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Teaching Legislative Politics Through a Game: Active Learning, Assignment Co-creation, and Assessment Across Modalities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of a legislative politics simulation game as a tool to engage students in advanced political science courses and provide an experiential learning environment. Designed to simulate the legislative process, the game allows students to propose the structure of their final assessments, which fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and co-creation. This study contributes in three ways: it demonstrates the use of a simulation game as an active learning tool in legislative politics, highlights the role of student co-creation in shaping assessments, and evaluates the effectiveness of simulations across different instructional modalities. The game was tested across five semesters, employing face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online formats. Course evaluations highlighted the game's success in increasing belief that course activities matched learning objectives. However, while the game proved to be an effective pedagogical tool in face-to-face and hybrid settings, challenges emerged in online iterations, particularly regarding student participation and engagement. This study underscores the importance of adapting simulations to different instructional environments and offers insights into the limitations of fully asynchronous formats. The findings suggest that while simulations can enhance learning in legislative politics courses, their success is context dependent.

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Legislative politics; legislative game; online learning; co-creation; active learning; high-impact practices

Introduction

The benefits of High Impact Practices (HIPs) are well-documented, including their role in closing learning gaps and improving student outcomes (Berger 2012; Hansen 2025; Kinzie 2013; Lopatto 2007; Ribera, Miller, and Dumford 2017). Theobald et al. (2020), analyzing data from over 53,000 students, find that active learning can reduce achievement gaps by 33% and passing gaps by 45%, especially when high-intensity methods are used. Similarly, Miller, Rocconi, and Dumford (2018) show that HIP participation significantly predicts future career planning and early job attainment, even after accounting for demographic and institutional variables. Within political science, the use of simulations, role-play, and games has expanded significantly as a

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high-impact practice, aiming to foster active learning and critical thinking among students (Oros 2007).

Currently, a substantial body of literature focuses on the integration of games in international relations courses (Asal and Kratoville 2013; Brandle 2020; Haun and O'Hara 2022; Kitchen 2022; McCarthy 2014; Meibauer and Aagaard Nøhr 2018; Rittinger 2020; Silva et al. 2023; Wheeler 2006; Whyte 2021). However, the application of classroom simulations and interactive learning activities in other political science topical courses has been less abundant (Baldwin and Ahn 2024; Filter 2009). In address, this study contributes to the literature on the use of games in United States (U.S.) legislative politics courses (Blackstone and Oldmixon 2020; Kahn and Perez 2009; Kalaf-Hughes and Mills 2016).

We present a legislative politics game as a tool for structuring final exams in advanced-level political science courses. This game offers students a unique opportunity to deliberate in a manner consistent with a legislative chamber, engage with the concept of "checks and balances" similar to the U.S. government, and influence the structure of their final exam. Through co-creation, students have a role in shaping their final assessment and are encouraged to approach the simulation with greater investment. Unlike previous simulations that have focused solely on the legislative process or the legislative-executive relationship, our game incorporates strategic elements from the "executive" and "judicial branch," which offers an additional layer of consideration for interbranch dynamics. In addition, the game is straightforward to implement and does not demand excessive time commitments from students or instructors, while still effectively meeting the learning objectives. Lastly, we evaluate the game's effectiveness across different course instruction formats.

This study makes three main contributions. First, it demonstrates how a legislative politics game can serve as an effective active learning tool that integrates institutional dynamics into course design. Second, it highlights the value of co-creation by allowing students to shape their own final assessments, thereby deepening their engagement and investment in the course. Third, it provides insights into how different instructional modalities (face-to-face, hybrid, and online) shape the effectiveness of active learning activities, which provides practical lessons for instructors adapting simulations to varied teaching contexts.

Simulation games and active learning

A substantial body of research highlights the pedagogical value of games and simulations in higher education. Games provide students with hands-on experiences that deepen understanding and sustain engagement, even in challenging areas such as quantitative methodology courses (Asal et al. 2018). Instructors can leverage student motivation by offering alternative modes of learning and encouraging learning through experience (Bruce 1988). Role-play simulations, for instance, are associated with greater student interest and more positive learning outcomes than lecture alone (DeNave and Heppner 1997). Studies further show that courses incorporating simulations produce higher grades and stronger performance than those taught with conventional methods (Frederking 2005; McCarthy and Anderson 2000). Beyond improved academic outcomes, games promote collaboration, active participation, and opportunities to observe and learn from peers' critical thinking processes (Shin 2021). These tools also create more

dynamic learning environments that sustain engagement (Hartt, Hosseini, and Mostafapour 2020). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that game-based learning can motivate students, foster deeper engagement with course material, and enhance collaborative and educational outcomes.

