

U.S. Government

Winning the Seat:
A Congressional Election Simulation

Student _____

Role _____

By

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Congresslink.org

Congressional Campaign Simulation

I. Tentative Schedule

Class Session One

Teacher introduces the simulation

Materials distributed

Teams formed. (Two teams of 9-12 players)

Within each team, roles are assigned. Each team will have two students alternating in the role of the candidate (since this is a difficult role) and will also have two co-campaign managers. In addition, other students on each team will take on the following roles:

- Four students, including one of the campaign managers, will be assigned to be media consultants and develop campaign advertising
- Four students, including one of the campaign managers, will be assigned to be speechwriters and prepare stump speeches

In addition to this, all students on each team will be assigned an issue on which they will write a one-to-two-page position paper, arguing for and developing a position the campaign will take on that issue.

Assign roles/duties

Select issues about which students will write position papers

Teams meet

Make strategic evaluations of candidate's and opponent's strengths and weaknesses

Decide how to prepare the first commercial and stump speech (purpose and general content of each)

Team members do research about the issues using “Democrats vs. Republicans”

Homework: Students complete position papers

Class Session Two

Present first commercial

Each candidate presents the "biography/candidate introduction" ad with a time limit of 30 seconds

Teams meet to evaluate candidate's and opponent's first commercial and prepare first stump speech

Candidate delivers first stump speech (Sounds general themes based on issue research, opponent's commercial, and information about the district. Time limit: 3-5 minutes)

Teams meet to evaluate stump speeches and prepare second commercial

Candidate delivers second commercial, an issue ad. Time limit: 30 seconds

Teams meet

Evaluate second commercial and prepare for debate, briefing candidate on issues and opponent's weaknesses.

Candidate prepares opening and closing statements, the latter to be adjusted during the debate.

Class Session Three

Debate takes place. time limit: 10-15 minutes

Students turn in position papers

Teams meet to develop guidelines for the final stump speech

Candidates deliver final campaign speech. Time limit: 3-5 minutes

Class Session Four

Class discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the respective campaigns

What might have changed the outcome?

How typical is the case study?

How might students get involved in real campaigns?

How does the case study or studies we used reflect the politics of our own congressional district?

Who determines who wins these elections?

Are there criteria that you believe should be the most important ones?

Do you feel congressional elections are set up to give voters adequate information?

How does the (essentially local) character of congressional elections affect the ability of Congress to be a policy-maker for the nation as a whole?

II. Case Study: All-Out Ideological War

The District

This district is so diverse that it is every incumbent's nightmare. Thirty years ago, this district was basically urban (centered in the city of Heartland) with some smaller pieces of suburbia. As the city has shrunk over the last twenty years, the district has twice been redistricted so that it now includes almost an even split of urban and suburban voters. Any ideology can claim to have some support within the district, but nobody has been able to tame it. Thus, this is one of the most volatile and competitive districts in the country, and always attracts the attention of the national parties.

Within the last twelve years, this district has been represented in succession by a conservative Republican who championed right-to-life positions, a liberal Democrat who urged higher taxes and redistributive social spending, a fiscally conservative yet socially moderate Republican, and a staunchly pro-union Democrat. Each of these incumbents either met with defeat or chose to abandon this district to make a run for higher office. In the last election, Tony DeMarco, a pro-union Democrat, was reelected for a second term with 52% of the vote. For DeMarco, this actually represented an improvement over his first election, when he won by 801 votes. DeMarco is retiring from his congressional seat to wage a long-shot campaign for governor. This year, both parties held competitive primaries and in the end chose true ideologues to run for this seat.

The Democrat - Mary Rodriguez

The Democrats have nominated State Representative Mary Rodriguez, 33, a Latina woman who has held elective office since she graduated from college. After 4 years on the Heartland City Council, Rodriguez ran for the state house and was victorious. She is giving up a safe district in the state house to seek this congressional seat. She describes herself as "a woman who believes that, when run effectively, government can help to solve societal problems. Government is not the enemy."

