

Power in the House: A Game of Political Capital

Suppose you were an idiot...and suppose you were a member of Congress...

But I repeat myself.

--Mark Twain

The purpose of this simulation is to provide students with the opportunity to see first-hand how a legislative body makes decisions about policy change. You will gain insight into the job of a legislator by experiencing the kinds of choices they face daily. As participants in this legislative exercise, you and your colleagues will gain from the experience what you put into it. It is essential that you adhere to your role at all times and that you prepare carefully for every aspect of the exercise. Please remember this is only a game. Have fun with it, but please always display the utmost decorum and consideration for your peers.

Overview of the game

The simulation is a game of power-seeking and reputation-seeking in the U.S. House of Representatives. The goal of the game is to accrue power, enhance your reputation, and get legislation passed. You will play the role of a member of the U.S. House; you will, in the game, represent an actual Congressional district. Like most members of Congress, among your primary concerns are getting reelected and getting public policy passed. This means you will need to pay attention to both your constituents and your co-partisans (especially those in the leadership). Unfortunately, these two concerns are not always in agreement!

Choosing a district: You will be asked to state a preference for a geographic area of the country. Based on this, you will be assigned a district. Please note that not everyone will receive his/her first choice and not every state will be represented. You will not assume the identity of the member who currently represents the district, but will create a “character” who represents the district. How closely that character is to the “real” you is totally up to you. You will act as that character during all aspects of the simulation. In short, you will be that Member of Congress.

Your party and ideology: When you state a preference for a geographic area, you may also state a preference for a political party. Based on these preferences, you will be assigned to either the Democratic or Republican Party.¹ Once the simulation begins, you can change your party, but doing so may have political repercussions. Just ask former Congressman Michael Forbes of New York. He changed parties in 1999 and was summarily trounced at the polls in 2000. Just like in the real House, some participants will find toeing the party line to be easy, while others will face cross pressures. Remember that your actions (speeches, votes, amendments, or bills proposed, etc.) will have direct ramifications for your reelection, popularity ratings, and reputation in the House.

¹ You may also choose to be an independent if you would like, but you want to be sure that is what you want to do before you make that choice. Life is tougher for independents.

The media: The simulation will also include “the media,” which will follow and report on your behavior throughout the simulation. More on this later.

The president/Senate/etc.: Outside forces affect what happens in Congress every day. Unless I inform you otherwise, you may assume that anything that happens in the “real” world also happens in the simulation. That said, I will be playing the roles of all other actors in the simulation. Furthermore, I retain the power to create new outside events. These events are just as “real” in the context of the simulation as actual events. In other words, in the context of the simulation, I am God.²

Structure of the House

Our House will look as much as possible like the real House. Different people, then, will play different roles.

Party and Chamber Leadership: At the beginning of the term, the two parties will caucus to elect their leadership. The majority party will elect a Speaker, Majority Leader, and a Majority Whip. The minority party will elect a Minority Leader and a Minority Whip. These individuals will be responsible for both the functioning of the Congress and the organizing of their own party caucus. Party leaders will:

- Decide committee assignments
- Coordinate the actions of the entire party membership
- Act as liaisons among committees
- Resolve disputes among party members
- Negotiate agreements between parties
- Organize floor deliberations

The Speaker of the House will have all the powers of the real office and will be responsible for familiarizing himself or herself with the procedures of the House. Although it is not in strict keeping with the rules of the real house, the Speaker will be in charge of running all floor sessions. You should select your leadership wisely, as they will have a powerful effect on your ultimate level of power and reputation. This is NOT a zero-sum game; you can all do well in the simulation if you work together, and you can all do poorly if you fail to do so.

Committees: The House will have three committees, whose jurisdictions will overlap those of the real House. The committees are:

- Education and the Workforce
- Energy and Commerce
- Foreign Affairs

Members not in the leadership will submit a ranking to their caucus leadership of their most-to-least desired committee assignments. The majority party leadership will

² No resemblance to any actual Supreme Being is implied.

determine the party allocation of seats on each committee and the leadership in each party will assign its members to one of these three committees.

Committee leadership: Once members have been granted their committee assignments, the majority and minority parties will elect a Chair and a Ranking Minority Member, respectively, for each committee. These two individuals are responsible for the functioning of the committee. They will:

- Organize and manage committee meetings
- Coordinate the activities of their partisan colleagues on the committees
- Oversee the drafting of legislation
- Delegate responsibilities related to drafting legislation
- Work with the party leadership on passage of the caucus agenda
- Present bills to the entire chamber during floor sessions

Rank and file membership: Members not part of the party or committee leadership are responsible for everything else that occurs in Congress. This largely means that they will help in the construction of legislation, including:

- Research current policy
- Collect information on the policy preferences of those affected by the policy
- Craft proposals for policy change
- Participate in floor debate
- Help to hold committee hearings and markups

The Media

No Congressional simulation would be complete without the media. You will receive periodic media updates throughout the semester. The media will include, but is not limited to, a newspaper, *The 1211 Times*. Media updates will include information about public opinion polls and other special events or circumstances in your state, such as an economic crisis, a disaster, or a future electoral challenge. It is part of your job to use the media to your electoral advantage. Feel free to issue press releases or even to “leak” information to the press. Remember: the Washington media can be brutal. If you are not adequately representing your constituents, expect to read about it in the media.

