

Democratic Simulations: Models for Life-Long Civic Engagement

Elizabeth R. Osborn and Cathy Ruffing

In a recent article titled “Building Better Citizens Begins in the Classroom,” American legal scholar Justin Driver wrote, “A student-centered approach to civic education ... frames students as active participants in shaping our constitutional order and positions them to become engaged, stewards of our democracy.”¹

Democratic simulations are widely acknowledged by researchers as one of the most effective approaches to civic education.² Simulations of democratic processes such as mock legislative hearings, moot courts, and town budget planning help students build knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate in decision making in their schools and communities. They learn to analyze issues, discern arguments, listen, form and express opinions, and develop public speaking skills.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has included simulations of democratic processes among its “Six Proven Practices.” NCSS urges schools to encourage student participation in these simulations, citing several benefits for active citizenship and academic and career success, including “learn[ing] skills with clear applicability to both civic and non-civic contexts, such as public speaking, teamwork, close reading, analytical thinking, and the ability to argue both sides of a topic.”³

More recently, the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) Roadmap included simulations in its “Six Core Pedagogical Principles.”⁴ The EAD Roadmap encourages teachers to model the constitutional principle of “We the People” and to provide students with opportunities to take informed action by engaging in events and tackling issues in their communities. Simulations

of school board meetings, state legislatures, and Congress give students the opportunity to take on important issues in their lives and discover the agency they possess.

Gaps in Theory and Practice

Despite the evidence and recommendations supporting the use of simulations, there are significant gaps between the efficacy of these practices and the extent to which they are conducted in classrooms. This raises two important questions: (1) what are the reasons for this gap, and (2) how can civic education institutions help teachers in overcoming the barriers? This article explores several potential answers to those questions.

According to the 2018 National Assessment of Education Progress civics assessment, less than half of students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades reported having participated in a democratic simulation.⁵ Black students report having fewer civic-oriented social studies classes and fewer opportunities to discuss current and contested issues, and Latino students reported fewer opportunities to engage in democratic simulations.⁶

The reasons for the low usage of democratic simulation are multi-faceted, but they often relate to a lack of time: some teachers feel significant external or internal pressure to simply “cover” content and are anxious about the investment of class time a simulation requires—especially in light of mandated testing. Other educators worry about the amount of time needed for preparation, and yet others are motivated by fear of parent or administrator reactions. All of these are valid concerns in today’s teaching environment.

Civic Education Institutions as Resources

Because interactive simulations can be complicated and time-consuming to create, one good option is for teachers to look to trusted curriculum providers for simulations that have been classroom tested and are ready to implement. Organizations in the national nonpartisan Civics Renewal Network (civicsrenewalnetwork.org) are a great place for teachers to start when looking for high quality ready-made simulations.

To lessen anxiety about parental or administrative concerns about simulations, teachers can share the simulation lesson plan and the website of the civic education organization providing the lesson prior to conducting the simulation.

To assist educators in delivering high-quality democratic simulations, civic education organizations are teaming up with teachers to prepare students for life-long civic engagement by providing all students with real-life democratic experiences. Examples of a variety of programs from two Civics Renewal Network organizations, Street Law, Inc. and the Center on Representative Government (CORG), are briefly outlined here.

Street Law Simulations

Street Law, Inc. believes there is more to democracy than voting—democracy is also what happens between elections and it happens best in classrooms and communities where everyone has a voice and can participate and engage in democratic processes. Through its participant-centered, interactive pedagogy, Street Law fosters democratic cultures at home and abroad, empowering the next generation to become critical thinkers on issues of rule of law, democracy, equity, and justice. One way that Street Law achieves this is by providing free lesson plans for democratic simulations, such as state legislative hearings, town hall meetings, moot courts, and more.

State Legislative Hearings

State and local laws, ordinances, and school board policies often have the greatest impact on students' lives. Role playing a state representative or a citizen advocating for a policy provides

valuable training for active citizenship. Simulating a legislative hearing or school board meeting helps students understand the purposes and procedures involved, as well as the roles and responsibilities of committee members. Through this process, students gain experience in identifying and clarifying the ideas, interests, and values associated with the topics being discussed. The issues addressed at these levels—such as cyberbullying legislation, voting procedure reform, and school dress codes—directly affect students, enhancing their engagement and investment in the democratic process. Teachers can access Street Law's free simulations at <https://store.streetlaw.org> by using the search term "simulation."

Moot Courts

A moot court is a role-play of an appeals court hearing or Supreme Court oral argument, where the court is tasked with reviewing a lower court's decision. Participants prepare and present arguments on legal questions that are often constitutional in nature. Moot courts are an effective strategy for engaging students with fundamental legal principles and concepts of justice.

