Midshipmen Form a Coalition Government in Belgium: Lessons from a Role-Playing Simulation

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ABSTRACT   Using a role-playing simulation on government formation with pre- and post-test assessment format, I show that students developed a significantly greater capacity for precision and specificity in their answers about the process of coalition government formation in parliamentary systems; students changed their beliefs in the ability of institutional rules to causally affect the process of coalition government formation in parliamentary systems; and, finally, students, changed their views on whether office-seeking politicians are more successful than policy-seeking politicians in forming coalition governments in parliamentary systems.

How do you explain the importance of the formateur in a parliamentary democracy to a midshipman? And even if you manage to explain the critical role that a formateur plays in the formation of a coalition government in a parliamentary democracy with deeply ingrained cultural, social, and linguistics divisions in a country like Belgium, how can you assess that a student retains this knowledge? Fortunately, role-playing simulations, which have been effectively used as pedagogical tools for the transmission of knowledge in a variety of subfields of political science, enable student learning in such a context. Moreover, by using a pre- and posttest research design I assessed the learning effects of the role-playing simulation and show how the role-playing simulation increased the students' ability to grasp complex concepts in comparative politics, operationalize different theories of coalition government formation, and apply the lessons of bargaining theory in a more precise manner after the role-playing simulation. Last, but not least, the students responded, and keeping in line with evidence from other role-playing simulations, with much higher levels of satisfaction than with traditional forms of learning.

As my jumping-off point I used the recent and expanding work in comparative politics role-playing simulations. Students have played the part of voters and party leaders in German elections, have acted as party leaders in German government formation processes, have participated in intraregime negotiations in the Middle East, have acted as ethnic group leaders in Sub-Saharan African countries, and have portrayed Russian regional leaders in their negotiations with the central government (Austin, McDowell, and Sacko 2006; Kaarbo and Lantis 1997; Marsh and Cole 2002; Shellman 2001; Stover 2005; Switky 2004). These role-playing simulations have complemented simulations in American politics and international relations which have focused on the American congressional committee system as well as on the American campaign process in the former case and have focused on crisis decision-making and interstate bargaining in the latter case (Ambrosio 2004; Asal 2005; Belloni 2008; Boyer, Trumbore, and Fricke 2006; Chasek 2005; Dougherty 2003; Endersby and Webber 1995; Flynn 2000; Franke 2006; Hensley 1993; Kanner 2007; Mariani 2007; Reilly 2003; Shaw 2006; Shellman and Turan 2003, 2006; Stover 2007; Thomas 2002; Young 2006; Zeffe 2003). In all subfields, there is a strong emphasis on clear rules, substantive learning opportunities, active learning procedures and an increasingly well-established set of procedures for preparation, actual play, and debriefing (Asal and Blake 2006; Starkey and Blake 2001). Last, but not least, these role-playing simulations emphasize the need to combine and integrate learning objectives with teaching goals.

Accordingly, I designed and used a role-playing simulation that integrated three learning objectives with three teaching goals. In terms of learning objectives, I wanted the students to (1) experientially learn how coalition governments come together, realizing both the complex dynamics of ideological conflict and the need for compromise that are involved in forming a coalition government; (2) to apply the different theories behind government formation in such a way as to travel down the ladder of abstraction from abstract theories to measurable hypotheses and then to operationalized variables, thus illustrating to students the basic principles that underpin complex theories of political science;[1] (3) and to test competitively office- and policy-seeking theories of government formation in a quasi-experimental fashion.[2] In terms of teaching goals, I wanted to teach students about the time

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constraints and vicissitudes of partisan bargaining within a parliamentary system with a given system of institutional rules and procedures; to show them, regardless of the institutional context in which politics occurs, how politics is inherently semistructured and open-ended in certain situations; and to teach them about the critical importance of information acquisition and knowledge synthesis that are necessary for successful decision-making in bargaining situations. Overall, I wanted to use Kolb's learning model and move from abstract conceptualization to concrete experience to reflexive observation to active experimentation (Brock and Cameron 1999; Kolb 1984).