Rodriguez is a liberal. She favors higher taxes on the wealthy and redistributing income to the poorer sections of the country. She is pro-environment, which resonates well with the "green" elements in the suburbs. She favors increased federal involvement in health care - she has commented that "national health insurance is the only long-term solution and it is just a matter of time until people see that." Rodriguez is a very strong affirmative action supporter; in college, she was arrested at a pro-affirmative action rally on campus. Rodriguez tries to downplay her pro-choice stand on abortion, as it runs the risk of offending the heavily Catholic Latino constituency living in the city of Heartland.

The Republican - Kurt Bullard

For the Republicans, the nomination went to Kurt Bullard, 56, a vice-president with Olsen Furniture, one of the state's largest furniture companies (and the biggest single employer in the district). Bullard has never run for public office before. He was moved to run by what he feels are anti-business policies being passed by the Democrats. He also strongly opposes abortion and affirmative action - "I overcame obstacles and made it without preferential treatment in hiring. That's the American way." He derides Rodriguez' positions on healthcare as advocating "socialized medicine."

Bullard is also proud to call himself a "citizen legislator." In a recent newspaper interview, he attempted to remind voters that "there is a world out there outside of government service. My opponent has been sponging off the government since she graduated from college." Bullard views it as his job to "give something back" by taking time off from running his business to serve in Congress. He has pledged to serve no more than three terms in Congress and then return home.

The Analysts

Political analyst Sam Balish describes the race as follows: This is a clear-cut ideological battle between two candidates who each seem to have a decent shot of winning. The district is split in such a way that either candidate could win this one. I think the affirmative action issue slightly favors Bullard, especially given Rodriguez's extremism on the issue. The environment favors Rodriguez, as this is one issue on which the suburban voters look like liberals. Income redistribution seems an evenly split issue in the district. Abortion is the wildcard. Rodriguez has a whole bunch of Catholic voters in the city who are inclined to support her except for on the abortion issue. If she can hold their votes, I think she wins. If not, Bullard could take this. Toss-up.

Democratic Party consultant Barry Simon has offered the following advice to the Rodriguez campaign: We need to do two things. First, we need to energize our base. We must strongly reach out to the urban voters on affirmative action, the environment, health care, and liberal income redistribution policies. This also involves minimizing the prominence of abortion for Catholic voters. Second, we need to grab the wedge issues that will pull the suburban voters toward us. That means hitting the environment repeatedly. This is the strategy that could win it for us, although this will be very tight.

Republican Party consultant Adam Newman offers this advice to the Bullard campaign: Seems to me we have an ultra-liberal running here. Her positions on affirmative action are well outside the mainstream, and her positions on high taxes and high spending are typical of failed liberal policies. We've got to hammer home these points to the suburbs. And, we have to go to the urban part of the district and hammer home the fact that Rodriguez is pro-choice; this is at odds with her core constituency. If we can pull this coalition apart a little bit, we can win. We don't need to win the city. If all we do is cut her margins slightly, or depress turnout there, this one is ours.

III. Preparing for the Campaign

Advice for Giving a Good Stump Speech

1. Highlight successes. Point to things you have done while in office that the voters will like and that will make them want to return you. This might involve showing that you have succeeded in protecting local interests (credit claiming).

"During the last session, I fought to make sure that Congress retained funding for the B-1 Bomber that we make right here in our district. Send me back for two more years and I will continue to fight for our local interests."

It might also involve showing that you have succeeded in taking positions that are likely to appeal to the majority of voters in the district. Note that this position taking also often involves a measure of credit-claiming:

"A woman's right to choose what to do with her body is a fundamental right and I have consistently voted to protect that right while in Congress. I am proud to have co-sponsored two amendments protecting a woman's right to choose during the last session of Congress."

For challengers, or candidates in an open-seat election, claiming credit will not be easy. If the non-incumbent has held another office (such as state representative), that can provide an opportunity to claim credit. If not, the candidate is forced to resort to #2.

2. Promise the moon. OK, maybe not the moon. Voters can see through that. But promise at least a few smaller satellites. Especially for candidates without a record, campaign promises become their best way to demonstrate that they will be working hard to deliver for the district:

"When I go to Washington, I will seek ways to protect the interests of these local fishermen. I support the Fishermen's Relief Act and will seek to see its provisions implemented this year. Elect me and all who earn their living at this harbor will have a good friend in Washington."

