

Teaching Social Movements with a Sustained Simulation of Police–Protester Contention: The Hypothetical Case of the Contested Election of 2024

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ABSTRACT

This case study reviews a social movement course that centered on a 10-week simulation of a contemporary contentious event in Washington, DC, involving six movement organizations and four police agencies. To our knowledge, it is the first classroom simulation of a Trump-era police–protester contentious episode or of any political science simulation that places an episode of insurrection in the contemporary United States. Three goals animated this project: (1) promote learning concerning extra-institutional political conflict in the American case; (2) combine scholarship and role playing to explore the dynamic interaction of movement, countermovement, and enforcement organizations; and (3) teach the complex relationship between social science theory and political practice in an engaging way. Students used theoretical frameworks drawn from the literature to assess and develop protest capacity and repertoires for their assigned organization and chose strategic goals and tactical means to attempt to generate political leverage. Student organizations made concurrent “moves” and instructors iteratively developed the contentious episode. This article discusses the results of students’ evaluations of the simulation. In addition to extensive online appendices, it provides a detailed explanation and design for instructors who are considering a similar approach.

Impassioned crowds have driven American politics since the eighteenth century. On January 6, 2021, Right-aligned activists collaborated with party officials to draw a large crowd of highly motivated movement actors, including militant insurgents, to the Capitol to interrupt the

constitutionally mandated operations of the US Congress. Given that this moment in American politics is characterized by negative polarization, ephemeral and marginal party advantages, and rapid movement innovation, political conflict outside of formal governing institutions will continue to impose itself upon our polity. Political science instructors thus have an urgent responsibility to deepen their students’ theoretical and practical understanding of noninstitutionalized politics in general and the police–protester nexus in particular.

This article describes a case study of a simulation embedded in a course titled “The Police and Social Movements in American Politics” that was taught in 2021 in the Politics Department at

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Brandeis University. Scholars have found that simulations can provide students with a more intense engagement with and a deeper understanding of real-world actors' motivations and strategies (Harkness and DeVore 2021). We created a semifictional

part because group interdependence motivates students to master information before meetings (MacLeod, Hazelton, and Schnurr 2021). Placing students in heterogeneous groups and asking them to adopt stances contrary to their personal beliefs also challenges

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future scenario because when students simply replicate a well-known past event, they tend to “tailor their actions to reflect what actually happened or to their preconceived prejudices” (Harkness and DeVore 2021, 317). We then directed a sustained, complex simulation to encourage students to continually incorporate new information and analysis into their work in response to other groups' “moves” (Wedig 2010).

This simulation was effective for several reasons. First, inhabiting real-world organizations in a competitive game motivated students to maximize new knowledge about the workings of actual police and protest organizations. Second, steering their organizations required “personifying” and applying abstract concepts and theories in ways that enhanced learning. Third, the simulation mimics exercises used by policy planners to prepare for such events and thus gives students hands-on experience in organizing and executing simulations. For example, the Biden administration is conducting “training exercises” to improve coordination among law-enforcement agencies that are facing potential threats to the Capitol and the capital city (Barrett, Parker, and Davis 2022). We intend for this review, and the provision of our extensive course materials, to assist other instructors in considering, adapting, or designing a simulation for similar purposes. We also offer suggestions for those instructors who may be teaching this course on a smaller scale.

SIMULATIONS AND ACTIVE LEARNING

Scholars across disciplines have concluded that experiential learning enables students to apply complex theories to real-world phenomena, resulting in increased knowledge retention and better critical-thinking skills (Dougherty 2003; Mariani 2007). Augmenting lectures with simulations develops skills more effectively than a lecture format alone (Smith and Boyer 1996; Wunische 2019). Simulations work best across longer durations and benefit from allowing students to shape the exercise (Dougherty 2003). In political science, simulations are most common in introductory courses that teach the roles and procedures found in well-structured, formal institutions such as Congress and the United Nations (Archer and Miller 2011). Few projects address the interaction of multiple institutions and the public (Britt and Williams 2022). In our case, we challenged students to evaluate the “fit” and utility of social science theories in explaining real-world political dynamics.

Working on course content in small groups with other students reinforces learning in part because they enjoy seeing that the instructor is not the sole source of knowledge and insight and

their worldviews and reduces the tendency to engage in the biased assimilation of materials (Budesheim and Lundquist 1999; Occhipinti 2003). Simulations help students to practice skills such as managing group work, communicating purposefully and effectively, and solving complex problems (Dougherty 2003; MacLeod, Hazelton, and Schnurr 2021).

