get what they perceive as “the best” states/districts.

We have students choose districts/states in class in random order to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to get their most preferred constituency. Second, students seem empowered by the opportunity to “play themselves” in the simulation; they are engaged and feel a greater personal, ideological stake in what happens in the simulation. Students address each other by their titles and are eager to take on leadership roles in their parties and committees. Third, because students represent real districts/states, those who are not sure which policies they should pursue can use information about real elected officials from their district/state to guide them. Finally, we agree with Woessner (2015) that legislating as themselves makes the simulation more enjoyable for students and quickly allows partisan teams to coalesce.

A pedagogical benefit of allowing student preferences to determine the composition of the legislature is that neither party control nor partisan polarization are imposed by the instructor. Prior to the simulation, students often lament the degree of polarization in Congress and express disapproval of the strategic use of procedures. If the class wants a legislature characterized by bipartisanship and compromise, they can try to promote those values in the simulation. In practice, we have seen some majority parties in House and Senate simulations seek broad consensus. Others have tried to exclude the minority party. By the end of every simulation, strategic use of procedures has been the norm. Because the degree of polarization, the strength of party leaders, and the norms regarding strategic use of procedures are unknown at the outset of the simulation, students are able to see them emerge and to evaluate their impact on simulation activities.

Students set the agenda

The legislative agenda is fully determined by the students. This distinguishes LegSim simulations from others where issues are predefined, like the ICONS simulations popular in international relations courses (<https://www.icons.umd.edu/>) or the congressional simulations by Baranowski (2006) and Ciliotta-Rubery and Levy (2000). We require each student to write a minimum of two bills, one of which must propose a major policy change. For the major bill assignment, students introduce proposals that *they* think are important—not those that they think elected officials think are important. Committee chairs and party leaders promote some bills and stymie others. Students understand that there is no guarantee of legislative success and draft legislation to build support. They lobby their peers to get their bills to the floor and they engage in substantive debates about issues they care about.

Bills could be no longer than 750 words, and students were required to choose the correct Legislative Type (bill, resolution, or joint resolution) from the drop-down menu in LegSim; structure the bill appropriately by sections; include a “Findings and Purposes” section that explains the need for the legislation; give authority to a specific executive branch agency if the proposal would require implementation; and include a reasonable estimate of the bill’s costs if the proposal would require appropriation of federal monies. Using these guidelines, students have crafted all manner of bills from silly to serious and symbolic to substantive. Some students use legislation proposed in Congress as models for their assignments. When students choose this route, we require that they redraft the proposal in language that is accessible to their undergraduate peers.

A key criterion of this assignment is that bills be written so students can read them and understand their intended effects and anticipated costs. In our most recent offering of the course, 13 bills were passed. Among other things, these measures sought to eliminate interest on federal student loans, restore felon voting rights, allow feminine hygiene products to be purchased using SNAP funds, expand health care benefits for veterans, prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression, and rename a federal post office in Boston for the late Richard Martin.

Customizing your simulation

Choosing between the House and Senate

Having chosen to use a long-form congressional simulation, an instructor must next decide whether to simulate the House or the Senate. The House's more routinized procedures may be preferable for classes with large enrollments or for shorter semesters. We simulate the House in our five-week summer courses. During the fall and spring semesters, we generally prefer to simulate the Senate because it affords more opportunity for members of the minority party to participate actively and to shape legislative outcomes.

Structuring committees

By default, each LegSim session is populated with the slate of committees that exist in the same chamber in the U.S. Congress, although this is easily customizable; House sessions have 20 committees and Senate sessions have 16 committees. Our legislative process classes have ranged in size from 35 to 48 students. We want each student to serve on one committee so that all committees can meet simultaneously during class time. We do not include an appropriations committee and we combine the jurisdictions of the remaining committees to create a smaller set of committees where each has between five and seven members. We attempt to combine committee jurisdictions to ensure that each committee has authority for issues likely to receive attention during the simulation.

Student leadership

Committee and party leaders in the simulation have greater influence than their peers over chamber policy outputs, but they also have a greater workload. They are responsible for scheduling hearings and setting the floor agenda, respectively, and these tasks have to be completed outside of class in order for the simulation to run efficiently. Even knowing the additional responsibilities, we have never had difficulty getting students to agree to take on leadership positions. Indeed, we usually have more than enough volunteers for committee leadership posts and contested elections for party leadership positions. For their part, students are generally eager to hold leaders accountable, ensuring proper representation of party preferences. On two occasions, leaders have been replaced by their parties: one for missing class regularly and one for being

insufficiently attentive to their caucus. These instances have provided us with opportunities to talk about the dynamics of party government.

Managing simulation-related communication

Communication is a central element of the LegSim experience. Students tend to have a lot of questions for instructors, students need to coordinate within their party and committee workgroups, leaders need to communicate with each other to negotiate floor scheduling, and leaders need to share information with the entire class. While LegSim includes a “Dear Colleague” feature that allows students to send messages to individual members or groups of members in the simulation, we find the tool cumbersome and have shifted our course-related communication to Slack (<http://slack.com/>). Slack is an online communication platform that organizes multiple conversations for members in an online *workspace*. **Each conversation occurs in its own *channel*. We create private channels for each party group and for each committee and a general channel where information and announcements can be shared with the entire class.** Students can also send private messages to any member of the class including the instructors. Students report that they prefer Slack to e-mail, LegSim’s communication tools, and LMS-based messaging. During the fall 2017 semester when we team-taught two sections of this class, there were more than 7,000 posts in our legislative process Slack workspace. (This was a shared workspace for two team-taught classes with a combined enrollment of 85 students.) The informality of the medium encourages students to join the conversation.