Yet, I also wanted to assess the effectiveness of an active learning technique such as a role-playing simulation. Although instructors have raved about the ability of role-playing simulations to generate significant enthusiasm about the material, the record on knowledge transfer has been uneven.[3] Depending on the manner and the type of the active learning technique, instructors have found that knowledge acquisition may not be significantly higher in the case of an active learning technique than in a traditional learning environment (Powner and Allendoerfer 2008; Raymond

learning component in their Naval Academy education, but they all had significant experience with group work and peer-based review, important components of their education at the Naval Academy.

The simulation centered on how parties form coalition governments in parliamentary democracies.[5] Because Belgium was experiencing a major crisis during the semester, in that it did not have a government for the past calendar year, it served as a relevant and informative background for a role-playing simulation.[6] Also, this simulation followed the course readings from Clark, Golder, and Golder *Principles of Comparative Politics* (2009). This textbook accomplished four key goals in terms of knowledge transmission: it provided the students with a great opportunity to examine different theories of coalition government formation in parliamentary democracies; it presented the different institutional formats in which coalition government take place; it highlighted the different procedures in great detail that underpin the coalition government formation process; and it also presented how office- and policy-seeking politicians would behave differently during the coalition government formation process. To fur-

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2010). To evaluate my active learning technique, I used a pre- posttest survey questionnaire that asked the role-playing simulation participants questions about government formation after the traditional lecture and reading assignments were complete. The students were then asked the same questions after the role-playing simulation (see appendix 1). This pre-posttest survey showed significant differences on a number of questions to illustrate the following: students developed a significantly greater capacity for precision and specificity in their answers about the process of coalition government formation in parliamentary systems[4]; students changed their beliefs in the ability of institutional rules to causally affect the process of coalition government formation in parliamentary systems; and, finally, students changed their views on whether office-seeking politicians are more successful than policy-seeking politicians in forming coalition governments in parliamentary systems. Consequently, this role-playing simulation does increase the amount of evidence, which supports those who argue that role-playing simulations can have a real and significant effect on knowledge transfer and learning acquisition.

THE SIMULATION SET-UP

This role-playing simulation was part of my Introduction to Comparative Politics course. The students in this course were sophomore political science majors who were interested in selecting the comparative politics track in the political science major. In addition, a few, less than 15%, junior and senior students who were not political science majors, were enrolled in this course. Both sets of students had the same tools for the study of political science: they had all taken the Introduction to American Government and Constitutional Development course as freshmen, a mandatory requirement for graduation. None of them had experience with an active

ther inform the students, my lectures drove these points home, using a series of examples that combined theoretical points with actual coalition government formation processes in 1980s Germany and 1990s Czech Republic.

Before the simulation, I used a simulation preparation report to prepare students in terms of the necessary background for their roles.[7] I randomly assigned their roles as leaders of the major Belgian parties and gave the students a three-part simulation preparation report.[8] In part 1 of the preparation report students learned to use the Lexis-Nexis resources, a proprietary newspaper database with translation capabilities, and open-source party websites to generate biographical information on their role as well as information on their role's positions on the questions of federalism and decentralization.[9] My goal behind part 1 was to enable the students to collect and synthesize information that they would research on their own to have familiarity with their role to adequately participate in the role-playing simulation. In part 2, students developed policy responses to the following questions: what would be the best institutional response to the government formation crisis, what should be the necessary procedural changes in the government formation process, and who would they blame for the continued inability of the Belgian parties to form a government. My goal behind part 2 was to get students thinking about what drives the formation of coalition governments; to integrate their course notes and the textbook material on how coalition governments form in parliamentary democracies with their planning; and to reflect on these issues in a more concrete and specific fashion. In part 3, I instructed them to think like students of comparative politics and not like Belgian politicians. Students developed explanations about why Belgium has the institutional structure that it does, considered what it would take to change

this institutional structure, and thought about the effectiveness of federalism. My goal in part 3 was to encourage students to think about the broader questions that students of comparative politics need to consider: the historical roots of contemporary political institutions, the relative "stickiness" of political institutions, and the effectiveness of federalism in a divided society such as Belgium's. To assess the knowledge retention before the simulation, students wrote a report, between 1,800 and 2,200 words, about the situation in Belgium, which was due on the day of the simulation.