Supreme Court cases provide opportunity and content for discussing contested public issues in meaningful ways, helping students develop critical decision-making skills, gain civic knowledge, improve communication skills, and foster empathy and tolerance for differing viewpoints. Within a divided democracy, teaching about controversial issues also increases student political engagement and improves civil discourse. Surveys show that social studies teachers recognize the importance of teaching about controversial issues to better prepare students to navigate conflict and controversy in civic life. However, many teachers also report feeling unprepared to teach these lessons effectively.⁷

While it would be naïve to believe that the Supreme Court is apolitical, lessons that use Supreme Court cases instead of policy issues or campaign platforms can help take politics out of the controversy. This approach allows students and teachers to focus on the legal issues at hand, rather than the personalities involved.

Street Law, Inc.'s

Mock Legislative Hearing Simplified Lesson Plan



1

Identify a Lesson Plan

Create one of your own or visit store.streetlaw.org and search “legislative hearing” for full lesson plans.

2

Assign Student Roles

- Legislators and a committee chairperson
- Witnesses
- Recorder
- Journalists

3

Invite Community Members

Invite staff from your local legislature, interest groups, or chapters of organizations to attend.

4

Brief Students on Purpose and Procedures

Explain the purpose of the legislative hearing and the procedures to be followed. Distribute any handouts, and confirm that students understand their roles and tasks.

5

Student Prep Time

Allow time for students to prepare for their assigned roles by writing a witness testimony, preparing questions for witnesses, etc.

6

Arrange Your Classroom

Arrange your classroom to look like a committee hearing room, with seats along the front for the legislators and a podium or table for witnesses.

7

Chairperson Calls Hearing to Order

The committee chairperson calls the legislative hearing to order, states the purpose of the hearing, and announces the order and time limits for witness testimony and questions from committee members.

- 2-5 minutes for witnesses
- 5-10 minutes for questions from committee members

8

Witness Testimonies

Each witness is called to present a statement followed by questions from the committee. The chairperson is the first to question the witness.

9

Committee Recommendations

The committee reviews the testimony, discusses the problem, and recommends next steps.

10

Conclusion and Debrief

- What did you learn about the issue we considered?
- Which facts and arguments were most persuasive? Why?
- Did you agree with the perspective of the role you were assigned?
- What did you learn about lawmaking/rulemaking from this activity?
- Dropping your role, how do you think this issue should be addressed?
- Do you think our real legislature should address this issue?



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Teachers at the Supreme Court Summer Institute participate in a moot court at Georgetown University Law Center.

Consequently, students are free to form and express opinions grounded in the facts and arguments presented, free from preconceived assumptions or confirmation bias. Through the simulation of appellate cases, students can embody Justice Stephen Breyer’s maxim making independent decisions based on a reasoned analysis of the law and the relevant facts.⁸

Another strength of a moot court as an instructional strategy is its flexibility. A more formal moot court can span several class periods, allowing students to study legal precedents, work in teams to shape arguments, practice effective advocacy, and ultimately, conduct a moot court proceeding before a panel of student judges. However, moot courts can also be simplified to fit within a single class period. Once students grasp the purpose and procedures of a moot court, this method can be easily adapted for use in a variety of teaching situations and time frames. One teacher who recently attended a Street Law professional development institute remarked, “I have used moot courts in my classroom for years. They are a great way to get students actively engaged in the

content [and] ... an extremely effective way to help students come to a deep understanding of the case and the constitutional issues involved. Plus, they are really fun.” You can access Street Law’s free moot court simulations at <https://store.streetlaw.org> using the search term “moot court.”

Center on Representative Government Simulations

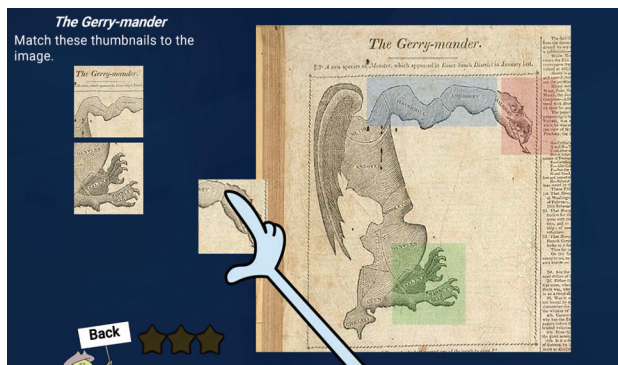
The Center on Representative Government (CORG, <https://corg.iu.edu>), a non-partisan organization founded in 1999 by former Representative Lee Hamilton, strives to provide opportunities for students to build the skills needed for active and engaged citizenship in a meaningful and interactive manner.

