

**Problem-Based Learning:  
An Interactive Approach to the Teaching of American Government**

By

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## *About the Problem-Based Learning Approach*

The use of simulations is certainly not new or unique to the teaching of political science. The recommendation of this paper is to incorporate a teaching and learning methodology originally developed for medical education called “Problem Based Learning” (PBL).<sup>1</sup> PBL encourages and facilitates a rigorous, creative, non-linear approach to learning.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores the use of PBL with a hypothetical “scenario” –running for a congressional seat- whereby students are required to think their way through a series of situations and circumstances developed in order to advance their knowledge of political science, and, in this case, specifically American Government.

## *How it works*

In the following scenario, students will be required to explore the case by advancing four categories: facts, hunches, information needed, and actions. The exercise begins by breaking the students into small groups (6-8 students). They are then instructed to read the case scenario thoroughly. Following this, the group members select one student to act as the scribe and then they begin writing on a flip-chart what they understand to be the “**facts**” of the case. These facts should be 7-10 of the most important details in the case scenario. These facts are NOT analysis; they are merely the important points and details that are asserted by the author of the piece. After the students have listed their “facts,” they are asked to develop the next category, “**hunches**,” which are their thoughts, analyses and predictions about the facts. (Hunches should be reasonable assumptions that flow from the facts, but that are not specifically identified in the case.) In the third column students identify the “**information needed**,” which are requests for additional information to give them a greater understanding of the issues and help to inform their last category, which is their conclusions drawn and “**actions**” to be taken.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this specific form of PBL, refer to Dr. Howard Barrows, Associate Dean of the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine: article in Medical Education, 1986. Dr. Barrow’s research argues that PBL achieves three important educational objectives: 1. Knowledge and skills should be learned in a context corresponding to future use (in order to improve retention, retrieval, and application); 2. Professional (versus classroom) reasoning skills should be enhanced; 3. Learning management; all of which will allow the student of political science to engage in active and creative learning while being required to demonstrate fundamental concepts and terms relating directly to the study of American Government.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Cheren, unpublished manuscript.

The value of developing questions (information needed) dates back to the Socratic method and can indicate key insights and measures for the instructor regarding the depth and breadth of the students' overall understanding of the material being presented. These categories should be expressed in columns from left to right on a flip-chart (see table 1, page 6) or on a chalk-board so that all of the participants can see and contribute to the progress of the exercise in a categorized, ordered, but not necessarily sequential form. Hunches, assertions and questions can and should be encouraged to be posed in any order. In fact, this flexibility yields one of the method's most positive aspects: the interaction is dynamic and non-linear; changes in one of the columns can produce changes/reassessments in the others.

Additionally, students are informed before the exercise begins that each group has been assigned a facilitator and that that person has additional information about the scenario. Each scenario work-up section concludes with a reminder that **“more info is available, but you have to ask for it”** which encourages the group to solicit additional information from the facilitator. These inquiries can come in the form of probing, generalized questions or questions regarding the specifics about the case. The purpose is to create an atmosphere of exchange and teamwork; facilitators are given some special instruction in advance of the exercise. I typically ask students that have demonstrated leadership over scholarship to be facilitators. I ask them to read through the case materials a day or two before the exercise and advise them to be judicious about what they divulge. Ultimately, however, they are given near total discretion about how and what information they share with their groups. A natural sense of competition occurs in the groups and the facilitators act as coaches.

### ***In support of PBL***

A recent TIME magazine (December 18, 2006) cover article identified three things that the American education system needed to emphasize in order to better prepare students for the new global economy. The first was global literacy, specifically cultural and language skills that TIME defined simply as “knowing more about the world.” Second was “thinking outside the box,” i.e. critical thinking skills because TIME asserts that imaginative thinking jobs are less likely to be outsourced; the third was “good people

skills;” small groups have emerged as business and industry’s most popular mode of problem solving and production. PBL strongly emphasizes these pedagogic imperatives.<sup>3</sup>

In a paper presented at last year’s APSA TLC, Christopher J. Voparil of Lynn University, Boca Raton, FL, argued that the conventional wisdom of the primacy of outcomes was outdated and required renewed attention.<sup>4</sup> Voparil cites the pedagogic theories of John Dewey, Howard Gardner and Michael Oakshott in a compelling argument about the need to “contextualize learning.” The increased diversity of higher education, writes Voparil, “not only in socioeconomic, but also in the level of preparation, and hence, the expectations of students about what they want in their college tenure”<sup>5</sup> mandates a revision of what constitutes learning and student success. Dewey posits that the biggest challenge for higher education professionals is to “make classroom learning an extension of this natural human activity or ‘motion’ rather than an impediment to it.”<sup>6</sup> By prioritizing the context within which learning occurs, knowledge and judgment, which unlike facts and information are not necessarily teachable, can be developed, applied and rewarded.