Student reactions to the simulation

Student reactions to the simulation have been overwhelmingly positive. Ninety-eight percent of respondents on end-of-term evaluations agreed with the following statement, “The simulation provided me with a variety of learning materials and activities to promote my learning of the legislative process.” Seventy-six percent of responding students indicated agreement with the statement “I wish more of my courses used simulations.” Thirteen percent of students disagreed with that statement and 11% expressed no opinion. Of the 129 comments made in response to open-ended questions in student evaluations of teaching over five sections of the course, 78% were positive. Among positive comments, many students noted that simulation made the course more engaging. Others identified the very benefits of the simulation that we hoped would emerge. One student noted, for example, that “[t]his class was very intellectually stimulating, it did stretch my thinking. By using a hands[-]on approach I have been able to learn and retain and put into use all of the material presented in this course.” Along those same lines, many students asked for more time in the simulation. Asking for more “LegSim” days, one student explained that, “I felt like we were rushing through our committees ... we had 17 bills to consider and could only get through about 2/day because they were substantively dense.”

Of the remaining comments, 6% were neutral and 16% were negative. Neutral comments tended to make suggestions about the allocation of class time, for example, requesting that we expand our bill-writing workshop. Others requested that we provide

party leaders with more guidance as to how to run their chambers. On the latter point, we think this is an unavoidable aspect of the long-form simulation process. When students are given greater agency over day-to-day organization of the class, they may struggle with time management and organization. We see these as learning opportunities. Students may be frustrated when they are not sure what will be “on the floor” on a given day, but so too are real legislators.

With respect to the negative comments, some students simply prefer lectures (“I really enjoyed the lectures more than the simulation”). Others did not like that the simulation called for work online, outside of class. LegSim allows party leaders to schedule votes and debates online, and our leaders have most often availed themselves of this functionality when trying to push bills through at the end of the semester. While this may frustrate some students, it also illustrates an essential feature of the legislative process: that time is a scarce legislative resource.

Several students commented on the level of decorum and the use of dilatory tactics during debate. With respect to dilatory tactics, this is yet another opportunity to remind students that some of the things that frustrate them about simulating the legislative process reflect frustrations of real legislators. On the issue of decorum, we instructed students to avoid personal insults and to direct all comments to the chair, and we interjected when these norms were violated. Even so, when students debate proposals that inspire passion, tensions may simmer. The key to navigating these tensions is to provide students with repeated reminders of the value we as instructors place on respect and professionalism and the potential for reasoned deliberation to inform policy making. We attempt to walk a careful line that respects students’ academic freedom while ensuring that classroom discourse is free of abuse. Given the potential for debate to become heated, we understand that some instructors may wish to exert greater control over the “floor” or avoid floor debate on some issues altogether. We advise against such an approach. If students are restricted in the issues they can consider and debate, they lose the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions about contentious issues with their peers. Ensuring that these debates occur in a context that prioritizes civil discourse and the exchange of ideas allows students to practice the deliberative communications skills repeatedly identified as important for future civic engagement (Campbell 2007; Colby et al. 2003; Strachan 2006).

Conclusion

Wilkerson (2005, 9) observes that when he first developed LegSim, “technology in education was rare, particularly in the social sciences” and colleagues wondered why he was devoting so much time to teaching. But student response was positive and in the decade since then technology has increasingly been utilized as a tool to facilitate student learning. LegSim is an exemplar of this trend. We have used LegSim to implement long-form simulations that teach students about the legislative process. Is it possible to conduct a long-form legislative process simulation without LegSim? Yes, of course, but the platform’s functionality has allowed us to incorporate substantial complexity into our legislative process simulations while keeping the task of administering the simulation manageable. That would be difficult offline or even with the aid of an LMS platform.

Freed from having to manage the flow of paper, we have been able to implement simulations where students write their own bills, consider those bills in committee, fight to get their bills on to the floor, persuasively articulate their policy preferences, and negotiate with leaders and peers. Through these activities, students demonstrate their mastery of course topics. Are students frustrated to see on the news that legislators cannot broker bipartisan compromises? Are they frustrated that legislators vote on bills they have not read? Are they frustrated by Congress's inability to execute major policy change? In our experience, the answer to all three questions is a resounding "yes." Through participation in the simulation, students develop a much better sense of the institutional, partisan, and individual-level factors that contribute to these dynamics. In end-of-term writing assignments and in conversation with us, students have often noted that they initially underestimated how difficult it would be to pass legislation and that their in-class experiences have helped them understand how Congress works, and how it does not. While instructors can explain these factors to students, students who have experienced them firsthand are better able to internalize the central themes of the course.

Finally, teaching a simulation-centered legislative process class is a lot of fun. We regularly find our students engaged in inter- and intra-party negotiations in the hallways before class and have often had to urge students to wrap things up at the end of a session to clear the room for the next instructor. We prefer this to the backpack shuffling that often characterizes the end of lecture-based courses. We also find ourselves mentoring students throughout the semester on matters such as how to frame their arguments, negotiate with leaders, and use legislative procedures; these interactions have been very rewarding. Each simulation is different because it is driven by the identities and the interests of the enrolled students. The throughline, however, is that students have ownership of the class and their learning experience. Having experienced this vibrant, student-centered class, we would never go back.

Notes

1. LegSim can be accessed via the following URL: <http://info.legsim.org>.
2. The authors have no professional association with John D. Wilkerson or the University of Washington.

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