3. Connect with the group to whom you are speaking. Members of Congress have their standard stump speeches that they use. They modify the speech, however, to address the needs and interests of the group to whom they are speaking. Thus, a speech before a business group will emphasize the members' record on business matters, while a speech to college students might emphasize student loans. It is in these types of speeches that candidates get their policy positions across to voters.

4. Use your name frequently. When voters go to vote, they must be able to identify the name of their preferred candidate. Thus, use your name in order to make voters remember it. Most incumbents, in contrast, will not use their opponents' name in order to avoid giving them free advertising:

"My opponent wants to tax you so much that you'll have no ability to invest for the future. This is wrong. When you go to the polls on Election Day, a vote for John Smith is a vote for the freedom to spend your money as you want."

5. Know the different types of speeches you will give and what they are meant to accomplish. In the simulation, candidates will have the opportunity to give three speeches, each of which has a central goal:

A. The Introductory Speech. In this speech, the candidate is introduced to the voters. It is his/her opportunity to tell them a little about his/her background, policy positions, campaign themes, and character. The speech must communicate that the candidate is viable (has a shot of winning) and is interesting enough to want to hear more from.

B. The Specialized Audience Speech. This speech is typically given to a group of supporters. For example, a Democrat might speak to a teacher's union and a Republican might speak to the Chamber of Commerce. The goal here is not votes necessarily (you should already have these votes locked up), but rather enthusiasm. The candidate wants members of these groups to become fired up enough by the candidate to campaign, talk to friends and neighbors, and give money.

C. The Election Eve Rally Speech. Think Knute Rockne-style pep talk. This speech must convince those who hear it that the election is close enough and important enough that they must get out and vote, encourage others to vote, and, most importantly, to care.

6. Speak well. This goes without saying, but speaking slowly, clearly, in an organized style and with sincerity and conviction will help convince the voters that you know what you are doing. Good speakers can impress even though who disagree with them and earn more support than their issue positions might warrant. Content aside, be a great communicator.

Advice for Making a Good Commercial

1. Anyone creating a commercial must keep in mind how viewers react to commercials. Think about your life. I know when I'm sitting at home watching TV, I'm also doing lots of other things like reading, talking on the phone, going online, carrying on a conversation with my wife, and eating. I'd bet you're like that, too. Are you really going to pay close attention when the commercial starts? I doubt it. Or, maybe you use the commercials as a time to run to the bathroom or to fix yourself a snack. Again, are you going to pay close attention when the commercial starts? Of course not. So, people creating commercials must understand that what they are saying is not being carefully seen or listened to by their viewers. They must strive to be heard despite these obstacles.

2. Remember rule #1.

3. One commercial, one message. This is the most fundamental thing to keep in mind. People cannot remember a large amount of information. A commercial is like a little thirty-second play. It has an introduction, middle, and end. It often has a hero (the candidate) and/or a villain (the opponent). But, most importantly, it has a plot. A good commercial has a nice, simple, story line that could be remembered even by somebody who was only glancing at it while it was on the screen.

4. Keep it simple in language as well as message. Avoid using polysyllabic lexicon when simple words will suffice. Don't use complex sentences, with numerous subordinate clauses, that might, occasionally, cause certain voters, including those with the least formal education, to have difficulty in dealing with the language. Make your point simply and with an economy of language. Also, assume your viewers know next-to-nothing about any policy areas in question. Explain everything to them.

5. Visuals often mean as much as the written text. While you will obviously not be presenting full commercials, you might be asked for a description of visual images as well as the printed text. Take care to cast the candidate in as favorable a light as possible when showing graphics. Surrounding the candidate with kids or babies is always a good move. A loving family makes a nice prop in a commercial. And, showing the candidate in "action shots" (including the classic with the sleeves rolled up!) is also a good move. These things may be cliched, but they become cliches for a reason - they work.

6. Like stump speeches, there are different types of commercials. The standards we apply to each one are different, because they are intended to convey particular messages. Among the most common:

A. The Introduction - this is kind of commercial you use when you want to introduce the candidate to the voters (likely for a challenger or open-seat candidate) or reintroduce the candidate (an incumbent). These are usually positive commercials that often focus on the background of the person involved or their accomplishments. These are the "feel-good" ads.