This reward, however, does not come in the form of a grade or score. Rather, because of PBL’s open and visual methodology, students experience validation by their peers. Many of my students have told me that the exercise is something they can easily identify as a skill-set that is readily transferable to “real life.” They understand that they have a piece of a puzzle, and that by putting their piece up for consideration by their group, others may have other pieces of the puzzle which can result in problem solving that is uniquely satisfying. My students have convinced me that the strongest argument to be made for employing PBL in the classroom is that it is a welcome break from the normal routine, and that it more realistically resembles life outside the classroom. It accomplishes this by emphasizing thinking skills over curriculum memorization thus increasing utility and relevance.

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<sup>3</sup> For additional support of PBL see, *The Power of Problem-Based Learning, A Practical “How To” for Teaching Undergraduate Courses in Any Discipline*, ed. by Barbara J. Duch, Susan E. Groh and Deborah E Allen.

<sup>4</sup> Voparil, Christopher J. Teaching and Assessing: On Liberal Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. APSA TLC 2006, D.C. Voparil writes: “The central claim of this paper is that the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education require a fundamental shift away from primary concerns of outcomes or end products of education toward the specifics of the learning process.” p2.

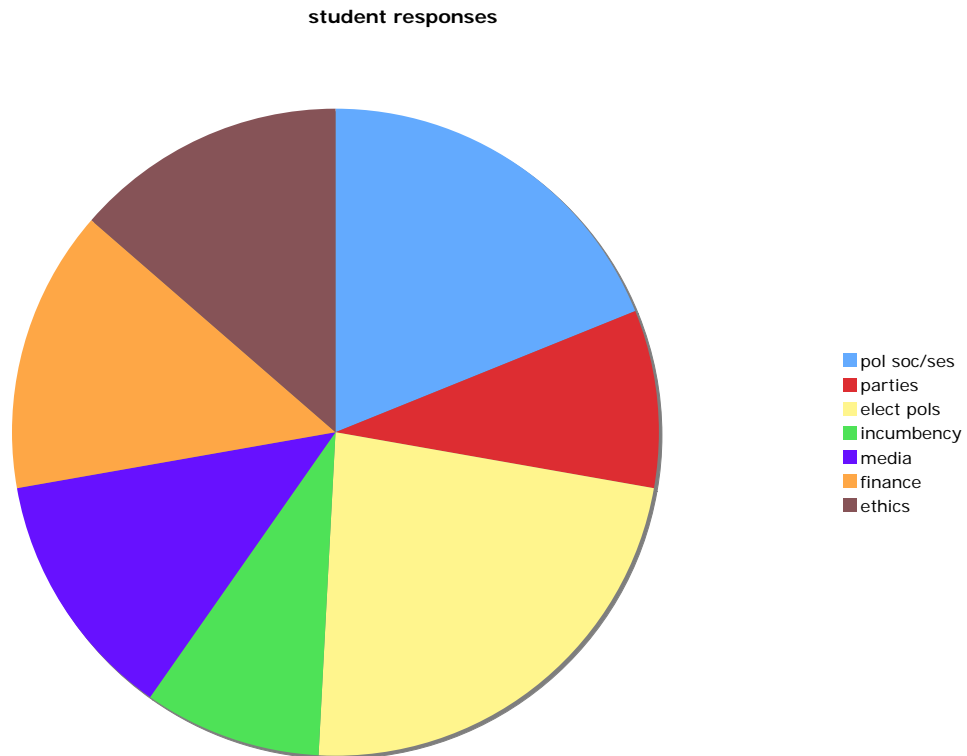
<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p7.

