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The Online Polling Project:
How Internet-Based Surveys
Expand Political Science Student Learning

By

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Teaching political survey research in the undergraduate political science classroom is complex, but more necessary than ever in today's information rich age. There is little doubt that political polling has been institutionalized in American political discourse (Asher 2004, p. 7). But questions remain over how the expanded political use of the World Wide Web (WWW) has, or will, impact components of polling and US political life.

The range of online survey data available for public consumption, and survey production software available for layperson use, create opportunities and new questions for teachers utilizing such data in their politics classes. Ranging from scientifically sound and statistically accurate professional surveys, through to ultra-biased or methodologically unsound "pseudopolls" (Orton 1982 in Asher 2004, p. 10) claimed as valid news on media web pages, what the Internet suggests is "data" is fascinating. This makes student learning of information literacy and survey analysis competency all the more crucial. But instead of passively used as an end product of the political process, can these new polling technologies, and their complexities, be properly harnessed for classroom use?

This paper briefly describes the teaching process and learning outcomes related to one political survey project used in an upper-division undergraduate American government course. The learning module, called The Voting Project, used publicly accessible survey data and varying levels of technology platforms that enabled students to post online, internet -based surveys to the staff, faculty and student body of one college. The success of this project-based/problem-based learning {PBL} module, reinforced in part by analysis of student input from one year’s course, suggests this activity has applications in a variety of political science courses, and has promise as a simulation that could be tailored for use in a variety of school settings or classrooms.

Internet Politics

“{Former MA Governor} Mitt Romney has officially declared his interest in the 2008 Presidential election. In an interview on the conservative Internet broadcast *The Glenn and Helen Show*, he responds to a controversial YouTube video about his positions on abortion and other social issues, and talks about the war, gun rights, health care, research and development, and the role of the blogosphere in the 2008 election, among other things. ...*That’s kind of cool, using a podcast to respond to a YouTube interview. All new media, all the time!*” [Emphasis Added] www.instapundit.com and www.politicalwire.com

Online, or internet-based, polling and surveying is a subset of the array of political applications found on the World Wide Web (WWW). Whether tracking consumer interactivity among web pages and within web sites; creating emotional profiling after gathering personality survey data; or reporting on citizen input solicitations by e-government agencies and the media, the WWW’s array of data collection and dissemination tools are immense.

American political campaign use of the Internet also remains new, but mirrors other areas of web activity by experiencing explosive growth. Lamar Alexander’s 1996 web site, the first by a US Presidential candidate (Bimber and Davis, 23), has morphed into dedicated web presences for anyone seeking political office. Over 26 million Americans, fully 19% of the adult Internet cohort, accessed online campaign or election news or materials last summer. (“Politics Online August 2006”). And a March 2005 nationwide survey and

report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press reported that:

“the online political news consumer population grew dramatically from 18% of the U.S. population in 2000 to 29% in 2004.... {as did those} who cited the internet (sic) as one of their primary sources of news about the presidential campaign: 11% of registered voters said the internet was a primary source of political news in 2000 and 18% said that in 2004.”

And few instructors need be told that among the 18-24 year old age group that is our primary student demographic, internet/electronic use rates are higher than average. Although significant and valid concerns remain about technical access and digital divide gaps among varying levels of tech users in America, the rapidity of the Internet’s use in political life poses an issue, and a question. It is within reason to assume that in our student’s lifetime, surveying, polling and even voting in elections will be primarily web-based. Are we preparing our students to be good citizens during such a time? Political scientist instructors must address the WWW’s future political roles and efficacy in their classrooms.

Online Political Polling

Expansion of online political surveying is one part of political electronic/internet “e-growth.” Computer inputting of telephone results of scientific opinion polls has evolved into political pollsters, campaign professionals and elected officials taking polling and political activity to the Internet. The landmark events of formal and binding electronic voting {e-voting} during the 2000 Arizona Democratic Party’s primary election, and interactive polling in the 2006 campaign by nationally known polling firms like Zogby, are held up to support the argument that online political immersion is occurring in real time. However, the mixed (at best) results of the Arizona primary due to the inability of a number of voters to access the online site, and questions over the validity of Zogby’s online data, has slowed the immediate need to prepare for online portals as prime transmitters of the political process. (Kamman)

Online polling mirrors online voting; one of three types of electronic voting (e-voting), defined as “the use of computers or computerised equipment to cast votes in an election (sic).” (United Kingdom (UK) Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2) Rather than machine counting of e-ballots or

computer voting through direct-recording electronic voting machines (DRE), online voting is, “casting a secure and secret electronic ballot that is transmitted to election officials using the Internet.” (California Internet Voting Task Force, 2)

Online/Internet voting can occur as poll site Internet voting, regional poll site Internet voting, kiosk Internet voting, and remote Internet voting, with the final category offering the greatest independence and least supervision in the voting process. (California Internet Voting Task Force, 11).

