

Review of Pearson's Web-Based Lab Simulations for American Government

[This link](#) takes you to a list of web-based “lab simulations” created by Pearson (an educational publishing and assessment service) for use in American Government courses.

Given the demands placed upon both instructors and students who take asynchronous online classes, we think that over the course of a single semester, it would only be possible to include one or two of the twenty-two simulations that Pearson offers.

To save instructors time, we have reviewed these simulations, which vary greatly in terms of quality and pedagogical effectiveness.

We have come up with what we believe are the five best simulations that you may want to choose from, should you decide to incorporate one or more into your online course.

What follows is a brief overview of five of the simulations, accompanied by some commentary that we hope that you find helpful.

I. [You are a Candidate for Congress](#)

This simulation attempts to show students how important the concept of ideology is to American politics. We have defined ideology back in Lecture 1 as a set of ideas or beliefs that an individual or group holds to be true. Everyone, in short, has an ideology, and some of them may prove incompatible with others. How then, can a candidate seeking elective office attempt to appeal to voters who hold a wide array of ideological beliefs? That is the implicit question underlying this lab simulation, which provides students with a useful summary of five fundamental concepts that are integral to the study of American politics: liberalism, conservatism, popular sovereignty, liberty, and equality. The lab then presents students with three “Challenge” questions that present specific scenarios that could face them as congressional candidates. For instance, one such Challenge asks students “what strategy would allow you to attract the majority of voters in a district that voted Republican in the last election?” Here we recommend making some revisions to the simulation, since in its current form, students are presented with three choices, only one of which is deemed correct. However, we believe that this particular simulation will foster more critical thinking if students are told there is no one correct answer; ideally, several students would collaborate on this activity. For example, one could take on the role of the actual candidate while two others serve as senior campaign advisers. In such a way, students will work together in order to come up with a campaign strategy that reflects their emerging knowledge of voter behavior and the power of ideology. By conferring with one another, students may discover that rather than targeting specific groups, there is value in appealing to broad coalitions and reducing levels of political polarization.

II. [You are a Consumer Advocate](#)

This simulation exposes students to the legislative process and in particular to “how a bill becomes a law.” Students enter that process as public interest lobbyists who want members of

Congress to introduce a bill that protects individuals (and college students in particular) from the “predatory tactics used by credit card companies.” As is the case with all the simulations Pearson has produced, this one also utilizes the “Challenge” format (students are given a “Challenge” question and three multiple-choice responses), which has some limitations. For example, students are asked “who do you ask to draft your bill” that promotes credit card reform? The following choices are provided: “you write the legislation yourself . . .you find an interest group that supports your cause . . .you ask your congressional representative to write and introduce legislation on this issue.” In this example, the answer (“find an interest group”) is clear-cut, though students ought to take this opportunity to delve deeper and conduct some research. That is, they should examine different public interest organizations in order to determine which one would be most likely to assist them effectively.

Perhaps the most engaging aspect of this simulation is the “Challenge” question that asks students to prepare testimony before a subcommittee. Though students are told the “best approach” is to “recount stories about your personal experiences” with credit card debt, we think the third choice, discussing the credit card industry’s “predatory practices,” should also be incorporated into their testimony, the drafting of which provides an excellent opportunity for student collaboration. Given that this particular simulation attempts to cover every aspect of “how a bill becomes a law,” you may find it useful to assign different stages of the legislative process to different students, who will then share their results with the entire class, say in a Discussion Forum.

III. [You are a Polling Consultant](#)

This simulation allows students to imagine they are polling consultants for something called A-1 Polling, a firm based in California. While students are told they “will learn how to conduct an accurate and reliable poll,” this lab will also expose them to some of the problems associated with public opinion surveys that are covered in both our *OpenStax* textbook and lectures: namely, respondents are not able to converse with one another before answering surveys or tell pollsters the wrong questions are being asked; polls may be worded in ways that shape responses; and those who respond to surveys may not be forthcoming about their views. However, there is no better way to have students discover these limitations than through direct exposure to them, which this lab provides, starting with the first “Challenge,” which asks: “what target population can you poll to realistically create a sample group, so as to gain an accurate picture of public opinion?” The “correct” choice is to “poll a random sample of all registered voters from lists you obtain from county clerks” rather than polling a “random sample of everyone with a telephone number” or “all residents of California,” since the latter two options would include nonvoters (e.g., green card holders). Unfortunately, polling firms today are confronted with the fact that only a small percentage of potential respondents are willing to take part in surveys, a tiny minority referred to in the industry as “samples of the willing.”¹

¹ [David Hill, the director of Hill Research Consultants](#), puts it this way: “Whereas once I could extract one complete interview from five voters, it can now take calls to as many as 100 voters to complete a single interview, even more in some segments of the electorate. And here’s the killer detail: that single cooperative soul who speaks with an interviewer cannot possibly hold the same opinions as the 99 other voters who refused. In short, we no longer have truly random samples that support claims that poll results accurately represent opinions of the electorate.”