THE ACTUAL SIMULATION

On their arrival in the classroom, students learned details about their simulation assignment: they would have two rounds of policy briefings that would be followed by one round of bargaining. I did not tell them what the topic of the bargaining would be. In round one, they presented their roles' positions on what needed to happen in contemporary Belgian politics concerning federalism. Quickly it became obvious that students had significant partisan disagreement in terms of their policy preferences. In round two, students presented their roles' positions in terms of forming a coalition government and responded to any claims from other simulation participants. The exchanges in round two increased the partisan divide and amplified students' disagreements about which party was to blame for Belgium's lack of a

support to make a difference in terms of a legislative majority. As such, the students formed a coalition government with a legislative majority only after promising significant policy concessions that stressed regional autonomy for the Dutch-speaking members and significant fiscal transfers for the French-speaking members of the coalition government.

THE SIMULATION DEBRIEF

The simulation was followed with a debriefing for students to evaluate their reactions to the simulation and further internalize any lessons learned from the simulation (Asal and Blake 2006; Enterline and Jepsen 2009). Students were unanimously supportive of the simulation, which they enthusiastically described as a fun learning activity because they could implement what they learned in terms of coalition government formation in a dynamic context with their peers. They were particularly enthusiastic about witnessing the difficulty of forming a coalition government among actors who did not have a lot in common and who were strategic about each other. The students were less enthusiastic about the knowledge barriers that required translation or about the amount of work needed to complete the simulation preparation report. They were particularly interested in increasing the time required for forming the coalition, but they were not opposed to having a more structured time frame for accomplishing the goals of the simulation. Last, but not least, when ranking their peers in terms

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coalition government. Each round lasted 16 minutes, and each participant had the opportunity to speak for up to two minutes.[10] In both rounds, the students relied on the information that had served as the basis for their work for the simulation preparation report to buttress their arguments, strategically interacted with the other players, and established their policy positions as closely to character as possible.

After both rounds, students received their last assignment: bargaining to form a coalition government with a parliamentary majority within 33 minutes.[11] After multiple rounds of negotiation, the simulation participants formed a government that included the swing vote of the midshipman who was playing the role of Caroline Gennez. In this last round, given the electoral results, it quickly became apparent that the requirement for a legislative majority government necessitated a cross-cultural coalition government.[12] However, it became clear that insurmountable obstacles blocked the achievement of such a goal because of the ideological commitments that some of the Belgian party leaders had made in their electoral campaigns—something that the students had discovered during their research for the simulation preparation report and had based their commentary on during the first two rounds of the simulation. In addition, while some Belgian party leaders may have agreed to become part of the minimal winning coalition, they did not have enough legislative

of their performance in the role-play part of the simulation, they did not hesitate.[13] To avoid awarding each other high grades, all of the students were required to assign at least two persons per grading option, which ranged from excellent to very good, good to average, to below average.

THE PRE- AND POSTSIMULATION SURVEY

To assess the learning impact of the simulation, I conducted two waves of the same survey: first, after we had covered coalition government formation in class using a traditional lecture method and second, after the role-playing simulation. The survey queried students about what they thought about the following: what issues would dominate the formation process of coalitions; what issues would increase and decrease the amount of time needed to form a coalition government; what procedural rules would they change during the coalition government formation process and why; what type of partner would be the best to pick for a coalition government; and what would they change to prevent the need for coalition governments. I used the same survey to better gauge the effect that the role-playing simulation had on the students' learning about the formation of coalition governments.