Today, instead of embracing e-voting, lessons on the technological pitfalls and scientific gaps in current online polling can be more readily taught in Internet-accessible classrooms. Zogby’s interactive polling experiment in 2004 aside, creating scientifically valid Internet-based surveys and polls remains difficult. The WWW severely hinders the ability to gather a representative sample of respondents whose responses could be considered as valid results. On the technical side, Internet voting experts question the capacity of online voting to insure authentication of potential voters (or survey respondents), keeping ballot secrecy and integrity intact, preventing multiple voting, and warding off hacker attacks on online systems. (California Internet..., 12).

But that does not stop any number of news organizations from posting pseudo-poll surveys on their web sites for site visitors to take, and for such organizations to present them as news {disclaimers aside}. As shown below, and for better or worse, online news agencies make it part of their information exchange mechanisms. Bad surveys, but great classroom examples to critique! (See Figure One on next page).

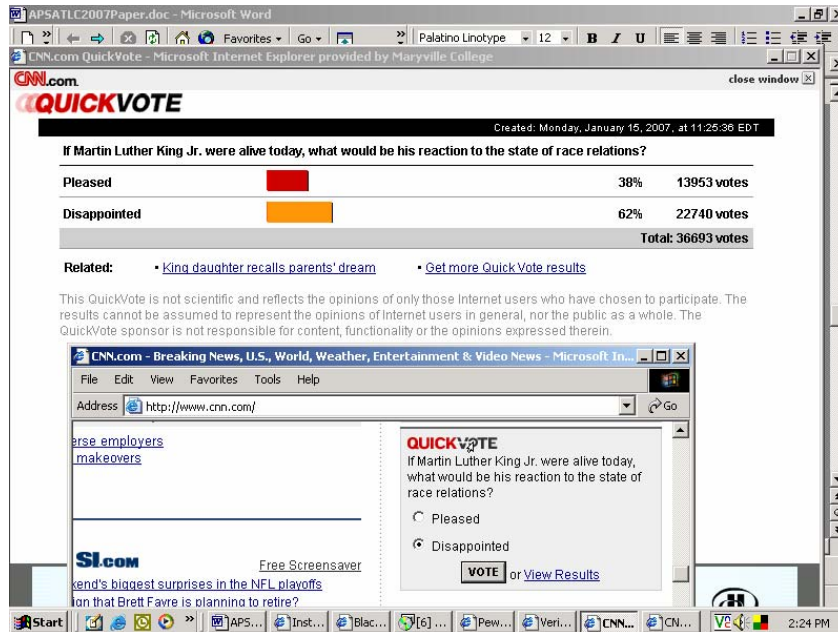
However, the gap between valid and invalid polling over the Internet seems to be closing. Many nations continue to plan to offer voting online, and polling/surveying has a dedicated web presence. (United Kingdom (UK) Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 3) The time seems ripe to bring the subject of e-voting into the classroom, and to experience it firsthand.

The Voting Project At Maryville College

Experiential learning forms a pedagogical basis for the online voting project explained in this paper. The “learn to learn” teaching goal championed by problem based learning/project based learning (PBL) suggests that student

learning will improve if, with proper planning and guidance, students are allowed to cooperatively work to seek solutions to real world problems. (Duch 2007)

Figure One: Screen shot of CNN.com QuickVote Online survey for 15 January 2007
<http://www.cnn.com>



Components of PBL are imbedded in the online voting activity titled The Voting Project, a major course deliverable in PLS321: The American Political Process. The course is a political science major upper division class, required within the American Politics subfield at Maryville College. It has become a campaign and elections focused course, given its placement in the school’s curriculum on an every even numbered fall semester. Its position during the US presidential and off year election cycle facilitates the real world problem used to drive the project.

Local media in East Tennessee have historically contacted the college in search of political commentary or electoral analysis leading up to congressional or presidential elections. In 2000, a senior student, advised by this author, wrote her Senior Thesis on how environmental salience issue and issue preference surveys could be conducted using online polling. Her thesis information and

analysis of her online survey results – the first such survey conducted at the College - were put on the College’s website. Local media ran a story on it, fascinated both by the online mechanics and the results of the poll. This sparked a desire for this story to be used by the school’s public relations department, and a real-world PBL connection to the course was formed. The first online poll in PLS321 was activated in Fall 2000.