Despite these advantages, scholars note several challenges in adopting game-based learning. No simulation can fully capture the complexities of the real-world dynamics it seeks to model, which can create limits to transferability between classroom exercises and political realities (Bruce 1988). Students themselves also recognize that while games and simulations enhance engagement, traditional lectures remain important for providing foundational knowledge, which suggests that games are best utilized as complements rather than substitutes (DeNave and Heppner 1997). In addition, designing and running simulations can pose a significant burden on instructors in terms of preparation and class management, particularly when games are high-intensity or resource-intensive (Glazier 2011). These challenges highlight the importance of aligning the scale and goals of a simulation with the broader course design, which ensures that the benefits of active learning are achieved without overwhelming students or instructors.

Legislative politics games in the literature

Scholars have created a few different games that are useful for inclusion in U.S. legislative politics courses. Kahn and Perez (2009) explore the use of a "The Game of Politics" simulation to enhance students' understanding of the legislative-executive relationship in an introductory American politics course. The game simulates the actions and interactions of the U.S. legislative and executive branches, including elements such as bill creation, committee deliberations, and press conferences. The game introduces students to the roles played by political actors, such as the president, legislators, and media, while incorporating unexpected "storylines" such as natural disasters or scandals to reflect real-world distractions. The simulation spans five class sessions, allowing students to propose and pass legislation, draft budgets, and address crises. Kahn and Perez (2009) evaluate the effectiveness of the game by comparing student performance on exams before and after the simulation. They found that students scored significantly higher on the final exam, suggesting that the simulation helped students to better understand the complexities of the legislative-executive relationship.

Kalaf-Hughes and Mills (2016) also examine a simulation focusing on legislative-executive interactions, but they extend the concept by incorporating a multicourse framework into the activity. In their study, students concurrently enrolled in courses on the U.S. Congress and the Presidency participated in a joint simulation that mimicked the policymaking process. This simulation required students to act in roles assigned to either the legislative or executive branches, introducing bills, debating policy issues, and responding to political challenges such as public opinion shifts or crises. The game was designed to explore how both branches of government influence policy outcomes. The instructors found that students who participated in the simulation reported greater perceived learning than those who had taken the courses in previous semesters without the joint simulation. Students also gained a more nuanced understanding of how the legislative and executive branches must collaborate and negotiate

to pass legislation. The study highlights the benefits of using simulations that capture the interaction between branches, rather than isolating the legislative process alone.

In contrast, Blackstone and Oldmixon (2020) focus exclusively on the legislative process through their use of LegSim, which is an online platform for simulating Congressional behavior. This long-term simulation covers an entire semester, allowing students to immerse themselves in the legislative environment by writing bills, participating in committees, and engaging in floor debates. Students represent real districts and political figures, and they work through the legislative process from bill introduction to committee markup and eventual voting. Unlike the previous two studies, which focus on legislative-executive interactions, LegSim places a singular emphasis on the internal dynamics of Congress. Blackstone and Oldmixon (2020) argue that this intensive engagement helps students better understand legislative norms and procedures, and it improves their ability to think critically about policymaking. The simulation also enhances students' understanding of the strategic elements involved in lawmaking, such as coalition-building and the use of procedural rules. All three games have demonstrated their usefulness in enhancing legislative politics courses. However, the required time commitment from students or prior background knowledge needed may moderate their efficacy, depending on the institution and student population.

Engaging students in co-creation of assignments

Although simulations and games have expanded active learning opportunities in political science, they have not typically extended to involving students in the design of their assessments. Scholarship on co-creation emphasizes how students can play a meaningful role not only as participants in learning activities but also as collaborators in shaping them. Applied to assignments, co-creation provides students with voice and agency in the pedagogical process and often leads to assessments more closely aligned with their learning needs (Cook-Sather 2020). Further, co-creation can foster reflection from students on their role in the learning process (Dickerson, Jarvis, and Stockwell 2016), which has been shown to increase confidence, skills, and ownership of learning outcomes (Geurts et al. 2024; Shukla and Arora 2023). Systematic reviews of the assessment co-creation literature similarly highlight gains in student autonomy, engagement, and interest (Smith et al. 2025), while democratizing the classroom can amplify inclusivity and diverse perspectives (Bovill 2020; Meinking and Hall 2020). In particular, reflective learners appear to benefit when co-creation is paired with active learning tasks (Doyle, Buckley, and McCarthy 2021).