B. The Issue Ad - this commercial lays out the basics (just the basics; don't get too specific) of an issue and suggests why your candidate's position is the correct one on the issue. This ad might be mildly "comparative," laying out a picture of your opponent's views (probably exaggerated slightly) and showing the error of those views.

C. The Attack Ad - usually hits your opponents over scandal, bad votes, or poor work while in office. Some attack ads end with a statement of who the voter should vote for instead (i.e., "If you're sick of this kind of behavior, vote for John Goodperson instead."). Others don't even bother to do this, and instead just focus 100% of the ad on the attack. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. Attack ads are usually used by candidates who are losing.

D. The Response Ad - done after you have been attacked by an ad. The key to an attack ad is to respond quickly and firmly. A good response ad will repeat only the very basics of the attack (in order not to help your opponent by repeating his or her charges). Then, it will state (1) why the original ad was wrong; (2) what the facts are; and possibly will also (3) respond in kind by attacking your opponent. While attack ads are usually reserved for those who are losing, almost all candidates realize they must respond to them or risk having the attacks seen as true.

E. The Testimonial - this kind of ad features people making statements about how wonderful the candidate is. The people being quoted can be everyday people or political elites. Regular people can provide a certain legitimacy to the ad; they are often carefully chosen to represent the voters most being targeted (such as using "Soccer Moms" to endorse the candidate when the campaign is focusing on women's issues). Testimonials by political figures often carry weight, as do endorsements from celebrities who may or may not be political (singers, actors, etc.)

7. Last, but not least, ask yourself the two questions listed below before putting out any commercial. If the answers are "yes," you're ready to go. If the answer is "no," go back to the drawing board.

A. Is what I have interesting enough to get people to hear its message?

B. Is the message strong and effective enough to get people to vote for my candidate?

How to Win a Debate

1. Show mastery of the issues. This is especially important for candidates who may be fighting a reputation that they are a lightweight or not up for the job. Each campaign will have a series of policy papers - it is up to the two students playing the candidates to demonstrate that they understand the issues. Charisma and looks are important, but a candidate who does not seem qualified will be judged to have performed poorly in the debate.

2. Know your tag line. Use it often, but not too often. Your big line in a debate must be like the melody to a Broadway musical - the audience must be whistling it as they walk out. Assume that two hours after the debate ends, everyone will have forgotten 90 percent of what they've heard. If you've got a central theme you want to get across, you must repeat it often enough so that it becomes part of the 10 percent they remember. I bet you can't recall a thing Al Gore said to George W. Bush in debate #1, but when I say "fuzzy math," many of you will recognize that.

3. Have one or two really cool one liners and use them. Work them in. People remember them. For example, some of my favorites:

A. Ronald Reagan in response to a question on whether he's too old to be president: "I will not exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience."

B. Lloyd Bentsen after Dan Quayle compared himself to John F. Kennedy: "I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. And you, senator, are no Jack Kennedy."

C. Al Gore on Jack Kemp's supply side economics plan: "The problem with your trickle-down economics is that it will send the entire country over Niagara Falls in a barrel."

4. Don't make a big mistake. Be risk averse. Risk saying nothing rather than making a bold statement that will turn out to be wrong.

5. Remember that this is your opportunity to speak to the American people and communicate your message to them. Have statements, lines, and explanations ready, and work them in. Candidates who do poorly in debates usually say that they got caught up in the moment, abandoned their speeches and carefully-arrived at strategies, and starting winging it. Say what you wanted to say; don't get too drawn into what is being said.

6. Find the comfortable middle ground between being too aggressive and being too passive. In 2000, for example, Al Gore was far too aggressive in the first debate. He overcompensated and was far too passive in the second. Imagine a continuum between total aggression and total passivity. Figure out where you want to place yourself on that continuum. Make a decision how much you will attack your opponent and how much you will ignore what your opponent says.

7. Work hard on the opening and closing statements. These are the kinds of things voters remember, so be sure the opening is well-written and compellingly lays out the case for voting for you. Be sure your closing statement leaves the voters whistling your theme (see #2). Much of what happens in the middle of the debate gets lost in people's minds, so be sure that the beginning and middle do not.

8. Once again, speak well. Speaking slowly, clearly, in an organized style and with sincerity and conviction will help convince the voters that you know what you are doing. Modulate the speed and tone of what you are saying so those watching the debate do not get bored. This can earn you support from even those who disagree with you.