The primary activity of The Voting Project is a simulation; student groups create their own surveys, which are then posted online. Each fall, students in PLS321 become primarily responsible for compiling questions, creating one or two surveys, and electronically posting and activating it digitally to receive and analyze results for use in pre-election press releases created by this instructor and the students and used by the College. Maryville College communications office staff meets with students at the beginning of the semester, or communicate by email their support of the project, amplifying the reality of this simulation.

The project runs from mid-September through to late October, culminating prior to Election Day. During that time, two online surveys are produced and activated for consideration. Some of the first survey and most if not all of the second survey content are student generated. Students are split into groups, and each group is responsible for creating a series of questions that they will present to the instructor and colleagues formally in early October for consideration to use in the online poll. The group oral presentations, along with a 15 to 20-page document prepared by the group with text and rationale behind their survey question choices, which is the primary graded item in the Project.

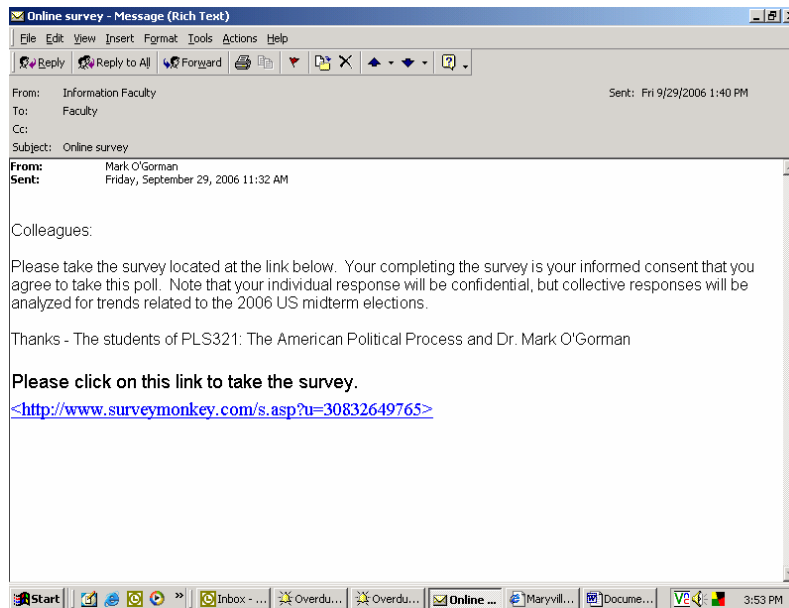
On days in the classroom pre and post-group presentations, the course progresses, with content related to survey research and the Internet discussed concurrent with the due dates for the online polling questions and analysis. A typical schedule during this part of the course is lecture/discussion of course content on half of the class days in one week, and discussion of the project during the other half.

By early October, student presentations have occurred. Two class days devoted to oral presentations of potential questions by each group take place, based upon their written analysis as to why the questions should be considered. Issue salience and candidate preference questions are required. Ideally, strong

student reports will identify and replicate reputable survey questions found online or in print sources. Students evaluate other groups and debate over question preferences are made to create the final poll.

The online survey instrument and the technology platform for this project consist of survey software that can be accessible only through a password-protected site or by accessing a webpage. In either case, only potential survey respondents specifically emailed can gain access to the site. Their email address is imbedded in the software and is the security firewall preventing multiple or unwanted entries. A prospective respondent is given an email with the link/password. They visit the link and an image appears inviting them to take the poll, after reading and accepting the informed consent imbedded on that site. {See Figure Two below}

Figure Two: Screen shot of email announcing access to Faculty/Staff survey – first of two surveys for The Voting Project 2006 at Maryville College



A respondent, after clicking into the site, enters the proprietary software and completes the survey. {See Figure Three below}

Figure Three: Two screen shots of Faculty/Staff survey – first of two surveys for The Voting Project 2006 at Maryville College