At the same time, the literature notes important challenges. Co-creation is difficult to implement in large classes, requires additional time and planning, and not all students wish to participate in designing their own assessments (Bovill 2020; Doyle, Buckley, and Whelan 2019; Smith et al. 2025). These challenges indicate that co-creation is most effective when implemented in smaller courses with adequate planning and when students are actively supported in contributing to the process. The legislative politics game presented later builds on these insights by incorporating co-creation into the assessment process itself, giving students a direct stake in determining the structure of their final exam.

Teaching modalities and active learning

The benefits and challenges of co-creation highlight that context matters for how students engage in active learning. One important contextual factor is the instructional modality through which courses are delivered. As political science courses are increasingly taught across face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online environments, it is necessary to consider how teaching format shapes opportunities for collaboration, interaction, and engagement in active learning activities, such as simulations and co-created assessments.

Research on teaching modalities indicates that active learning can be effective across settings, though it manifests differently depending on the format. Students often perceive in-person instruction as more conducive to teamwork, participation, and interpersonal connection, even when learning outcomes are comparable across online and face-to-face courses (Malta et al. 2025). Online adaptations of classroom techniques, including virtual simulations, can also create authentic and engaging experiences (Basdogan and Birdwell 2023; Forbes et al. 2023), and synchronous strategies such as breakout rooms, interactive games, and icebreakers are particularly effective (Bali, Mann, and Minosky 2024). At the same time, students systematically report lower enthusiasm for online engagement strategies relative to in-person ones (Bolliger and Martin 2018), and sustained engagement in online spaces often depends on intrinsic motivation and course design that aligns with student needs (Tang et al. 2023; Tualaulelei et al. 2022). Altogether, this literature suggests that while active learning can be implemented successfully across modalities, instructors must carefully account for how learning environments shape participation, interaction, and students' perceptions of value (Wilson, Pollock, and Hamann 2007).

Context and course design

The course is offered at a comprehensive state university in the Midwest, which is a part of a state university system. The university provides an undergraduate degree in political science, with an optional concentration in law. Student backgrounds and academic achievement are varied, and the institution maintains a high acceptance rate of around 90%. Nearly all students report substantial work commitments outside of their academic responsibilities, while also being enrolled in a full-time course load.

The legislative politics course is an advanced-level political science course. The course has been taught with implementation of the game five times (Fall 2016—face-to-face, Spring 2020—hybrid, Spring 2021—online, Spring 2023, Spring 2024) by two different instructors at the same institution. Although open to all students, the course has primarily enrolled political science majors, in part because it does not fulfill the university's general education requirements; however, it does count toward all students' upper-division major credits. Notably, the course is not required for the major. For advanced courses, political science majors must select three courses from at least three different subfield categories out of four. The legislative politics course is one of five options available to satisfy the American Politics subfield requirement. Approximately half of the students enrolled in the course plan to attend law school, which may indicate a lower level of interest in broader political science topics among some participants. The most commonly cited reasons for enrolling in the course were its compatibility with students' face-to-face schedules or its availability online.

The course includes weekly readings and 10 weekly online quizzes that assess students' understanding of the week's topical material. Additionally, two argumentative essays are required throughout the semester, with one focusing on the primary goals of members of Congress and the other examining how the majority party can maintain control of the agenda through procedural rules. In the online version of the course, students must also submit 10 weekly written reflections on the material, which must include a minimum number of citations with corresponding page numbers. The course design also features two exams. The first exam, worth 20% of the overall grade, occurs about two-thirds into the semester and covers key topics such as modern trends, representation, constitutional and historical context, congressional elections, members' goals, parties and leaders, and standing committees. The remaining material includes House and Senate rules and procedures, congressional voting, and interbranch politics. The second exam, which is directly related to the legislative game, constitutes 10% of the overall grade. Students are informed that the structure of the second exam has not yet been determined in the syllabus.