**Data: N= 68/8 groups (see Table 1, page 6, for sampling and summary of actual student responses/contributions)**

This lesson scenario (see appendix 1) explores several concepts and terms relating to congressional electoral politics. There were a total of 216 student responses spread among the following categories:

- Political socialization, alienation and socioeconomic status (39)
- Political parties (18)
- Constituencies and congressional electoral politics (48)
- Incumbency and incumbency advantages (18)
- Media in politics (26)
- Campaign finance (29)
- Ethics in politics (28)



**Table 1  
Facts:**

the Democlicans are unhappy with the incumbent

the electorate likes Washington outsiders

the incumbent has voted with the opposition party

we're in a catch-22 regarding media attention and funding

trailing in polls

vowed not to engage in smear tactics

money and politics have always gone together

opponent is having an affair

basic constitutional requirements for running are met

**Hunches:**

party may be using us just to threaten incumbent

incumbent's dedication to constituents is questionable

if incumbent cheats on her husband, she might cheat on other things

candidate has negative attitude about government; a low sense of political efficacy

name recognition is good, even though it may be for something bad

proportion of high SES constituents is high

incumbent might switch political parties

money and power are one and the same

small, minor fundraising activities might lead to bigger media exposure

incumbent supports war in Iraq

moral relativists support us

**Info Needed:**

what issues did the incumbent vote with the opposition on?

what are candidates positions on issues?

what percentage of district populations identifies itself as a values voter?

what are the Democlican's issue positions?

what additional demographic info is available about the district?

who/what are the incumbent's major sources of funding?

what public funding is available?

how legitimate is the "news source?"

why am I considered outside the beltway?

**Action:**

appeal/campaign to lower SES constituency

schedule debate with incumbent

bait incumbent into bragging about B-ball game victory

conduct low-cost traditional fund-raising activities like bake sales in order to generate media attention

start a blog

recruit tech-savvy college students to help with GOTV

emphasize candidate's values vs. incumbent's lack thereof

telephone supporters day of election for GOTV

target interest groups

release photos to public

conduct a smear campaign

## *Conclusions*

Anecdotal data suggests that one of the unpredictable pluses of this exercise was that students liked it and wanted to do more of it. The negatives included the most common problem of group-oriented assignments: the inherent inequity of student contribution/participation. To address this problem, I suggest the instructor make a list of active and passive students using their overall impressions based on previous class participation. Then assign students into groups with equal numbers of active and passive students in each group.

My use of PBL for the teaching of American Government has yet to produce any statistically significant findings regarding its educational efficacy. I have not attempted to measure the effectiveness of this method through any type of pre/post testing of students' factual knowledge of the curricular materials. And although that might be useful information, it would in no way influence or discourage my use of PBL. PBL has proven its value to me time and time again through direct student feedback: they tell me that think its fun and a great way to break-up the routine of didactic lecturing -which may say more about my lectures than it does about PBL. However, for now, I enthusiastically welcome any positive feedback from them, especially when it results in the interactive and satisfying experience they claim that it does.

## *Appendix*

### *Scenario: Running for Congress*

**PART 1:** The nagging futility of low political efficacy, both yours and that of seemingly everyone around you has reached an all time high. And after an earth-shattering personal epiphany –one that ultimately rejects the very foundations of how you’ve been politically socialized- you’ve decided to run for congress to be an agent of change and good. You’ve concluded that the only way to be perceived by the electorate as a serious candidate is with a major party affiliation, so you call your local Democlican’s party headquarters and make an appointment to see one the party’s leaders. You find out that although your likely opponent in the primary election is a nine-term Democlican incumbent, she has fallen out of favor with the party for voting with the opposition on several key issues. The Democlicans tell you that they are looking to challenge, even punish her. The party manager indicates that he likes your ideas and claims that his party has been looking for a candidate “just like you” because you bring them that enviable label of being from “outside the beltway;” this is particularly salient and attractive to them during a campaign season that is replete with voter dissatisfaction.

**First consideration: are you constitutionally qualified to serve as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives?**

**Who and/or what is meant by the “electorate”?**

**What is meant by “low political efficacy”? And what do the “foundations of your political socialization” say about your attitudes about government?**

**What advantages and/or burdens does your opponent’s incumbency suggest?**

**What does it mean to be from “outside the beltway?”**

**What additional (information including terms, theories and questions) needs to be understood before you proceed?**

**More information is available from your facilitator, but you have to ask for it.**

**Facilitator:**

**1. Constitutional congressional requirements:** member must be at least 25 years old and live within the state that he/she is seeking office in.

**2. Definitions:**

**Incumbent:** a person that is currently holding an office.

**Electorate:** people that are entitled to vote for and elect governmental office holders.

**Political efficacy:** both a sense of, and the actual effectiveness of, one's political beliefs.

**Socialization:** how someone is socialized or raised to believe (in this case, specifically about politics and government).

**“Outside the “beltway”:** refers to outside of the Washington DC area and, more importantly, DC culture.

**3. Hunches:** Our candidate most likely has not paid much attention to politics and has an estranged, cynical view of congress. He/she is almost certainly the first person from their family and/or social group to seek public office, which suggests that they may not have an appreciation of the importance of a competent, well organized and well funded political organization. This, in turn, could make them very dependent on the major political party (the Democlicans). Additionally, since that incumbent is out of favor with the party, is there a chance they'll switch parties or run as an independent (like Senator Joseph Lieberman I-CT)?