Figure 3a

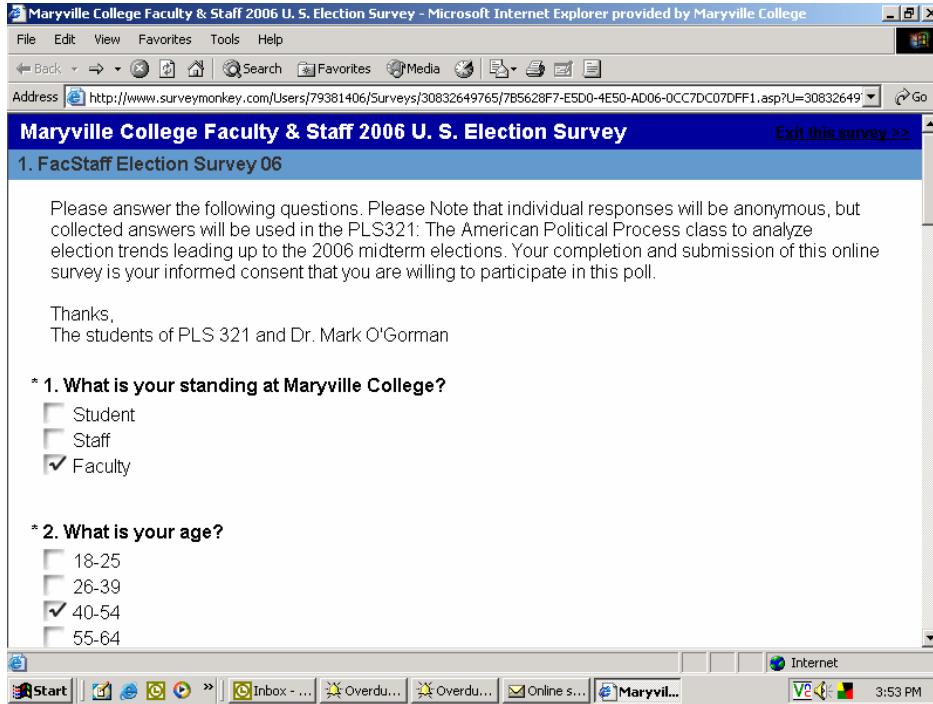
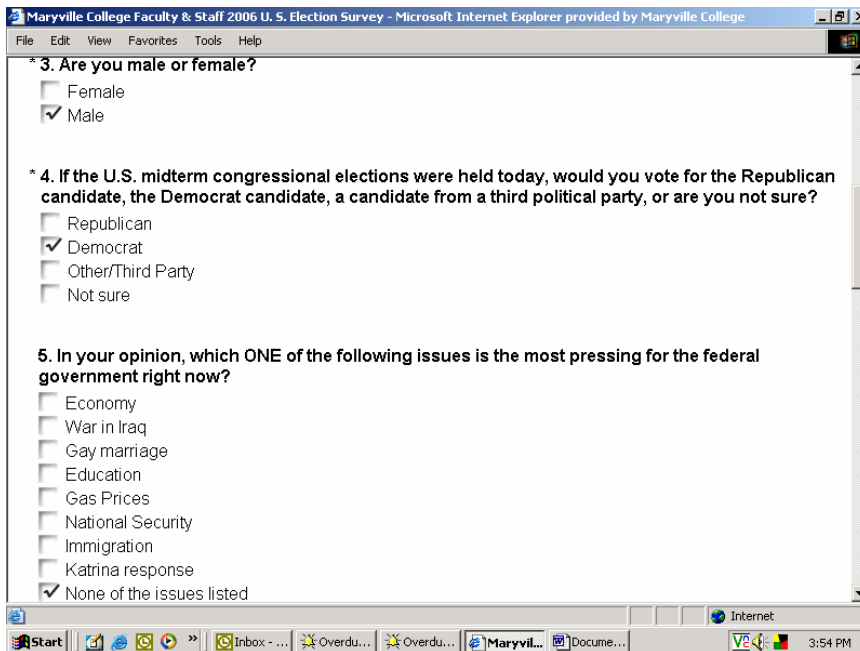


Figure 3b



Results are compiled by the software, and at the end of the agreed-upon activation time of the survey, the results are transferred to a data file for further analysis. (See Figure Four below)

In 2000, Microsoft FrontPage™ web page software, the TestPilot™ survey software were combined to create the survey. In 2006, The Tartan™ online course management system (cms) of the College, combined with the SurveyMonkey™ survey software, provided the survey instrument platform for the polls created by the class.

Figure Four: Two screen shots of Excel Spreadsheet data results for selected questions from Student survey – second of two surveys for The Voting Project 2006 at Maryville College