Note that in this simulation, respondents will be asked about their views on “building a border wall” or “offering benefits to undocumented immigrants.” Here it is critical to draw students’ attention to the different ways in which such questions can be worded, and how the diction can affect the responses. Fortunately, this simulation concludes with a “Challenge” that directly addresses this issue, though the example provided lacks nuance. That is, students are asked to identify which of the following three questions is free of framing: “would you vote for a politician who is willing to throw money away on a wall along the border with Mexico? Would you vote for a politician who supports building a wall along the border with Mexico? Would you vote for a politician who supports building a wall?” Clearly, the third option is too broad and the first is intended to elicit a specific response. For this reason, students may find it rewarding and illuminating if instructors ask them to design additional questions in collaboration with several classmates; they can then receive feedback from the class as a whole. Moreover, this lab could be supplemented by an activity that asks students to examine the wording of recent survey questions published by various firms; they will then be in a position to critically examine how surveys can in subtle ways ask respondents leading questions. A final point: the lab does not point out the degree to which surveys manufacture rather than simply reflect public opinion. Polls can do this by foregrounding issues that many of those surveyed would not otherwise have concerned themselves with. Surveys can thus inflate the importance of an issue, which is precisely why candidates committed to a certain agenda sometimes selectively invoke polling data. Students should be invited to consider whether the fictional California representative that hired their polling firm for this simulation seeks to manufacture or merely measure public opinion.

IV. You are a Voter

This simulation uses a voting drive on a college campus as a means of exposing students to the workings of party politics in the US. Students do not take the role of partisans; rather, they are tasked with educating others about party platforms and aligning prospective voters with the party that best reflects their views. The simulation rather implausibly imagines the students that are seeking assistance and information have not already been socialized into identifying with a party. Nevertheless, this exercise is useful in that it allows students to step back and critically reflect upon how a party attempts to appeal to voters by taking a stand on particular issues rather than relying upon brand loyalty. The simulation also invites students to consider what happens when voters discover that *both* major party platforms may support *some* of their views. In such instances, voters of course weigh certain issues more heavily than others, an essential point that instructors should emphasize when students face the third “Challenge” in this simulation, which asks: “how do you advise a student who is against abortion?” Two choices are offered: the student should register as a Republican or as a Democrat. But further engagement is needed with that hypothetical student. Perhaps, for instance, they are “pro-life” but also believe that, in order to promote the health of children, the government should “take responsibility for the . . . health of its citizens” (a statement taken from the simulation’s second “Challenge”). Which party would that student then support? A similar dilemma occurs when students are asked to advise voters

Instead, we have samples of ‘the willing,’ what researchers call a “convenience sample” of those consenting to give us their time and opinions.”

who support environmental protections and gun ownership rights. The problem the simulation effectively highlights is that our political system often assumes voters can be divided into opposing camps that happen to coincide with the respective platforms presented by the Democratic and Republican parties. But voter behavior is more complicated than that, even if leaders of both parties often act as though it isn't.

V. You are a Newspaper Editor

This simulation gives students exposure to the workings of a daily newspaper, a traditional and endangered form of journalism that should be supplemented by an analysis of independent web-based news sources (with which many students are probably more familiar). For this laboratory exercise, students are presented with the five fundamental “functions of the media in a democracy”: serving as watchdog; informing the public; setting the agenda; creating a public forum; and providing political socialization. How well do various traditional media organs perform these functions? This simulation invites students to answer this question from a practical, business-oriented perspective. However, the third “Challenge” raises questions that students should be given the opportunity to explore further. That is, students taking on the role of newspaper editor are told a presidential candidate is coming to their city to deliver a speech. They are then asked to consider the following: “you aren’t sure whether to focus the headline on the candidate’s falling polling numbers or the contents of the speech. How should you frame the story about the candidate?” That either/or might strike students as problematic. Why not focus on both? The simulation does in fact offer a compromise of sorts: “lead with the latest poll results but cover the content of the speech later in the article.” And what is the rationale offered for making that decision? While covering the content “later in the article” cultivates civic mindedness by publishing information, “the story will also draw more people in if you lead with the polling results.” In this instance, the simulation seems to regard it as inevitable that the mission of “informing the public” must accommodate the imperative of increasing advertising revenue (by drawing in more readers). However, it is also possible that the media’s tendency to foreground political campaigns as horse races is in fact contributing to the decline in newspapers’ readership. We believe that students should be given the opportunity to think critically about the “tradeoff” the simulation proposes. Here is just one point to consider in this context: as indicated in our discussion above about polling, survey results often create rather than reflect public opinion. Headlines that emphasize a candidate’s rising or falling poll numbers above all else can influence how readers view that candidate, *independently of the actual positions they take on a particular issue*. In other words, individuals may gravitate toward or shy away from a candidate on the basis of their alleged electability, voting behavior which the media perpetuates and encourages by making the kind of tradeoff that this simulation describes as necessary.