Legislative politics final exam game

The creation of a game for the legislative politics course was motivated by three key considerations. First, student feedback indicated that the course generated the least interest compared to other U.S. politics courses, such as constitutional law, public policy, political parties, interest groups, and elections. The feedback suggested a need to make the course more interactive to boost interest and enrollment. Second, students from previous semesters reported that the legislative politics material was particularly dense and challenging relative to other courses. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that no prior knowledge of the U.S. government is required to enroll, meaning students often lack the background necessary to immediately engage with complex legislative concepts. As a result, core material must be taught before students can meaningfully participate in applied activities. Third, the game was designed to avoid imposing a substantial time commitment on students, as some are not political science majors and may have never taken a political science course before, many are enrolled in large credit loads, and most work significant hours outside of school. These constraints make it difficult for students to commit to an elaborate simulation that spans multiple weeks, which reinforces the need for a concise and focused activity that still achieves the intended learning objectives.

The game has undergone slight modifications based on research advocating for course redesigns informed by student feedback (Papanastasiou and Zembylas 2008). Originally, the game was tested as an in-class assignment and was not related to the final exam. However, based on student feedback, the game was reformatted to be related to the final exam (discussed here). For clarity, only minimal adjustments were made to the language of the game based on questions posed by students throughout the process. The goal of the game is for students to demonstrate the learning objectives they have acquired in the preceding weeks. In this section, we present the final version of the course as it currently stands. The game proceeds as follows. First, students are provided with the following prompt for the activity:

> "*In the syllabus, the final exam occurs on [date]. As you know, a syllabus is a binding contract that stipulates the guidelines, requirements, grading policy, and all other necessary*

material for the conducting of the course. In our syllabus, discussion and criteria of the Exam II is intentional left vague. However, a basic framework appears to exist when looking at Exam I. That being said, a syllabus can easily be changed."

Next, students are given general information about the potential for implementing changes to the course (see Table 1). In this activity, students are expected to simulate a deliberative legislative body, although, unlike the majority voting process used in the U.S. House of Representatives, they are required to reach a unanimous decision due to the game's context. Despite this difference, the process of gathering preferences and negotiating an outcome, while considering other decision-making bodies, remains similar. In the game, the university administration acts as the judicial body, determining the legitimacy of proposed changes. Since the university has specific rules regarding final exams, for example, that face-to-face courses must meet during the designated final exam day and time, the administration would be the body that assesses whether the proposed outcome aligns with institutional standards. This requires participants to familiarize themselves with institutional rules. Finally, the instructor assumes the role of the president in this legislative simulation by wielding veto power and holding preferences that the legislative body must consider during deliberations.

Next, a list of procedures for the game is provided. Students are informed that they must participate in all steps of the activity (except step 7) unless explicitly exempted. Failure to participate will result in a loss of points corresponding to that portion of the grade. The procedural steps are outlined below. The rules that are specifically included for the online version of the game are italicized.

Procedural steps

1. The students should choose a leader through a majority vote that they believe could maintain rules of order for discussing the syllabus change (*note: individual failure to participate results in loss of points*). In addition, this leader should be a person that the students believe would be a good representative for the class (i.e. would be able to represent the interests of the class in a clear and concise way to the professor).

Table 1. General information about changes to a course.

Legality of a syllabus change:
How can a syllabus course requirement or assignment be changed?
According to university guidelines, a syllabus can be changed/altered when there is unanimous consent from the participants in the course. (Or, if a professor engages the change in the proper context—see below.)
Who judges whether a change to the syllabus has unanimous consent?
The university's academic administration oversees ruling on matters related to the validity of a course change.
Professor's role in the syllabus change:
Can a professor alter the syllabus schedule unilaterally?
Yes, a professor can unilaterally alter a syllabus so long as there exists a disclaimer in the syllabus indicating that such a situation is possible and that the professor reserves the right (see, Syllabus disclaimer).
If students unanimously decide to alter the syllabus, does the professor get a say?
Yes, the professor has the right to veto any decision made by the students regarding the alteration of the course, as the professor is the expert on the material as well as the best practices for achieving learning outcomes.
Professor and students deciding a change:
How should the process of engaging a syllabus change begin?
Students should start the process by identifying the university's rules for final exams. Then, they should begin considering all their preferences on the change, since unanimous agreement is required. Finally, students should consider the professor's preferences and the goal of the course, since the professor is the veto point.