IV. Democrats vs Republicans

The information presented in each of the cases does not explain all of the issue positions for each of the candidates. Unless otherwise noted, students can assume that candidates hold issue positions common to their political party. Where there are exceptions, these will be spelled out in the text of the case.

This section lays out some of the major differences between the two political parties across a wide range of issues. A brief discussion of each position is included as well. These are general statements of party belief; in the real world, there are exceptions to each of the statements made below.

Moreover, issues that are painted black and white here often are anything but. For example, consider the abortion issue. Most people think of abortion as being a two-sided issue: pro-life or pro-choice. While somewhat useful, this distinction does not capture all the variance in this issue. Most people are not, in fact, strictly pro-life or pro-choice, but favor some sorts of restrictions. Many pro-life people would be willing to legalize abortion in the cases of rape and incest, or if the mother's health was at stake. Many pro-choice people are comfortable with outlawing third-trimester abortions, or requiring minors to get the consent of their parents.

While the dimensions on which the parties differ are numerous, the most basic rules explaining Democrat and Republican differences are as follows: **Democrats tend to favor using the power of government to regulate the economy; Republicans favor a more hands-off approach in economic matters. To this end, Democrats tend to favor a larger role for the federal government; Republicans favor placing most government powers at the state level.**

Since Democrats are more likely to see intervention by the government in the economy as a good thing and Republicans are more likely to see federal government intervention as a problem, this affects their economic policies greatly. Democrats have traditionally been the party of higher taxes and more government spending while Republicans have favored lower taxes and less government spending.

This general position statement can be extended to other issues fairly easily. For example, what should we do about airport security? Democrats are more likely to favor a larger government role, including making airport security screeners federal employees. Republicans are less likely to favor a larger government role. They would continue to leave airport security in the hands of private companies, although they would put them under federal supervision. Or, consider health insurance. Democrats are more likely to favor a larger federal role, perhaps even including national health insurance. Republicans are unlikely to favor solutions that mean so much federal involvement.

Some specific issues and party tendencies are presented below. Remember that each issue is not as black and white as depicted here; each has shades of gray. Unless otherwise specified, candidates may feel free to move around within gray areas.

1. Abortion. Democrats tend to be pro-choice, Republicans tend to be pro-life. But, there are shades of gray here (see the discussion above).

2. Affirmative action. Democrats tend to favor affirmative action, Republicans tend to oppose it. Again, there are shades of gray. Some Democrats might favor giving preference to minorities when all else is equal, but might oppose quotas (requiring a certain percentage of positions to be given to minorities). Some Republicans might oppose affirmative action in some areas but might be willing to see it used when clear benefits of diversity can be shown. The amount race or gender "counts" might also determine whether a Republican or Democrat finds a particular plan acceptable.

3. Crime. Democrats tend to be more concerned with the root causes of crime. They oppose mandatory minimum sentences and "three strikes" provisions as not allowing judges to take into account the specific circumstances of defendants. They tend to focus more on social programs to minimize the despair potential criminals might feel. Many, but not all, Democrats oppose the death penalty. Republicans tend to be harder on crime, favoring longer sentences, capital punishment, and restrictions on parole.

4. Environment. Democrats tend to favor the classic command-and-control mode of environmental policymaking, creating strict laws to limit environmental pollution and forcing companies to comply. Democrats tend to be very pro-environment. Republicans, on the other hand, take more of a business angle on this issue. They emphasize the economic impact of environmental (and other) regulation, noting how these types of laws cost businesses money. They prefer solutions that are less sweeping and take into account the cost of regulations for business. They also favor more market-based approaches that offer companies tax incentives for complying with environmental standards.

5. Labor vs. Business. Democrats tend to be the party of organized labor, favoring workers' rights. Republicans tend to agree more with business interests than with labor. They would favor restrictions on the rights of some unions to strike.

6. School Prayer and other religious issues. Republicans are closer to what we call the "Religious Right." As such, they are more likely to favor laws restricting abortion, implementing school prayer, hanging the Ten Commandments in schools and courtrooms, etc. Democrats, while not anti-God (nobody wants to be accused of being anti-God), prefer to limit the role of religion in public life. They tend to favor much stronger separation of church and state.