**4. Info needed:** what are your opponent's positions on the issues that are most salient to Democlicans in you area? How much do local people know about your opponent's discord with the party? (How much do you know about it?)

**5. Actions:** Find and hire a proven campaign manager. Explore sources of funding and volunteer staffing. Begin gathering as much info about the incumbent/opponent including voting records, sources of funding (PACS, special interest groups, etc.)

**PART 2:** The campaign is in full swing now and the most pressing issue is funding. The correlation between money and politics dates back to at least Hammurabi. Your staff hasn't been paid in two weeks, morale is down, and even though the Democlican party is backing you, your campaign manager informs you that you desperately need an infusion of cash, or at the very least, something to really get your name out into the public;

without this, your campaign is effectively finished. The biggest problem your volunteers face is that when they make their support and funding calls, most of the people they talk to claim that they have “never heard of you.” The major source of this frustration is the catch-22 of campaign finance and media attention: the media isn’t paying a lot of attention to you, and subsequently, neither are the potential financial backers...and because of your conspicuous absence of cash, the media isn’t taking your campaign very seriously...and so on and so on. Something has to give; what can you do?

**Who and/or what is “Hammurabi” and what does that tell us about money and politics?**

**What is a catch-22? And why/how does this seem to define your situation?**

**Can you think up some kind of media event, or even a stunt or gimmick, to get your name out and get some attention for yourself?**

**More information is available from your facilitator, but you have to ask for it.**

**Facilitator:**

**1. Hunch:** You suspect your opponent, being a nine-term incumbent, isn’t having nearly as much problem with funding as you are.

You believe that money and politics have always corrupted each other.

**2. Hunch and more info:** You believe that your opponent has probably taken money from some less-than-entirely reputable people, and you think you might be able to use this information against them, so how/where can you find this out?

**3. Action:** Can you target your fundraising efforts to special interest groups that may have expressed some support for your policy positions (especially with some assurances that you’ll consider their positions if elected) by announcing a bold position on a salient issue?

Challenge the field and/or the front-runner to debate the issues.

Stage a high-profile event, even a shameless gimmick, perhaps involving your children’s school or after-school sports activity. For example, parachute into your 9 year-old’s Little League baseball game, subsequently get arrested, and then claim that “you’ll jump out of an airplane to get those boneheads in Washington to listen to your constituent’s concerns.” (Sometimes the “I’m a bit crazy in defense of the little guy” approach at least

gets people's attention.) This part of the exercise can be a great way to have some fun and reduce some stress.

**Part 3:** Congratulations! Your quick thinking and imaginative approaches have paid off and you're now considered to be a truly viable candidate. The only televised debate between you and the nine-term incumbent is scheduled for two days from now, and the sponsors and networks assure you that this will be the most watched local political event of the electoral season. One of your deft young staffers reminds you that the most anticipated NCAA playoff basketball game of the season is scheduled for earlier the same evening of the debate. To make matters worse, the heavily favored team is your opponent's alma-mater, and the underdog, of course, is yours. Your team is most likely going to be humiliated on the court, and you suspect that your opponent will tactfully, yet shamelessly, exploit this fact during the debate. However, the good news is that by rubbing your nose in your team's defeat, the incumbent's campaign is at some risk of offending some of the district's potential supporters. Your information is based on socioeconomic (SES) data. Even though you know that SES positively correlates to voting, and your opponent's supporters have higher SES standings than you or your supporters, you also believe that there are simply more of your kind of people living in the district. Therefore, you conclude that your most important electoral strategy will be to get them out to vote, which they probably don't do with much regularity. Your staff is now advising you to bait your opponent into saying something about the game, confident that it will have a negative effect on her campaign.

**What is SES? And, how does it define someone's electoral behavior?**

**What strategies can you employ in your "Get-Out-the-Vote" (GOTV) efforts?**

**In addition to SES, what other factors can influence voting?**

**More information is available from your facilitator, but you have to ask for it.**

**Facilitator:**

**1. Facts not published:** Your opponent went to an upscale, Ivy-ranked private school; you slugged it out at night school at the local community college and then graduated from the State University.