2. After a leader is chosen, the leader should decide on basic initial rules of order. Then, using these basic rules of order, the students should decide on the rules of order they would like to utilize for the reminder of the syllabus change decision-making process. (*Tip: Anticipate the students that might not respond or participate. If you do not anticipate these students, the activity stalls and fails.)*
3. The students should debate and discuss what they believe the professor's stance is on the syllabus change. Since the professor holds the veto, the students do not want to waste time by debating and deciding on a syllabus change that will not be upheld. Therefore, they should consider the professor's interests, preferences, and goals.
4. The students should debate and discuss their goals in terms of changes to the syllabus. Obviously, goals are going to differ by individual. So, it is important to start by understanding everyone's most preferred outcomes.
5. The students should debate and discuss what changes would be most beneficial for achieving their goals. Again, unanimous consent is necessary. Therefore, students must be allowed to dialogue and discuss their ideas.
6. The students should vote on a proposal to take before the professor (unanimity is needed). Again, be aware that you need to balance your goals with the professor's goals. Since the professor holds the veto, you do not want to waste your one opportunity to change the syllabus.
7. The next step requires that the final proposal is presented to the professor. The proposal must be presented by [date]. Therefore, the students should elect 1–3 students to present the proposal to the professor (*on the discussion board or over Zoom*). If the proposal is not presented by [date], the professor will design an exam since Step 8 cannot be completed (see top).
8. Finally, if the professor agrees and the proposal is adopted, the students shall follow through with the proposal by [date]. If the proposal is not adopted, the professor will create their own exam without any restrictions. *The students will have from [*date*] to [*date*] to complete the professor's exam.*

Finally, a disclaimer is provided at the end of the game. The disclaimer states, "*If the exam proposal fails, the professor's incentive is to make the exam comprehensive due to the failure of the students to successfully implement the knowledge they have acquired to complete the activity. Thus, students have not demonstrated the learning objectives outlined for the previous weeks.*"

Methods

The analysis draws on four sources of evidence: the outcomes of the game in each iteration (whether students successfully reached agreement on a final assessment), student feedback in course evaluations, debriefing discussions with students, and the instructors' detailed breakdowns of the game process across semesters. These materials provided insight into both the effectiveness of the game as a learning tool and the contextual factors shaping its outcomes in face-to-face, hybrid, and online settings. While the study does not involve systematic data collection, such as surveys, interviews,

or assignment coding, the evidence is sufficient for evaluating the game's implementation and identifying key lessons for teaching practice.

Results

First game—Fall 2016

In Table 2, the results from the games are summarized. The first time the game was implemented, there were 10 students in the face-to-face course.[1] Deliberation occurred over two class sessions for a total of roughly 3 h. Students had also indicated talking about the game for a substantial amount of time outside of the classroom in an unstructured manner. The first iteration of the game resulted in an adopted proposal.

The students proposed administering a multiple-choice exam on the scheduled exam day, as the university required face-to-face courses to meet during the designated exam period. Each student would submit five complete multiple-choice questions, resulting in a total of 50 questions, each contributing 2% to the final exam grade. Additionally, the students suggested including seven extra credit multiple-choice questions, weighted the same as the regular questions. Students shared topics and sources for their contributed questions without revealing the specific items. This approach encouraged students to review the course material, similar to a traditional exam. However, the key outcome was that students were able to engage in a process that mirrored legislative deliberation.

Although the class size was small, course evaluations revealed several notable patterns. Course evaluations indicated that students reported lower motivation to take the course compared to the department average (more than one standard deviation). However, they expressed slightly higher positive responses to all questions regarding the instructor, course material, and learning objectives. Interestingly, while the modal response to the question of whether their interest in the course had increased or decreased was a neutral response, there was unanimous strong agreement that the course presented a coherent body of knowledge. Additionally, students expressed higher levels of agreement that the course readings and class sessions supported their learning, compared to the department average.

Teaching the course face-to-face provided an opportunity for a debriefing session where we discussed the game and its objectives. All students shared that they found the activity both fun and engaging. A majority also noted that while developing the voting rules, they reflected more on the readings than they initially expected. Additionally, a few students reported that they "actually studied more for the final exam than for the first exam." This feedback suggested that students were aware of

Table 2. Game, semester/year, course format, outcome, and feedback.