Simulation Participation: The Power Game

"I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it."

- George W. Bush

The simulation game is a worthwhile experience only if everyone participates. Participation is therefore essential and required. Indeed, it is your day-to-day participation that will make the simulation a "game." Note that participation in the simulation is worth 10 percent of your total class grade. Failure to participate will garner you a 0, thereby virtually precluding you from earning an "A" in the class. In short, participation is pretty important! That said, there are lots of ways for you to participate. Think about what your strongest suits are. What are you really good at? What do you really enjoy doing? If you're a natural-born leader or an excellent public speaker, the best way for you to participate is obvious. But whatever your skills or talents, you can figure out ways to use them to your advantage in the simulation.³ Just be creative. Or come by and ask for help. I'd be happy to try and help you come up with a way you can turn your love of cross-stitch into Congressional simulation gold!

To make things interesting, participation will be intimately linked to the game through the use of "political power" points. Just like in the real House, power and reputation must be earned. Hence, over the course of the semester, your actions in the simulation (through in-class work, issuance of press releases, and other activities) will be closely monitored. Strong, meaningful participation will be rewarded, just as hardworking members of Congress are rewarded by accruing power and enhancing their reputations in the real House. Conversely, lackadaisical, lazy, or sloppy "participation" will result in power and reputation loss. As in the real Congress, undisciplined party members, lazy legislators, and folks who cast votes that will be unpopular at home are not rewarded with power and indeed, may be sanctioned.

Here is how the power game will work. Each of you will be assigned a party and district to represent. Additionally, each of you will be randomly assigned a number between 0 and 1 using a random number generator (using the uniform distribution, if you are interested in that kind of thing). Based on these numbers, I will split the class into equal thirds. Higher numbers represent greater "seniority," lower scores will represent less "seniority." I then use this "seniority" level to determine your entry-level power score. All Members will have two points of "political capital" on Day One. As in the real House, you presumably have some semblance of power simply by proving your ability to be elected to an important political office. But power and reputation are enhanced, at least somewhat, by seniority (this is more true, by the way, in the House than in the Senate, but more on that later). Specifically, Members scoring in the lower third on that random power generator will receive no additional power points; Members scoring in the middle third will receive one additional power point; Members scoring in the upper third will receive two additional power points. Since your seniority is randomly assigned, you may feel this initial allocation is unfair. But you should keep in mind that power points in this

³ If you have just compiled an off-color, vaguely humorous list of your "talents" in your head, well, my friend, your talent is probably humor. That's fine. Just keep it clean. And funny.

game will be highly fluid. It will be easy to gain and easy to lose power points. Indeed, more senior members may find themselves at greater risk of losing points than less senior members, particularly on “blown votes” or other mistakes that more senior legislators ought not to be making. In short, the playing field will level out in very short order! Here is the kicker: Your power score is directly tied to your participation grade. If you end up with five power points, you end up earning five points for your participation grade (i.e. five points out of ten). That is, *your participation score is linked point-for-point with your power score*. If you end up with ten points, you will earn the full ten participation points. For every point over ten, you will earn one point “extra credit” up to a maximum of three points. The point allocation system creates an incentive to participate. Failing to participate will result in point loss (and grade depreciation). Keep in mind that since you can lose power, you can end up with a negative score. At the end of the game, any student with a zero (or a negative score) will receive a zero for their participation grade, no questions asked. Hence, if you find yourself in trouble early, it will be up to you to dig yourself out.

As noted, power is fluid. It ebbs and flows. To put some structure on the game, below are some general guidelines for how points can be added or subtracted. Importantly, you should recognize at the start that I am not going to be the sole arbiter of points. While I will have primacy over the point system and will have the final say-so over your final game score, there are some twists and turns to keep in mind. First, the leadership (majority or minority) has the authority to take away as well as to allocate points. You may ask why these Members have these powers. In the real House, leadership has a great deal of control over the lives of rank-and-file members. As we will learn in class, the leadership has both positive and negative power. Positively, the leaders can provide “cover” for you in the event you have to make a tough vote. In the context of our game, the leaders may find it necessary to allocate some power points to you from time to time. Negatively, the leadership can take away points. For example, suppose you renege on a deal or vote against the leadership on an important vote. In this case, the leaders may impose sanctions on you by taking away some of your power. You should also be aware that the opposite party leadership will have the right to give points to you, but not to take them away. In other words, your own leadership giveth, and your own leadership taketh away. And the other leadership just giveth.