Figure 4a

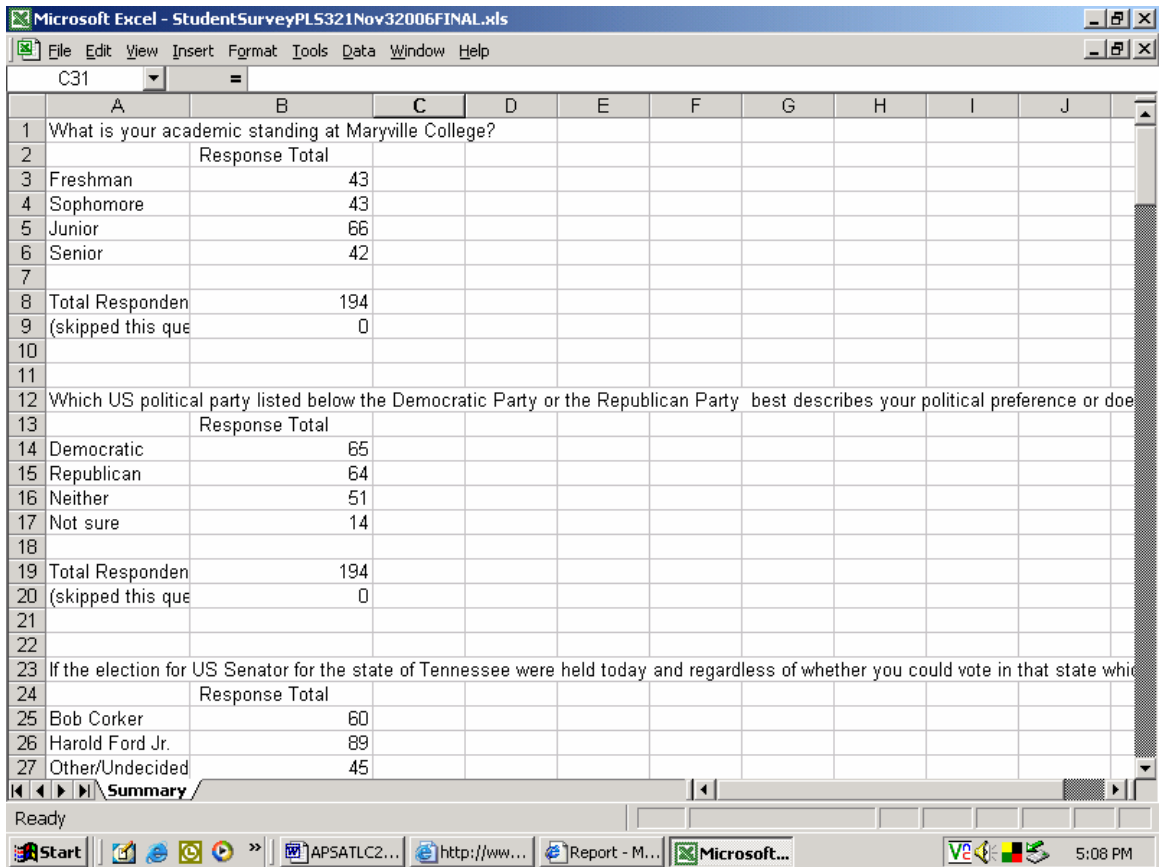


Figure 4b

The screenshot shows an Excel spreadsheet with two sections of survey data. The first section, rows 67-85, lists various issues and their response counts. The second section, rows 86-93, lists three specific issues and their response counts. The spreadsheet includes a 'Response Total' row for each section and a 'Total Responden' row at the end of each section.

Row	Issue	Response Total
67	What one issue is your most important issue in the upcoming election?	
68	Response Total	
69	Economic Issues	29
70	Education	27
71	Gas Prices	6
72	Global Warming	8
73	Healthcare	8
74	Immigration	8
75	Moral Issues	40
76	National Security	10
77	Taxes	1
78	War in Iraq	30
79	War on Terror	9
80	Other (please sp	18
81		
82	Total Responden	194
83	(skipped this que	0
84		
85		
86	Which issues in a political candidate's platform will impact your vote more the War in Iraq Terrorism or are you not sure?	
87	Response Total	
88	The War in Iraq	109
89	Terrorism	52
90	Not Sure	33
91		
92	Total Responden	194
93	(skipped this que	0

The Voting Project and online/internet polling has occurred in Fall 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006, coinciding with the US elections in those years. Regional polling site and/or kiosk voting occurred in 2000 and 2002, when the Maryville College library dedicated one or two library workstations solely for online polling. IN one year, the permanent Library web site was amended to contain a hyperlink where students could enter into the polling site. In every year, remote polling/voting was available, where students from their dorm or home computer could log in and complete the survey.

Response rates have remained similar to what is shown in Figures 4a and 4b. In Fall 2006, 194 of the 1,146 students at Maryville College completed the online student survey available in the last week of October 2006, a response rate of 16.9 percent. Course content about suffrage issues and the complexities of voting in America are made vivid in class when student colleague data from the survey is incorporated into the discussion.

Immediate and real time student survey question input, comparison and analysis were a critical part of the in-class PBL component of this project. The so-called “smart classroom” features built into the classrooms where this class has been held, with Internet connection and projection capabilities, allowed instant review of student questions.

This instructor has vividly seen the cognitive connection made (the “ah ha” moment) by students about survey construction topics (i.e. avoid double barreled questions, order questions appropriately, preclude use of double negative or biased question text) occur each time a class lecture on such topics early in a week’s classes was followed by an end-of-the-week discussion that posted student-authored examples of online questions onto the projection screen in the classroom. Students were comfortable and open in assessing their work, this author suggests, because of the shared PBL interest in creating a workable “real world” survey and student ownership of the survey they were constructing. And debate was lively in these classes. What remains unsolved is whether such good debate occurred because of some achievement of student empowerment of learning (a PBL/simulation goal), or because of the reality of needing to work hard on a major graded portion of the course.