Game	Semester/year	Course format	Outcome	Feedback	Students
1st	Fall 2016	Face-to-face	50 question multiple-choice exam	Positive	10
2nd	Spring 2020	Hybrid/synchronous online	Literature review	Positive	15
3rd	Spring 2021	Asynchronous online	Additional argumentative essay	Positive	11
4th	Spring 2023	Asynchronous online	38 question multiple-choice exam	Negative	19
5th	Spring 2024	Asynchronous online	Failed to complete assignment	None	11

the instructor's expectations regarding the level of preparation required for the final exam. Moreover, their comments indicated that students felt a sense of accountability toward their peers in crafting clear and important exam questions. Most students also enjoyed trying to anticipate which outcomes the instructor would accept, which prompted deeper reflection on course goals.

Second game—Spring 2020

The second time the course was taught was in Spring 2020. Unfortunately, the course started as a face-to-face course but was forced to convert to a synchronous online course due to COVID-19. There were 15 students in the course. Deliberation occurred over two Zoom sessions for a total of roughly two and a half hours. Student had also indicated talking about the game over a messenger group chat. All the students participating had known each other and the instructor before the course. The second time the game was played also led to the students' proposal being successfully adopted.

The students proposed that they each complete a literature review on a topic of their own choosing related to the course, with a minimum page count of five pages and 10 references. The proposal offered students a chance to dive more deeply into a topic of interest and to engage with content beyond the assigned material. Given the disruptions caused by COVID-19, this outcome seemed especially reasonable.

Students indicated higher-than-average agreement that learning objectives were clearly communicated and that course activities contributed to their learning in the course evaluations. A similar result was found when assessing whether the course activities contributed to their learning. The instructor received higher ratings than the department average in areas such as the instructor's notable presence throughout the course, the frequency of feedback, and the helpfulness of that feedback in supporting student learning. While these differences could be explained by several variables, it is reasonable to assume that both the student-instructor interactions and the game itself were factors considered when completing the evaluations since they were completed shortly after the game's completion.

During the debriefing discussion, almost all students appeared to associate the game with adjustments made due to the COVID-19 pandemic, unaware that the game had been part of the course design from the beginning. As a result, they praised the instructor for incorporating such flexibility into the course during the pandemic. For instance, students noted that the option to write a literature review in place of a formal final exam benefited their mental health and reduced the stress typically associated with exam preparation. Students also noted that they enjoyed anticipating which outcomes the instructor would accept, and many said this was the first time they had considered the instructor's goals in such depth, a perspective they planned to carry into future courses.

Third game—Spring 2021

The third time the course was taught, the course was completely asynchronous online. The course was offered with COVID-19 mitigation procedures in place. There were 11 students in the course. Deliberation occurred over two Zoom sessions for a total

of roughly 2 h. Student had also discussed the game in the online course discussion forum. Most students already knew one another and the instructor before the course. In this first fully asynchronous offering, the proposal was presented over Zoom and led to the students' proposal being successfully adopted.

The outcome that the students proposed was writing an additional argumentative essay on one of the topics of their choosing from the last one-third of the course. Most students had reported enjoying writing the argumentative essays where they must provide a stance on an issue within legislative politics and defend it. Curiously, students did not seem to notice that the earlier argumentative essays carried more weight in their final grade (13% each *vs.* 10%), which suggests that they valued the intellectual engagement and skill development associated with crafting a well-reasoned argument more than the assignment's point value.

The course evaluation feedback was overwhelmingly positive. However, fewer than half of the students filled out the evaluations, which was a common issue with online courses during the pandemic at the university. In this iteration of the game, several challenges related to the online format became evident. Of the 11 students, only five consistently contributed to the discussion forum, while the remaining students offered sporadic comments of agreement. Furthermore, although student feedback was generally positive, it tended to be vague and lacked depth. The lack of engagement raised concerns about the game's suitability for fully online formats, but these challenges mirrored those observed in other courses during the pandemic. Therefore, based on the positive game outcome and ongoing student demand for advanced online course offerings, we proceeded with exploring the game's effectiveness in the online course format.

Fourth game—Spring 2023

In the Spring of 2023, a newly hired assistant professor took over the course. Since the class had been transitioned to a fully online, asynchronous format during the pandemic, the new instructor maintained both the format and the existing course materials. There were 19 students enrolled in the course. Students discussed the game in an online discussion forum. The student elected leader presented the agreed-upon plan to the professor within the designated timeframe. The proposal was approved.