**2. Definitions:** SES (socioeconomic status) A measure of one's social and financial success and achievement. Major components of SES, such as education, income, occupation, and age, all positively correlate with each other, and with consistent voting behavior. Additional voting rationales include "civic duty", a belief that it is everyone's patriotic obligation to vote; believing yourself a stakeholder in an election, especially when you believe you have something to protect or fear from the election outcome; and political efficacy, discussed/defined above.

**3. Hunches:** You think that if your opponent identifies with the winning basketball team, people in your district will perceive her to be an elitist and a snob. You also believe that if your opponent tries to forcefully identify with the majority of people in the district (the kind of people that did not go to elite schools or spend most of their time in DC) she risks seeming phony and disingenuous (similar to what former Vice President Al Gore did in the 2000 presidential election when he stressed his "people against the powerful" campaign slogan).

**4. Actions:** During the debate, emphasize the contrasts between you and your opponent's educational/financial backgrounds.

**Part 4:** Your campaign is moving forward, the election is only four days away, and you are running very close to your opponent in the polls. One night the telephone rings and wakes you from a deep sleep. The caller identifies himself as a "reporter from a respected local news organization." He asks you if you would comment on the following: "Can you confirm or deny that your campaign manager was instructed, by you, to leak a story that your political opponent (who happens to have been married to the same person for the past 19 years and has 3 three children with him) has been sleeping with one of her congressional aides/advisors?" Your most immediate problem, however, is that this reporter has just rudely awakened you, and you typically don't make decisions about which pair of sox to put on before you've had a strong cup of coffee, much less a discussion that could have major implications for your campaign. The reporter is asking you to politicize a story, which, due to your own, deft counter-intelligence team's research, you happen to know to be true. (In fact, your campaign staff has shown you some irrefutable compromising photos of your opponent and her "companion.") But, you've made a very publicized campaign pledge against mudslinging, and you've stated

unequivocally that a person's personal life should not be a campaign issue. You are also keenly aware of the negative backlash your association with this story could have among the moral relativists in your district. However, to complicate matters further, you know you are down several points in the most recent poll against your opponent with so-called "values-voters." You realize that, like almost all political scandals (what political scientist Larry Sabato has termed a "*feeding frenzy*") this story will get out, and could potentially hand you the election. The problem is the timing: with only a few days left, you know that the story might not break in time to really help you.

**So, now your moment of truth: do you comment to the reporter and start the "frenzy"? Or, do you remain quiet and risk the entire election because of your personal ethics?**

**How should you answer the reporter's question? Are there ways to comment without violating your ethics?**

**What does the reporter mean when he accuses you and your staff of "leaking" the story?**

**Who are the "values-voters"? And would the disclosure of your opponent's infidelities have particular resonance with them?**

**Who are the "moral relativists" and how much do you care about their perceptions of this scandal?**

**More information is available from your facilitator, but you have to ask for it.**

**Facilitator:**

### **1. Definitions**

**Values-voters:** People in the electorate who identify strongly with conservative, moral beliefs and who are particularly sensitive about sexual issues such as extra-marital affairs, homosexuality, traditional family compositions, etc.

**Moral relativists:** people who are inherently more accepting of other people's behaviors, particularly as they relate to the behaviors of people in today's more sexually tolerant and expressive society, vs. more traditional, religious-based cultures.

**Leaking:** the deliberate releasing of information for specific political gain that often

allows the leaking person or people to deny their involvement.

**2. Hunches:** (upsides and downsides to the dilemma) You think the story will break with the same effectiveness/intensity without your commenting on it, but again, the timing could be critical. You also consider the ideological base of your district and specifically the traditional vs. moral-relativists composition of your constituency. It's possible that many people share your feelings about a politician's personal life; perhaps they would be characterized as the kind of people that ultimately "forgave" President Clinton. You have two main concerns. First, it's very possible, given America's perceived obsession with prudish Victorian values, (or at least their profession of such) that this kind of thing could win the race for you. And second, it's also quite possible that if your base is the "forgive-Clinton" types, your being associated with the release of this story could really backfire on you and cost you the election. Another hunch you have is that you've got the moral-relativists' support already, you're not sure if values-voters would cross-over and support you even with this scandal exposed, and so you think your best bet may be to wait it out.

**3. Info needed:** specific demographic data on the religiosity of your district's constituency (how many of them go to church and or other religious activities and how often)? And what religion are they? (Catholic? Protestant? Jewish? Muslim? Other?)

**4. Action:** This time your students are completely on their own. You just need to make sure they can defend their decisions.

**Part 5:** Your young staffers compel you to reach-out to the Gen Y voters, and schedule you for an interview with Steven Colbert on The Colbert Report's "Know Your District" segment. Now would be a good time to panic!