Quantitative data presented in the Nation’s Report Card reveals most students entering high school lack the core knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the civic life of our nation, demonstrating a need for more innovative approaches to teaching social studies and civics.⁹

To this end, the Center has developed a collection of innovative and interactive

educational learning tools (Action Citizen, CitizIN, Engaging Congress, and Freedom Summer 1964) and a library of videos to provide teachers with resources to reach this goal.¹⁰ All materials are available at no cost from the CORG's website, <https://corg.iu.edu>.

CORG's resources (<https://corg.iu.edu/resources/index.html>) focus on building the skills needed in a representative democracy: critical thinking, collaboration, and participation. This is accomplished through the inquiry-based analysis of primary sources in an interactive "gamified" manner and the reinforcement of content through tasks and games that simulate some of the tasks associated with active and engaged citizenship such as building budgets, managing a city, helping to tackle environmental issues, and gerrymandering.



Engaging Congress (<https://engagingcongress.org>) has 42 primary sources spread between 7 units that focus on issues like federalism, separation of powers, and voting rights. In the unit focused on executive powers, users simulate advising the president on a policy statement from various perspectives.



Similarly, in Action Citizen (<https://actioncitizen.org>), users learn about key environmental legislation and the citizens who helped make them happen. Then, as residents of a town,

the simulation focuses their efforts to minimize environmental catastrophes while choosing ways to reduce environmental impact going forward.



CitizIN's (<https://citizin.org>) six units chronologically align with a standard U.S. History course. In the final unit, citizens act as the mayor of a small town and, after creating a simulated annual budget for their town, they must make monthly decisions about spending while trying to end the year without a budget deficit.

Democracy Quest (DQ), set to launch during the 2024-2025 school year, combines primary source analysis with virtual reality (VR) to engage students in multiple modalities. Through a series of simulations in the virtual world, they have the opportunity to practice civic skills in an evidence-based and innovative manner. DQ is intended for 6th-12th grade students in U.S. History, government, and civics classes.¹¹

Taken as a whole, CORG's rich resources provide teachers with multiple options for incorporating innovative simulations to use with their students that will help develop the skills needed to be engaged and informed citizens.

Conclusion

Now more than ever, America's polarized communities need citizens who possess the skills necessary to protect and grow democracy. Through democratic simulations, educators can help students develop and strengthen the civic muscles they need to become the best stewards of democracy that they can be.

Simulations require out-of-class time for preparation and in class time for students to participate in the simulation. However, teachers—especially educators new to simulations—can

mitigate those concerns by using classroom tested, well-planned simulations created by trusted curriculum providers. As teachers become more experienced in simulations, they may choose to modify existing simulations or create their own based on their standards and classroom needs. ■

Notes

1. Justin Driver, “Building Better Citizens Begins in the Classroom,” *Education Next* 24, no. 3, Summer 2024, www.educationnext.org/building-better-citizens-begins-in-the-classroom.
2. Lisa R. Halverson, Eleesha Tucker, and Gloria Smith, “Teaching Civics: An Overview of Instructional Strategies Using Primary Sources, Role-Play and Simulations, and Academic Service Learning for Teaching Civic Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions,” *The Social Studies* (July 2024).
3. “Revitalizing Civic Learning in Our Schools,” A Position Statement of National Council for Social Studies, 2013.
4. Educating for American Democracy Roadmap, 2021.
5. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “Do Discussion, Debate, and Simulations Boost NAEP Civics Performance?” Fact Sheet, The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (April 2013), John M. Tisch School of Public Engagement, Tufts University.
6. Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School,” CIRCLE Working Paper 59 (Medford, MA: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Tufts University, February 2008).
7. Cathy Ruffing and Lee Arbetman, “Exploring Controversies through Supreme Court Cases: Appealing to Reason,” *Social Education* 82, no. 6 (2018): 343 – 347.
8. Based on the following quote from Justice Stephen Breyer: “Independence means you decide according to the law and the facts.” Stephen Breyer, “Justice for Sale,” interview by Bill Moyers, *Frontline*, 1999.
9. The results of the 2022 National Assessment for Educational Progress revealed the first ever drop in civic knowledge for the nation’s eighth graders. “NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP Civic Assessment,” The Nation’s Report Card (Oct. 29, 2024), www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/civics/2022.
10. CORG’s curriculum team includes Mariah Pol and Ryan Cowden, Ph.D. students from Indiana University’s Curriculum and Instruction program. Both bring their expertise as social studies teachers to these projects through the creation of outstanding inquiry-based curricular materials. <https://corg.iu.edu/lessonplans>
11. Nicole C. Miller and Rebecca L. Kellum, “Making the Virtual Historical Using Primary Sources,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* (2024).



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