The students agreed to create a 38-question multiple choice exam. Each student would submit six questions with at least three incorrect answers and one correct answer, for a total of 114 questions. The instructor would then select the 38 exam questions from the pool of questions submitted by the students. The students submitted their questions in a discussion forum visible only to the professor, and all items were submitted by the assigned deadline. Once the instructor created the exam, students were given a span of nine days in which to take the online, multiple-choice exam. Students elected to have an unlimited amount of time in which to take the test "as students have test anxiety and a limit would produce unneeded stress" (quote taken from student email). In addition, the leader decided to make a separate, non-mandatory discussion board for purposes of exam review. The purpose of this discussion board was to "help with anxiety for the students who require directed studying," the leader reported.

No course evaluations were submitted. However, exam performance was above average for the class when compared to previous assignments. Debriefing discussions with students revealed that while they liked the assignment in theory, half of them were frustrated with needing full-class participation. As many of the students were seniors, a common complaint was that they were busy, and they considered the assignment to be too much work and too time-consuming. During the debriefing session, the frustrations felt by having to get classmates to participate outweighed the benefit of the assignment. The outcome offered preliminary evidence that the online format may be effective only in specific circumstances.

Fifth game—Spring 2024

The course was offered in a fully online, asynchronous format. There were 11 students enrolled in the course. Students discussed the game in an online discussion forum, elected a leader, and formed a leadership committee. The student elected leader presented a rough, but incomplete outline for the exam before the assigned deadline. The proposed structure included a total of 35 questions: 30 multiple-choice, three short-answer, and two matching questions, to be completed within a 90-min time limit. The exam would be organized with multiple-choice and matching questions appearing first, followed by short-answer items. The short-answer section was to draw on real-life examples and legislative proposals where possible, and questions would be distributed based on weekly course content. The proposal also mentioned the possibility of extra credit, to be awarded through a mix of question types.

On the same day the proposal was submitted, the student leader was emailed with a conditional acceptance from the instructor. In the response email, the instructor indicated that the following information was needed before final approval: the exam questions, identified point values for each question, an indication of whether the test is open-book/open-note, a master copy of the exam questions with correct answers identified, a deadline for taking the exam, and a further explanation of the extra-credit questions.

The semester ended on May 10th. The instructor did not hear from the student leader (or anyone else) until May 8th at 11:02 p.m., when the leader emailed asking whether they were supposed to write the test and, if so, how the class would take it. The leader proposed writing an exam by noon on May 9th and posting it to the discussion forum for classmates to review before submitting it to the instructor for approval. The professor rejected the proposal, explaining that the deadline for creating a final exam had already passed and that an instructor-created exam was now posted. The instructor also noted that the leader's timeline would have left classmates with <24 h to complete the exam. Consequently, the final exam for the class was the multiple-choice exam created by the professor. After the exam, another student emailed asking whether the scores could be curved.

The outcome of the game was surprising, as it had not been assumed that students would fail to complete the activity. Only two students completed course evaluations, reflecting a broader pattern of disengagement in fully online courses at the university. This issue has prompted discussion within the university's lead governance committee about improving feedback in online settings and underscores the need for caution

when implementing techniques that rely on student input. The first evaluation did not mention the game but provided a generally positive review of the course. The second, written by a senior taking 18 credits in their final semester, stated: "As a class we had to create our own final exam. I found it unfair that the students who participated were punished because of the students that did not participate." The exact source of this frustration is unclear, as the instructor-created final resulted from never receiving a complete student-generated proposal, not from a lack of participation during the activity. It is possible the reviewer was referring to the leader's failure to follow through when describing the lack of participation.

Discussion

As stated prior, one issue with simulation games is that they rarely perfectly capture political reality. Indeed, during debriefings a sizable number of students were quick to recognize the ways in which the legislative politics game diverged from the real-world functioning of Congress. For each successful game, at least one student noted that the inability to override a veto represented a significant departure from actual institutional practice, while most students pointed out that the absence of partisan divisions or constituency pressures made deliberation less contentious than in Congress. For all simulations, students observed that the compressed timeframe simplified the often lengthy nature of real-world negotiations. These observations encouraged students to reflect critically on how the simulation simplified or constrained legislative dynamics, which in turn deepened their understanding of institutional design.