There were significant differences between the pre- and postsurvey sets of student responses (see table 1). Student responses changed dramatically. In the presimulation survey the students

Pre- and Postsimulation Questions and Responses

QUESTIONS ASKED	PRESIMULATION	POSTSIMULATION	PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CHANGED
What do you think is the most important feature of government formation with coalition partners?	Ideological compromise 38%, partisan balance of power 62%	Ideological compromise 62%, partisan balance of power 38%	**25% change from partisan balance of power to ideological compromise**
Why do you think that government formation among coalition partners takes a long time in some cases?	Partisan disagreements over power 60%, partisan disagreements over ideology 40%	Partisan disagreements over power 25%, partisan disagreements over ideology 75%	**35% change from partisan disagreement over power to a partisan disagreement over ideology**
Why do you think government formation among coalition partners is very quick in some cases?	Coalition formation quick because of ideological consensus 50%, & because of power seeking 37%, & functional need to avert crisis 13%	Coalition formation quick because of ideological consensus 50%, & because of power seeking 37%, & functional need to avert crisis 13%	**0% change**
What issues do you think emerge during the government formation among the coalition partners?	Balance of power over decision-making 75%, ideological differences 25%	Balance of power over decision-making 62.5%, ideological differences 12.5%, cultural/linguistic differences 25%	**25% change from balance of power over decision-making and ideological to cultural/linguistic differences**
What government formation rules among coalition partners would you change?	External pressures 50%, coalition decision-making rules and procedures 50%	External pressures 25%, coalition decision-making rules and procedures 75%	**25% change from external pressures to coalition decision-making rules and procedures**
Why would you change these rules of government formation among coalition partners?	External pressures 50%, coalition stability 25%, government formation stability 25%	External pressures 12.5%, coalition stability 37.5%, government formation stability 50%	**37.5% change for external pressures to 12.5% coalition stability and 25% government formation stability**
What do you think are the most important considerations when choosing coalition partners to form a coalition government?	Cooperative 50%, ideologically similar 50%	Cooperative 50%, ideologically similar 50%	**0% change**
What aspects of politics do you think don't play any role in the government formation process?	Everything 50%, economic issues 12.5%, social issues 12.5%, foreign affairs 12.5%, office-seeking politicians 12.5%	Everything 50%, economic issues 0%, social issues 12.5%, foreign affairs 12.5%, office-seeking politicians 12.5%, constitutional issues 12.5%	**12.5% change from economic to constitutional issues**
What do you think drives the need to form coalition governments?	Need for order 25%, government stability 37.5%, cultural divisions 25%, foreign affairs 12.5%	Need for order 25%, government stability 37.5%, cultural divisions 37.5%, foreign affairs 0	**12.5% change from foreign affairs to cultural divisions**
What would you change to prevent the need for coalition governments?	Human nature 25%, party system dynamics 25%, cultural/ linguistic cleavages 37.5%, external influences 12.5%	Human nature 0%, party system dynamics 50%, cultural/ linguistic cleavages 50%, external influences 0%	**12.5% change from external influences to cultural/ linguistic cleavages, 25% change from human nature to party system dynamics**

responded that interparty bargaining over the allocation of cabinet posts would be the most important feature that could influence the formation of a coalition government. However, in the postsimulation survey students were convinced about the need for ideological compromise as the most important feature that could affect the formation of a coalition government. Similarly, in the presimulation survey they were adamant about how partisan disagreements over the allocation of cabinet posts would increase the time necessary for the formation of a coalition government, but in the post-simulation survey they were convinced that ideological disagreement was far more important. Although they remained convinced about the relative importance of balance-of-power issues among the potential coalition partners, they increas-

ingly believed in the power of ideological issues, such as ones that centered on cultural and linguistic difference in a country like Belgium. Ideological differences quickly trumped the allocation of cabinet posts as the most important issue in the formation of coalition governments.

Regarding procedural rules, students assumed that procedural rules would lock in coalition partners. And they were aware of this need for lock-in rules because of their significantly increased belief in the need for coalition stability and governmental rule. In the presimulation survey they were sure by a significant margin that they would need to change these government formation rules to minimize pressures from external actors, such as the media, yet in the postsimulation survey they realized the

need to have decision-making rules that would lead to durable and effective coalition governments. The need for government stability led them to prioritize procedural and institutional rules that would increase the chances for a coalition government to endure disagreements among its members and stay in office.