The instructor aids in the project by creating an initial survey, with some student input, as a first task of the Voting Project. That poll is activated in late September and is taken only by faculty and staff. It is used to educate students about the survey process and its details, to insure the technical parts of the internet-based poll work, and to provide current baseline data from which to make further/better judgments about question use in that year’s election cycle student survey. The second survey – the survey controlled by the class – has as its population the student body of the campus. The instructor is the final authority for the release of any public part of the project.

Faculty and staff interest in the project (and in 2006 with the first targeted faculty-staff survey) is fairly high, as is their patience in responding to student questions of varying quality imbedded in this initial survey. This adult and professional survey population recognizes the learning process occurring in this poll, and this faculty member is grateful for their willingness to participate and provide feedback. Occasional email critiques and complements from colleagues across campus are welcome, and read in class to amplify the simulation’s reach across campus.

Once results were obtained, the raw data was downloaded into spreadsheet files and emailed to students for their use. They were asked questions about the results that would be both homework and a springboard for discussion in preparing the press releases. After debate (MUCH debate) within the class, the data and student analysis were used to prepare a news release that was sent to the Maryville College communications office for distribution. {See Figures Five and Six Below}

Figure Five: Screen shot of 2006 Press Release provided to Maryville College Communications Office about The Voting Project Student survey results.