7. September 11. At this writing, it is too soon to assess partisan differences in terms of how the events of September 11 will be dealt with. We know that historically, Republicans tended to favor larger defense budgets and the use of military action as opposed to diplomacy. We also know that Republicans on average tended to be somewhat more isolationist than Democrats; Republicans particularly opposed American involvement as the world's policeman. Finally, on average, Republicans tended to be stronger allies of Israel than did Democrats, although there are many exceptions to this rule.

How does September 11 change things? For now, there has been remarkable consensus on how this new war is being handled, and on the new role the United States has had to assume in the world. Both Democrats and Republicans are talking about spending large amounts of money on military campaigns. Both Republicans and Democrats are talking about engaging in "nation building" in Afghanistan. And, both parties continue to be perplexed by the Middle East.

Differences emerge, particularly as concerns domestic responses to terrorism (see above on airport security). Democrats also have a stronger record on civil liberties; Republicans are more likely to favor wiretap authorization and other such measures. Many of the affairs related to September 11 and international affairs are now in a state of flux, and, for now, there is widespread agreement. The coming months and years will determine how long this agreement lasts and what differences might arise to break this new consensus.

8. Social Security. Democrats favor the current system much as it is, although they want to see more protection for the money currently in the Social Security system. Before September 11, George W. Bush had a proposal in place to somewhat privatize the system. This would have allowed people to take part of their Social Security contributions and invest it on their own. This plan has fallen far off the national agenda in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

9. Taxes. Republicans tend to favor lower taxes and Democrats tend to favor higher taxes. For Republicans, who have less ambitious ideas for what the national government should do, there is simply less need to collect tax revenue. For Democrats, who favor a more expansive federal government, taxes are a necessary means to pull this off.

Moreover, each party has a different view on who should pay taxes. Democrats favor a 'Robin Hood' policy - they tax the rich and redistribute income to the poor. Republicans will often concentrate their tax breaks on the rich, arguing that doing so encourages rich people to invest in the economy (such as by using their tax cut to spend money). This spending, some Republicans argue, will lead to a healthier economy.

V. Expectations

Commercials

The commercial will receive a "1" if, after it ends, the viewer is absolutely clueless about why that commercial would have encouraged them to vote for that candidate. A "1" is given to a truly dreadful commercial.

The commercial will receive a "2" if the viewer can see the point behind the commercial, but it is put together so poorly that the viewer just not at all convinced. A "2" is given to a poor commercial.

The commercial will receive a "3" if its central point is clear and the viewer is somewhat, but not overwhelmingly, convinced by it. A "3" is given to an average commercial.

The commercial will receive a "4" if its central point is very clear and the viewer is

convinced by it. A "4" is given to a commercial that is good. The commercial will receive a "5" if it is extremely convincing and effective. A "5" is given to that rare commercial that is excellent and memorable.

Stump Speeches

Introductory stump speech - how well did this speech introduce the candidate and his/her central campaign themes? Does the speech make you think this is someone worth listening to in the future?

Specialized audience speech - how well did this speech excite the group the candidate chose to address? Would this speech make these supporters excited enough about his/her campaign to open their pocketbooks and support the candidacy with money? Will they turn out to vote for the candidate?

Election night speech - does this speech fire up the supporters to get out and vote? Is the speech exciting enough to keep supporters thinking victory?

Debates

Each candidate's performance will be rated on each of the following criteria on a scale from 1-5, where 1 indicates the poorest performance in this area and 5 represents the best. Then, the total points will be added and awarded to each candidate.

Competence - did the candidate appear to show he/she would be a competent member of Congress? Did the candidate do his/her homework? Were answers to the questions appropriate?

Performance - did the candidate perform well? Did he/she "look" the part and "act" the part? Did the candidate speak clearly?

Mistakes - did the candidate make any critical mistake during the debate? Were the inevitable minor mistakes harmful to the candidate or did they just get bypassed during the debate?

Opening and closing statements - how well done were they? Did they summarize points nicely and offer a strong reason to vote for the candidate?

Memorability - will you remember anything positive about this performance ten minutes after the debate ends, or did the candidate have no good lines/explanations/comments that left an impression?