Because creating, employing, and monitoring simulations subtracts time from instruction in a wider array of approaches and topics (Smith and Boyer 1996), educators can benefit from examining and adapting successful models (Mariani 2007). Mello and Stein (2021) linked two courses in which students designed multiple simulations based on historical protests. Harkness and DeVore (2021) created a fictional scenario for their two-hour simulation session on revolution, providing their students with information on roles and rules one week in advance. Jimenez (2015) limited student collaboration to emphasize the coordinating costs of rebellions. We adopted features of these techniques and recommend a similar “patchwork” approach to design.

COURSE LEARNING GOALS

The “Police and Social Movements” course pursues theoretical-, historical-, and skills-oriented learning goals (Dougherty 2003). The course aims to help students master the fundamental tenets of social movement theory, especially political process theory (McAdam 1999; Snow et al. 2018; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), which is an outgrowth of Tilly's seminal work (1978). Whereas recent work has extended this scholarship to explore identity and social media (Staggenborg 2021; Stulberg 2018; Tufekci 2018) among other factors, we enhance the traditional model by emphasizing the consideration of competing movements' countering behavior and authorities' responses to social conflict.

A second goal is to learn to apply theoretical frameworks to both historical and contemporary episodes of contention. The class reviewed the events of January 6, 2021, and studied the statutory procedures embedded in the Electoral Count Act. Thus, we assigned equal importance to educating students about the decision-making process and the substantive content of the event (Asal and Blake 2006).

Third, we aimed to improve students' abilities to collaborate on research and analysis and to communicate their findings. To accomplish these three goals, course requirements included short written memos, verbal summaries presented to the class, and a final 10-page research paper separate from the simulation. The simulation can be

considered for introductory through upper-level undergraduate courses on social movements, especially those focused on the United States. Given its grounding in generalizable theory, the simulation could be readily adapted to other national contexts.

SIMULATION DESIGN AND EXECUTION

The simulation moved through planning, collective action, and evaluation phases (see online [appendix A](#)). Our students, from years 1 through 4, displayed varying levels of knowledge and praxis. Because perceived or actual unfairness confounds teaching, we used an intake questionnaire to measure levels of prior movement and academic experience (see online [appendix B](#)). Of the 50 students, 20% had not taken any courses in political science and 30% had no movement experience. We used these data to ensure that each organization contained equivalent aggregate levels of student experience and knowledge. The instructors then assigned the 50 students to 10 organizations composing three distinct networks: Right-aligned (i.e., MAGA, QAnon, and Proud Boys), Left-aligned (i.e., Antifa, Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion), and authorities (i.e., FBI, DC Metropolitan Police, Capitol Police, and National Guard/US Department of Defense). We chose the groups for variety in structure, membership, and goals and for their importance in the real world. Each of three instructors—one professor and two PhD students—advised one of the three networks. The Left–Right–Policing triad reflects the reality of most current American contestation. However, for reasons that are not clear, Left-aligned groups were not obviously present during the events of January 6. The chaotic conflicts of the 2017 Unite the Right rally provide another suitable template because they involved complex networks of all three sets of organizations.

The simulation started in November 2024 with a contested presidential election between Kamala Harris/Pete Buttigieg and Nikki Haley/Ron DeSantis. Basing simulations on historical events and organizations streamlined our planning process and provided students a baseline of knowledge that oriented them to the assignments (Baranowski and Weir 2015; Britt and Williams 2022; Mello and Stein 2021).

The first assignment asked students to apply the political process model (PPM) to assess their assigned organization's potential for power seeking. This relatively stable and efficient model adapts well to undergraduate learning because four sets of factors are posited to promote movement success: (1) organizational capacity; (2) the structure of opportunities; (3) mass cognitions and emotions and the frames that appeal to them; and (4) the response of authorities to the challenge. Students first produced a solo, five-page “individual strategic inventory (ISI)” describing their organization's capacity (e.g., leaders, members, and material resources), their perceptions of political opportunity, how their frames for conflict might appeal to cognitions and emotions, and repertoires of practiced protest tactics (Davenport, Johnston, and Mueller 2005; Earl and Soule 2006; Enos, Kaufman, and Sands 2019; Snow and Byrd 2007). Working in groups, students then synthesized this work into an integrated, eight-page “group strategic inventory (GSI)” of their organization's capacity and goals. A third group memo, the “statement of group strategy (SGS),” outlined a strategy to guide their operations toward specific goals in the exercise, using the Meyer and Staggenborg (2012) approach to clarify their group's demands, arenas, tactics, alliances, and targets. (See online [appendix C](#) for ISI, GSI, and SGS assignments.)