Students also identified elements of the game that reflected real-world legislative dynamics. The significant power granted to the elected leader at the outset illustrated how institutional rules can concentrate authority and shape decision-making, which gave students insight into leadership dynamics and the manipulation of chamber procedures. This recognition, combined with their reflections on divergences, helped them link the game to broader course themes on representation, institutional constraints, and the limits of political decision-making. Debriefing discussions reinforced these connections by emphasizing key learning objectives related to rules, institutional interactions, and the strategic behavior of political actors.

Across iterations, the experiences with the game both affirmed and complicated existing research on simulations, instructional modality, and co-created assessments. The face-to-face and synchronous versions matched prior findings that simulations foster engagement, collaboration, and deeper conceptual reflection (Asal et al. 2018; Frederking 2005), and they also aligned with work showing that co-created assignments can strengthen student agency and ownership (Cook-Sather 2020). At the same time, the fully asynchronous iterations reflected concerns raised in the modality literature about reduced social presence and uneven participation in online active learning environments (Bolliger and Martin 2018). Taken together, these patterns show that while the game's design is consistent with established benefits of simulations and co-created assessments, its success depends heavily on modality. The exercise worked well in face-to-face and hybrid courses, where students demonstrated high engagement and collaborative momentum, but fully online contexts posed challenges culminating in the first unsuccessful outcome. As a result, the game contributes to three broader

areas: the use of games for active learning, the pedagogical value of co-created assignments, and the importance of instructional modality in shaping student engagement.

Several practical lessons emerge from these experiences. Instructors seeking to implement similar simulations should allow space for students to articulate differences between the game and political realities to strengthen critical engagement with course content. Additionally, embedding co-creation into the assessment process can heighten student ownership and interest in the activity. Finally, instructors should be attentive to modality: while active learning can be adapted across settings, online courses may require more structured support, synchronous interaction, or alternative mechanisms to sustain student motivation and collaboration.

Conclusion

This legislative politics game was designed to foster active student engagement and increase understanding of institutional dynamics by giving students a direct role in shaping their final assessments. By simulating deliberation and decision-making processes, the activity encouraged students to practice negotiation, collaboration, and the balancing of institutional interests. In doing so, the game reflects the core principles of High Impact Practices (HIPs), which emphasize active learning, student agency, and the development of transferable skills through experiential, collaborative tasks. Importantly, the game required minimal extra time commitments for both students and instructors, making it a feasible addition to advanced political science courses.

Overall, this study highlights three key contributions. First, it demonstrates how games can serve as an effective HIP by integrating active learning into legislative politics courses. Second, it shows the pedagogical value of incorporating co-creation into assessment design, which deepens student ownership and investment. Third, it shows that while simulations are highly adaptable, their effectiveness is shaped by instructional modality, which requires instructors to carefully consider how best to implement such activities across learning environments.

Across iterations, the game provided meaningful opportunities for students to reflect on how rules and institutional structures shape political outcomes. Feedback from face-to-face and hybrid courses was consistently positive, with students reporting higher motivation, greater investment in course material, and stronger collaboration. By contrast, fully online implementations were more challenging, which underscores the limits of transferring active learning directly into asynchronous settings without additional support.

Future iterations of the game in online settings should build in more structured, synchronous touchpoints, such as required Zoom discussions or collaborative breakout groups, to strengthen social cohesion and communication. Research suggests that successful online teamwork depends heavily on trust, leadership, and direct communication (Bovill 2020; Garro-Abarca, Palos-Sanchez, and Aguayo-Camacho 2021). Additionally, a team-based teaching model that scaffolds collaborative skills throughout the semester may help students develop the meta-cognitive and interpersonal tools necessary for more effective participation in simulations (Garrison and Akyol 2013; Lee et al. 2017). While asynchronous delivery poses ongoing challenges, deliberate course design can better prepare students to engage in meaningful, co-created learning

experiences online. These skills are increasingly important as more careers incorporate online and remote elements.

Note

1. The use of course evaluation data is in accordance with APSA Ethical Guidelines for protecting human subjects. The course evaluation data was collected anonymously, and consent was provided for the use of data. In addition, no identifying information is provided for voluntary, non-anonymous quotes provided by students.

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