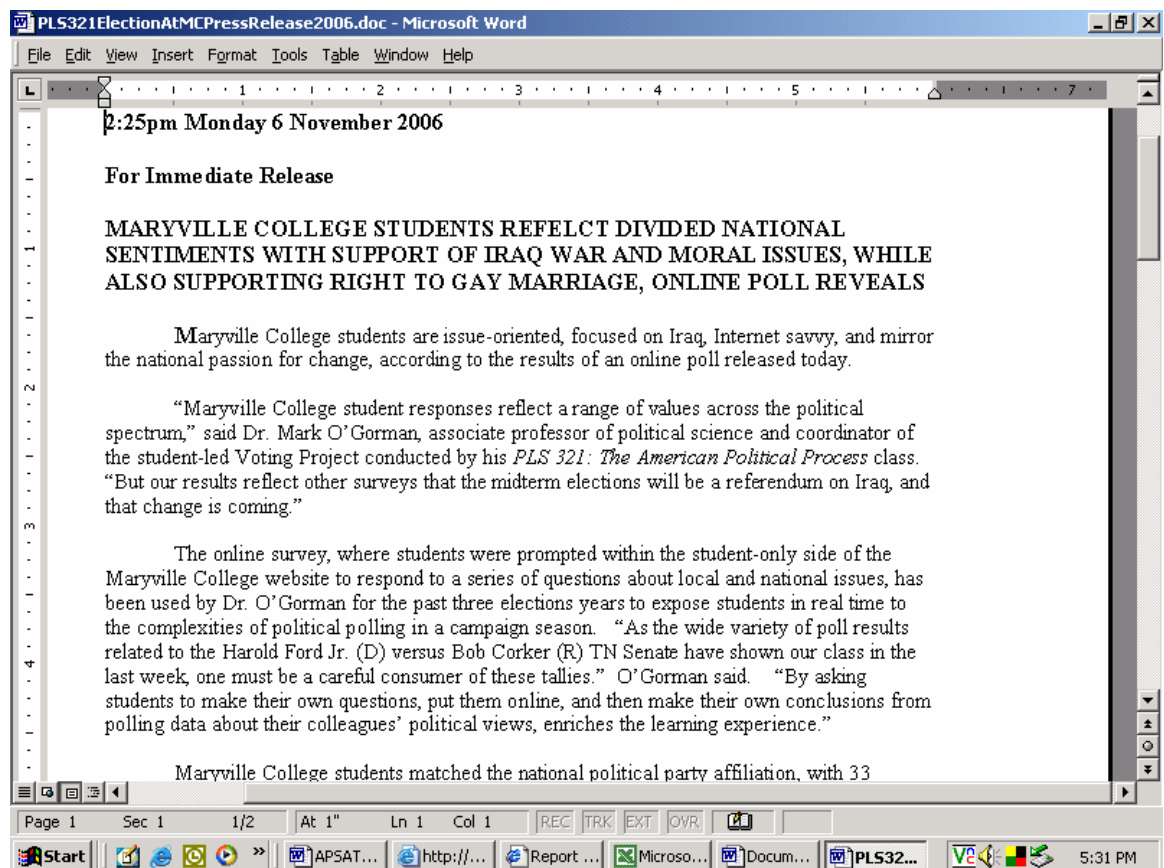
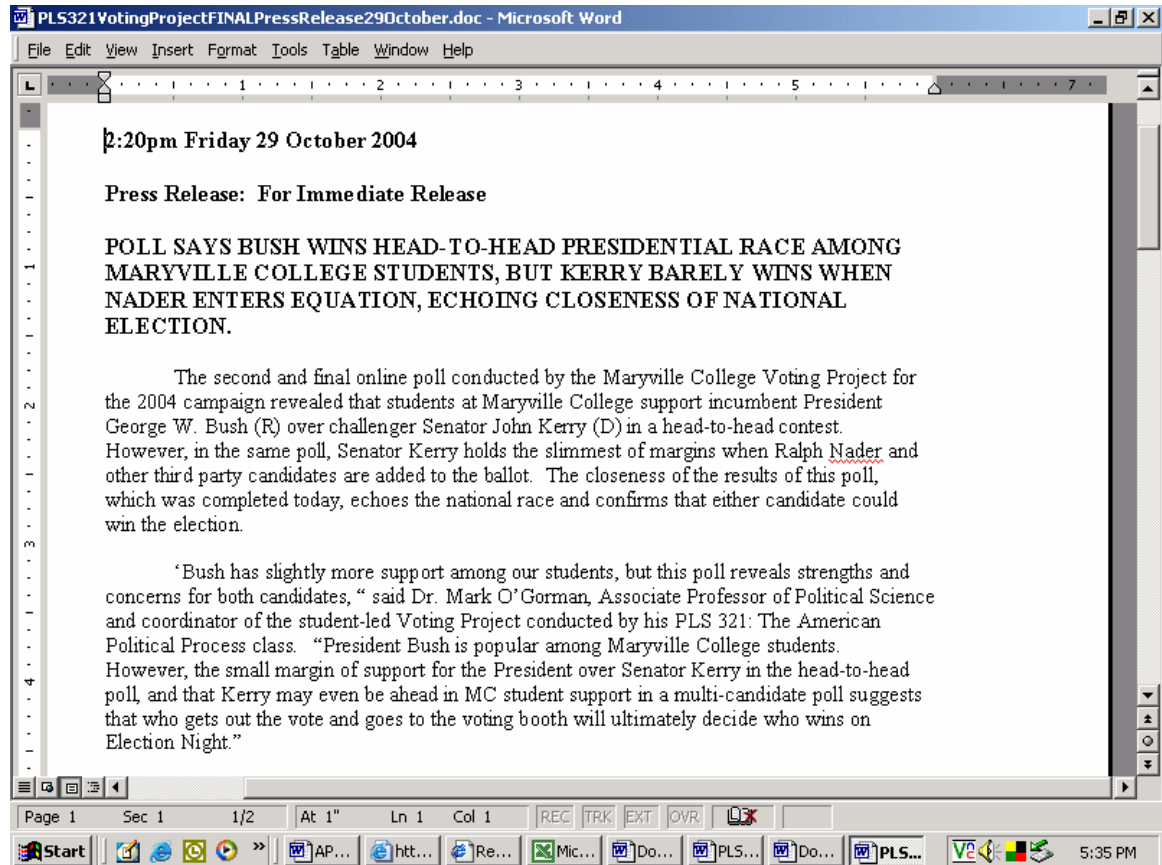


Figure Six: Screen shot of 2004 Press Release provided to Maryville College Communications Office - The Voting Project at Maryville College



The day after Election Day is the traditional end of the Voting Project. Students use that day to compare election results with their survey results and past/current exit polls to attempt to analyze their predictions see if student survey trends were reflected in election results.

Learning Goals and Student Outcomes

The Voting Project has been used as a means to facilitate four learning goals in the PLS321: The American Political Process course. They include:

- Increase student comprehension of content, theory and topics related to the American political process.

- Amplify student understanding of how political surveys are constructed and analyzed.
- Provide students with tools to make more discerning judgments about Internet content, especially online political content and Internet based polls.
- Facilitate more frequent and richer connections on how theory and practice integrate within American politics.

Anecdotal and brief empirical information were used to determine to what extent the outcomes were achieved.

A Voting Project specific survey was given to students to complete, which contained Likard-scale and open-ended questions related to the student outcomes listed above. The survey and mean scores for each answer are in Figure Seven on the next page.

In question one, students were asked to agree with a statement suggesting that The Voting Project aided student cognition of content and topics within the PLS321 course. On a one to five scale of choices for the student respondent, where a score of five meant a student completely agreed with the survey question that participation in The Voting project improved student cognition, showed promising results. The mean score was 4.29 out of five.