In the collective action phase, every two weeks each student organization used a one-page template to submit to its network advisor a “move” (see online [appendix D](#)) listing short-term goals and the resources and actions deployed. The instructors then integrated the moves into a weekly update, “The President's Declassified Daily Brief.” (See online [appendix E](#) for a complete cycle of moves and documentation.) These two- to four-page summaries contained top-level analyses of the election-certification process and the 10 organizations' new locations and actions. Thus, three instructors considered six moves by 10 organizations across nine sessions to propel and reconfigure the scenario from November 6, 2024, to January 21, 2025. (See online [appendix F](#) for a timeline of key scenario events.) Student organizations attempted to activate theoretical mechanisms found in the scholarly literature. For example, Left-aligned groups attempted to draw excessive coercive force to themselves in an effort to frame authorities as brutal and illegitimate and, in turn, to build public support. Authority groups anticipated this possibility and thus avoided physical confrontations as part of a broader strategy aimed at maintaining their legitimacy.

Given the students' unfamiliarity with policing organizations, these groups required assistance concerning coordination. A “summit” of these group members led to the designation of the event as a National Special Security Event (US Department of Homeland Security 2021) and to more cohesive plans. The authorities strived to deter unrest through overwhelming preemptive shows of force; manage protest peacefully through requiring formal permit applications identical to real-world practices; and maintain order by coordinating the positioning of resources in flexible but forceful ways. Police agencies issued remarkably convincing press releases that emphasized their duty to protect the constitutional right to assemble peacefully (see online [appendix J](#)).

The Left-aligned groups sought to realize values that superseded Democratic Party ideology by centering expansive racial- and environmental-justice claims. They recognized the value of coordinated mass mobilizations to promote shared goals; thus, they prioritized tactical cooperation. The visible and effective partnership between Extinction Rebellion and BLM centered the demands of historically marginalized communities and the global majority (see online [appendix G](#)). Antifa provided covert tactical support to mitigate threats from Authority surveillance and detention. These efforts demonstrated a shared normative goal of enhancing the efforts of disadvantaged groups to generate and leverage collective power.

Right-aligned organizations seemed uncomfortable and suspicious of others. Uniting around the goal of the reinstallation of President Donald Trump, students in MAGA and QAnon bemoaned their lack of formal organizational capacity and leadership, and they struggled to pursue coherent missions; the students confronted the difficulty of mobilizing and directing these organizations' members. The organizations sought to delay the resolution of the contested election and to deny victory to both parties' presidential candidates. Fluid and weak partnerships enabled some mutually beneficial actions as well as plausible deniability for disruptive acts.

We escalated the simulation to a more militant stage that compelled students to consider the tactical and normative implications of the use of violence. Left-aligned groups expected state repression and mitigated risk by prioritizing member safety,

especially the safety of activists who were people of color, through a commitment to expressive nonviolence, bureaucratic permitting, and joint protective formations. Right-aligned groups used violent rhetoric, intentional misinformation, and armed agitation. Some students in Right-aligned organizations considered certain Capitol Police officers to be potential allies. All of the students gained a much better sense of the decisive advantages of authorities, including systematic and institutionalized planning and coordination as well as superior coercive capacity. Students also came to appreciate the importance of the legitimacy that most citizens lend to the legal use of coercive force by the state, as Weber (1919) argued more than a century ago.