Finally, member-to-member transactions, provided that they are mutually agreeable, are permissible. For example, you may need the vote or support of another member. In order to gain this vote, you may offer that member a point or more. In the future, the other member may reciprocate. This kind of exchange is sometimes referred to as “logrolling.” Good deals may result in increases in your number of power points, whereas bad deals may result in decreases. This is especially true for people with lots of power points. If you don’t use them effectively, expect to lose them.

To elaborate on all this, below are some basic rules of exchange.

Power additions

There are four classes of power additions, described below.

Professorial additions:

If a Member displays a creative use of House rules and/or displays an understanding of House procedure above and beyond a textbook understanding of the process, Jake may allocate one or more points to the Member.

Press/Constituency/White House Additions:

These kinds of additions are in direct response to how you play the game politically. For example, a strong defense of your actions (votes, bill initiations, response to some crisis) may prompt the press or your constituency to allocate power points. Further, a “vote of courage” may be rewarded with additional power. This reward may come from the press, the constituents, or the White House (for example, the President really needed your vote and you came through).⁴

Leadership/ Committee Leader Additions:

As noted above, the leadership may find it necessary to give you a “protective shield” if you are faced with a tough vote. Under this scenario, the leaders may allocate power points to you in order to mitigate any political fallout from your vote (i.e. the leaders give you political capital to expend on their behalf). Additionally, the leadership may seek to reward good partisans for their work by granting power points. Importantly (leaders, take note!!!), any allocation of power from leadership to another Member is taken directly from the leader’s own power budget. Thus, stingy leaders may be unwilling to part from his or her power (which could in turn lead to sanctions being imposed on the leader by the press!). Because leaders can allocate power, there is a bonus attached to being elected leader: if elected Speaker, you will immediately gain six power points. If elected majority or minority leader, you get 5. The two whips get 4. For their part, committee chairs get 3 points, and ranking minority members get 2.

Member-to-Member transactions:

Simply put, Members may logroll. They may lobby other members or indeed, “buy” votes, so to speak. This means that if two Members mutually agree, one member may allocate power directly to another member. But take note: Any transactions of this type are zero-sum. If you give one point to another member, you lose one point from your own power budget.

Power subtractions

You can gain...but you can just as easily lose. Power is fluid. Blow a vote, lose some power. Anger the White House, lose some power. Members of the House face cross-pressures. You will have to weather the storm. There are three classes of deductions:

Professorial deductions:

If you miss an in-class simulation day, there will be a mandatory 2 point power deduction. This is punitive but a necessary evil. When you are absent, everyone in the simulation is

⁴ The very cleverest of you will have realized by now that these types of additions are not, in fact, “magic,” but are also determined by the professor and are therefore really just a subset of the additions described above.

affected. Additionally, if a member incorrectly uses the rules or grossly misunderstands House procedure, there will be a one point deduction per infraction. Rules are important. You will learn them and live them. If not, you will suffer the consequences! Finally, a violation of House courtesy (i.e. using Members' given names during proceedings, calling each other names, hurling insults) will result in a one point deduction. Creative Members can be scathing while also maintaining "courtesy."

Press/Constituency/White House deductions:

If the press or your constituency interprets your actions as exceeding the constraints imposed on you by your constituents, then you will face a power deduction. For example, a "blown vote" or acting in a manner that defies political explanation will hurt you. A "faux pas" or scandal may result in power deductions. Further, if you are a "bad partisan" or show yourself to be vulnerable to special interests (i.e. you "cave in"), the press, your constituency, or the White House may deduct power. Finally, I reserve the right to grant retrospective deductions if you prove to be a do-nothing backbencher or if you decide to play the game in some other way that is boring or uninspired.

Leadership deductions:

The leaders from your own party have the right to take away power points from any party member they choose, and committee leaders have the right to take away power points from party members who sit on their committees. If you renege on a deal, blow a vote, or are, in the leader's eyes, a "bad partisan," the leadership may deduct one power point per infraction.

Handy tips

To help you play the game, here are some tips and recommended strategies.