Question three asked students to evaluate whether The Voting Project aided student understanding of online polling. The mean score was 4.86 out of five. Question two asked students about the value of group presentation activity within The Voting Project as the best way to test student understanding of surveys. With a mean score of 3.57 out of five, a lower mean score than in question one or question three, this instructor needs to reconsider the purpose and effect of the group presentations in The Voting Project. How can student input, effort and quality be measured in this simulation? But the group project was mentioned by only two of 11 student responses to the open-ended question asking what one activity should not be used in the next The Voting Project. How can simulations be evaluated effectively, and efficiently?

Figure Seven: Screen shot of The Voting Project - Fall 2006 - student evaluation instrument (Mean scores and N added)

The Voting Project – Fall 2006 - Maryville College – Class Comments PLS321: The American Political Process	
Please take a moment to answer the following questions about The Voting Project – our online survey project earlier in the year. Taking this survey is your informed consent to use your answers. Your responses will be anonymous and would be reported as such. Thank you – Mark O’Gorman	
On a scale from one to five (1-5), with one (1) representing completely disagree with the statement and five (5) being completely agree with the statement, please write down a number that corresponds to your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements:	Number on 1-5 scale 1=completely disagree 5=completely agree
The Voting Project helped me to better understand material in the PLS321: The American Political Process course.	Mean=4.29 N=15
The Voting Project group presentations was the best way to test students on knowledge related to political surveys	Mean=3.57 N=15
The Voting Project helped me to better understand issues about online polling.	Mean=4.86 N=15
The Voting Project was presented in a way to the Maryville College community that insured the highest possible number of respondents.	Mean=4.07 N=15
I worked harder on The Voting Project than on any other activity within any of my other classes in the Social Science Division.	Mean=3.64 N=15
I worked harder on The Voting Project than any other activity within any of my other classes at Maryville College.	Mean=2.79 N=15
Please list two things you learned from participating in The Voting Project.	
In planning to teach PLS321 (and The Voting Project) in 2008, what one thing should be repeated as part of The Voting Project, and why?	
In planning to teach PLS321 (and The Voting Project) in 2008, what one thing should be discontinued as part of The Voting Project, and why?	

Qualitative data from the open-ended questions seemed to confirm that content issues related to surveys were learned. Student responses to the question asking what two things were learned from participating in The Voting Project echoed content reflected in the following student quotes: “The importance of wording,” {emphasis in original} and “unreliability of responses due to non-attitudes,” as learned by the greatest number of respondents.

Students in the class in 2006, and historically, have mentioned the Project as a positive experience in the major.

A Final Comment

It is hoped that this paper, and The Voting Project that it describes, leads to more discussion about the purposes fostering, the methods of delivering, and the assessments defining success among the simulations and role play activities we are discussing at this conference.

This teacher (and learner) offers two items for consideration. One relates to flexibility and scale. The Voting Project at Maryville College is a major project imbedded within one class. However, the basic pedagogical tool – improving student work through a focused student response to a (somewhat) realistic endeavor – can be offered in classes ranging from 15-minute exercises in one lecture, through to 15-week semester-long endeavors that essentially become “the course.” What event(s) in the classroom define label said event as a simulation? What trade offs occur in defining such when similar simulations vary in scale or scope from one class to the next?

In the summary of the Simulations and Role Play (S&RP) tracks of the 2006 American Political Science Association (APSA) Teaching and Learning Conference (TLC), the authors suggest that while a variety of simulation types occur simulations, however, are not “one-size-fits-all.” “ (Ellington, Grillo and Shaw 542). My five year olds sandals and my size 10 double EE dress shoes are very different objects, but are products that share similar characteristics. Are we ready to “size up” and differentiate the types of S&RP used in the political science classroom? Who decides, and by what criteria? What categories, boundaries or limits to S&RP exist? Is The Voting Project a project based learning module, or “just” another simulation?

The second, and final, comment relates to technology. This author’s interest in technology is clear, given the Internet focus of the project and its immersion in The Voting Project classroom. But what will be the impact and effects of technology on the next generation of simulations and role playing (S&RP) in political science, or in college teaching? My adult exposure to technology has run the gambit from punch cards to data streams uploaded to a wireless Blackberry. Professors using email are considered “old school” by students in today’s classroom. Is technology a means or an end? At Maryville College, debate one day centered on whether to call technology in the classroom either instructional technology, or technological instruction. How has (and will) technology impact S&RP? Was The Voting Project enriched through technology, or was the simulation diminished in all its online and Internet bells and whistles?

These are complex issues, but ones that lead to the age-old question that the college professor wrestles with each day: How can I be a better teacher?

Simulations are part of the answer. But which part?

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