Finally, an assessment and decompression session allowed students to review and critique the simulation and to deepen their understanding of theories and concepts (Smith and Boyer 1996; Wedig 2010). Because our assignments elevated anti-Black racist organizations to a standing comparable to BLM, this discussion included questions concerning the status of white supremacy in the exercise. The assignments thus risked placing students in ideologically dissonant and emotionally painful roles. Several students felt that the inclusion of the Proud Boys “gamified” an organization that explicitly rejects their identities and values. This is a significant problem. We provided content and trigger warnings—verbally in all early meetings and in written form on the syllabus (see online appendix H). We also encouraged students to select out of any group for any unstated

appendix I) and shared additional comments. Our students’ generally positive responses mirror satisfaction rates reported for other political simulations (Baranowski and Weir 2015). Students responded most unfavorably to a question about the equitable distribution of work within groups. We suggest that instructors consider making it clear in advance that group work is an important aspect of the course; assigning a specific and equal aggregate workload to each student within a group; and using confidential peer grading to provide an accountability mechanism (Wedig 2010). Five students (10% of the class) agreed or strongly agreed that this assignment caused discomfort that interfered with their learning. Again, instructors must take care to consider and balance the potential benefits of touching on those very emotions that drive contentious politics with the potential discomfort or harm caused by involving groups that espouse hateful ideologies (Budesheim and Lundquist 1999). In addition, several students reported that the simulation clarified social movement theory and its applications; it would have benefited from greater independence of action on the part of organizations; and they recommended reserving more classroom time for organizational deliberations. In our subjective assessment, previous versions of the course did not generate comparable levels of engagement and energy. However, using a pre- and post-simulation knowledge-assessment tool would provide a more objective measurement of the project’s success.

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reason; two students removed themselves from their initial organization. In addition, an instructor might rotate students through two organizations to disperse such burdens or place faculty or undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs) in these roles.

We also considered critiques of the PPM, especially the pointed claims of Bracy (2016), who argued that the full separation of the PPM from Black history, culture, and scholarship reflects a white racial bias that centers the state as the only possible source of social change. We provided other materials to further critical race, gender, class, and institutional analysis of social movement theory (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Ganz 2000; Robnett 2000; Weaver 2007). We sought to re-engage with the students’ own principled commitments with a final 10-page paper about a police–protestor episode of their choice that evaluated the strength of fit

The labor required for planning and managing this simulation was intellectually and psychically demanding. Two doctoral-level TAs—each deeply knowledgeable about social movement theory and practice as well as exceptionally skilled teachers—contributed high levels of time and personal commitment. However, a scaled-down seminar version of this simulation can work for a single instructor. Limiting enrollment to 10 to 20 upper-level social science majors and assigning two students to each organization would enable an instructor to teach complex scholarly materials more quickly and to shift some of the scenario-design responsibilities—for example, choosing a controversy with a location and dates—to students. A single instructor could require students to post their strategic inventories and their moves to a class forum, relieving the instructor from synthesizing moves into a weekly update.

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between prevailing theories and the actual evolution of their chosen historical event.

REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

In anonymous evaluations, the students ranked their agreement with five statements on a five-point Likert scale (see online

Because spatial factors can powerfully affect the course of protest (Kryder 2008), a single instructor could project one master map in class—on which students update their group’s location and actions—to graphically represent these factors. The seminar could collectively evaluate the moves and mold the subsequent arrangement of forces in class.

CONCLUSION

A 20-year-old student today has already lived through several world-historic events that have destabilized our political system, including a well-organized attempt to subvert our constitutional order. As political scientists, we have a responsibility to renovate our pedagogy and curriculum to help students make immediate sense of these confusing yet pivotal years (Kryder and LaRochelle 2022). This teaching project sought to equip our students for better understanding, evaluating, and participating in noninstitutionalized politics. This model of a sustained simulation reenacting a semifictional, timely scenario could be adapted for other courses and subjects beyond social movements (e.g., evaluating the impact of various forms of environmental activism in one or more nations). Mirroring historical events and real organizations allowed students to focus on advancing their work rather than undertaking complex, fictional-world building. Whereas this real-world approach at times constrains student imagination, repertoires of contention are time-bound and repeat themselves; groups draw on a limited set of well-practiced performances when making claims (Tilly 1978). Although it was difficult for some students to set aside their ideological commitments when inhabiting groups whose beliefs they reject, relatively extreme organizations are now significant actors in American politics and warrant our scholarly attention. At times, tensions in the collective arose from personal animus, shirking, and racial insensitivity. Yet, we believe students benefited from engaging in some discomfort in a controlled simulation that provided challenging opportunities for discussion, learning, and reflection. They reported that the simulation enabled them to connect theoretical readings with real-world scenarios and also gave them a better understanding of the complexities and patterning of police–protester interactions that remain central to the future of our democracy.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000148>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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