First, any transfer of power (either by leaders or by members) needs to be reported to me immediately. I will maintain a database of power points and will update it regularly (daily, when we get to the most intense part of the simulation). **WHAT I SAY GOES. THIS MEANS THAT MY ACCOUNTING OF POWER POINTS IS ABSOLUTELY OFFICIAL. IF YOU DO NOT REPORT TRANSACTIONS (POINTS GAINED/LOST), THEN GAINS (OR LOSSES) WILL NOT SHOW UP IN MY DATABASE. YOU ARE OUT OF LUCK IF YOU ARE IN THIS SITUATION.** The solution is easy: Report all transactions to me. If you are a leader and you take away points, indicate who lost points. If you allocate points, indicate who gained the points. The same goes for member-to-member transactions. Remember that sacrificing some of your power may actually help you later on. Hence, reporting deductions is as important as reporting additions. If you are ever in doubt about your point score, consult me immediately.

Second, recognize that you inevitably face cross-pressures. Angering the leadership may actually please your constituents. So remember Newton's Third Law: Whenever one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body exerts a force of equal magnitude and opposite direction.⁵ In political terms, we might modify the law: losing a power point might gain you multiple power points. Conversely, a gain in power points might be more

⁵ Or something like that. I'm no physicist.

than offset by a loss in power.⁶ The trick is: Be aware. What are the pressures out there? Where are your constituents? Who is going to notice your actions? Think before you leap!

Third, recognize that you can mitigate damage by being sure that your reaction is politically smart. You might have to “soften the blow” after making a vote you know will anger your constituents. You might find yourself in the middle of a controversy you didn’t create, but could harm you if you don’t tread carefully. Think of the flap a few years ago involving freshman Congressman Keith Ellison. Sitting Congressman Virgil Goode criticized Ellison, who is Muslim, for planning to use the Koran in his official swearing-in ceremony as a Member of the House. Ellison kept his mouth shut when Goode was getting all kinds of press attention, saying only that he looked forward to meeting Goode. Then Ellison showed up on Swearing-In Day with a Koran once owned by Thomas Jefferson. Then, he goes up to Goode after the swearing-in and shakes his hand, right in front of the C-SPAN cameras. That guy is brilliant. Thomas Jefferson’s Koran? That’s ten power points right there.

Fourth, KNOW THE RULES. I can’t stress this enough. If you display a keen understanding of the rules, I guarantee you will be rewarded. If you fall victim to another Representatives’ better understanding of the rules, I guarantee you will be punished. For example, in the Nineteenth Century House, Representatives figured out that they could just not answer when their names were called on the roll, and the House would be denied the quorum it needed to continue business. Minority members used this parliamentary trick to stymie the majority.⁷ That move would get them a couple of power points each, in my view.

Fifth, come to class. You won’t gain power by showing up, but you’ll definitely lose power if you don’t come. Remember: There is a mandatory two point deduction for missing a simulation day.

Sixth, work behind the scenes. Some of the best, most powerful Members of the House are not great speakers, but can make things happen outside of the limelight. One important strategy is to copy me on any emails you send to other members when you are talking about strategy. This correspondence (which will remain confidential unless you specify otherwise) will give me a sense of the “hidden” work you are doing.

Seventh, remember the words of former Member of the House of Representatives⁸ John F. Kennedy: Of those to whom much is given, much is required.⁹ If you are endowed with lots of power points, because you have a powerful position, seniority, or both, you should use it. If you hoard it, you will lose it. George W. Bush once said: “I learned you must

⁶ In this sense, then, the law is probably more like the Wiccan Rule of Threes than Newton’s Third Law, but referring to it as Newton’s Third Law makes me seem more like a conformist intellectual, which I prefer.

⁷ Note that the rule was changed in 1890, so you can’t use this trick.

⁸ I think he had some other jobs, too, but I’m not sure.

⁹ Yes, I know he was quoting the Bible. Luke 12:48, to be exact.

spend political capital, or it withers and dies.” He never served in Congress, but his dad did, so he probably knows what he’s talking about.

FAC (frequently asserted complaints):

But I don’t have any power because I have no seniority!

Gee, that’s a shame. And very, very sad. You should feel really sorry for yourself. But if you think it is unrealistic, I’d suggest taking an elevator ride up to the cramped, stinky offices on the fifth floor of the Rayburn House Office Building, where they house some of the real freshmen members of Congress. Oh wait. You’ll have to take the stairs. The elevators don’t go up there.

The other people I work with are (choose one or more) lazy/not as smart as me/unethical/losers.

Gee, that’s a shame. And very, very sad. You should feel really sorry for yourself. Have you ever heard of Mark Foley? Randy “Duke” Cunningham? Jim Traficant? Anthony Weiner? Google them.

The media is mean and unfair.

Gee, that’s a shame. And very, very sad. You should feel really sorry for yourself. But at least they are not Wonkette. (www.wonkette.com, but only if you don’t mind straight-up offensive stuff)

The majority leadership is ignoring me just because I’m in the minority!

Gee, that’s a shame. And very, very sad. Blahlahblah. I think you get the picture by now.