Last, but not least, students changed their minds about the reasons behind coalition governments. While in the presimulation survey they were divided in terms of the drivers for the need for coalition governments, in the postsimulation surveys students accepted the relative importance of party-system dynamics versus cultural and linguistic cleavages. In the presimulation survey they thought that factors such as human nature and foreign

6. The size of the class also enabled me to run a simulation that allowed all the students to actually play a meaningful role in attempting to form a coalition government.

7. I followed the preparation, interaction, and debriefing model that is advocated by Asal and Blake (2006).

8. Austin, McDowell, and Sacko (2006, 95) use the same assignment process for their role-playing simulation in the coalition government formation in the Iraqi case.

9. Shellman (2001, 828) emphasized researched party websites as well in his simulation on the formation of a German coalition government.

10. Marsh and Cole (2002, 378–79) use a two-round format in their role-playing simulation in the case of Russian federalism.

11. I used a set time constraint to encourage bargaining similar to Kaarbo and Lantis (1997, 505).

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affairs accounted for a significant percentage of coalition governments, but in the post-simulation survey they converged on the different aspects of party competition and the dominant cultural cleavages.

CONCLUSION

Overall, by engaging in this role-playing simulation students experientially understood what it meant for a country like Belgium not to have a government. Students learned the difference between majoritarian and proportional representations systems when they had to deal with all the different parties with increasingly narrow policy concerns. The students grasped minimal winning coalition arguments when they formed a coalition government with the smallest amount of legislative majority possible. They realized the importance of different procedural rules when they were hamstrung by them in their quest for a coalition government. And they also realized the tensions inherent in any federal system of different languages and regional divisions. While they did all this in an active-learning format that allowed them to report higher levels of satisfaction than in a traditional lecture format, they also realized that the active-learning format provided them with a significant amount of knowledge transfer because it was structured and focused. ■

NOTES

1. For the ability of simulations to increase students' immersion in theories, see Shellman and Turan (2006, 22).

2. For the ability of simulations to provide a laboratory in which students can apply and test theories, see Enterline and Jepsen (2009, 50).

3. For the positive effects of simulations see Baranowski (2006); Dougherty (2003); Frederking (2005); Galatas (2006); Krain and Lantis (2006). For the need for more systematic and rigorous examination see Gosen and Washbush (2004).

4. Shaw (2006, 62) reports a greater sophistication between pre- and postsimulation survey responses as well.

5. Unlike other simulations, I intentionally chose a nonstructured outcome role-playing simulation to further simulate actual political practices that were unfolding at the time in Belgium.

12. Much like Ambrosio's role-playing simulation in a multi-ethnic setting (2004, 287), it was important for my students to learn about the amount of compromise that it would take to form a cross-cultural coalition government in a country like Belgium.

13. I thought it was important for the students to realize that this was not a purely fun activity, but also one that required effort that would be peer-reviewed in a way that would not lead to accommodative and consensual rating.

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APPENDIX 1: Simulation Questionnaire

1. How do you think leaders should deal with a foreign policy crisis in international relations?
2. What do you think are the most common mistakes that leaders make in foreign policy crisis?
3. What would you change in the decision-making process to avoid these mistakes?
4. How effectively do you think that foreign policy can be avoided by changes in leader behavior?
5. How effectively do you think that foreign policy can be avoided by changes in the organizational dynamics behind foreign policy decision-making?
6. How effectively do you think that foreign policy can be avoided by changes in perceptions?
7. What role do you think that ideas and beliefs play in foreign policy decision-making?
8. Do you think changes in leaders lead to changes in outcomes in the international system?
9. Do you think changes in regimes lead to changes in outcomes in the international system?
10. Do you think that cultural differences play a role in outcomes in the international system?

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