



Political Simulations: An Annotated Reading List

Every study this site relies on, what it actually establishes, and what it does not. Grouped by the question it answers rather than by date.

For college and high school instructors.

Two things are worth knowing before the list. First, the political science literature on simulations is small, and a great deal of what is confidently said about them rests on one or two studies or on nothing at all. Second, the large effect sizes people cite come from medical education, where the scenarios are short, the outcomes are technical, and the participants are professional trainees. Neither of those facts is a reason not to run simulations. They are a reason to promise only what the evidence supports.

Does a simulation teach content better than a lecture?

No, and this has been the finding for twenty years. It is the most robust result in the area and the one most often left out of the case for running one.

- **Krain, Matthew, and Jeffrey S. Lantis. 2006.** “Building Knowledge? Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Global Problems Summit Simulation.” **International Studies Perspectives** 7(4): 395–407. Found different *kinds* of knowledge, not more knowledge. The distinction is the useful part.
- **Raymond, Chad. 2010.** “Do Role-Playing Simulations Generate Measurable and Meaningful Outcomes?” **ISP** 11(1): 51–60. No significant difference in exam performance. Worth reading in full because it is unusually candid about its own null result.
- **Powner, Leanne C., and Michelle G. Allendoerfer. 2008.** “Evaluating Hypotheses about Active Learning.” **ISP** 9(1): 75–89. Similar finding, different design.

What do they buy, then?

Retention and interest. This is the honest case, it is a good case, and it is better supported than the content claim ever was.

- **Wunische, Adam. 2019.** “Lecture versus Simulation: Testing the Long-Term Effects.” **Journal of Political Science Education** 15(1): 37–48. Lecture students did better immediately; simulation students retained more over time. The cleanest statement of the trade.
- **Levin-Banchik, Luba. 2018.** “Assessing Knowledge Retention, with and without Simulations.” **JPSE** 14(3): 341–359. Four topics by four methods, with an anonymous quiz three months later. Simulation plus in-class debriefing was most effective, simulation alone second, no

simulation last. **The single most useful citation available** for a political science classroom, because the measure is delayed and the setting is a real course.

- **Bernstein, Jeffrey L., and Deborah S. Meizlish. 2003.** “Democratic Theory and Practice: The Impact of a Congressional Simulation.” *Simulation & Gaming* 34(2): 198–219. Nothing measurable at the end of the course, real differences three years later, and **no difference in political participation**. Cite the third finding as carefully as the second.

Interest, excitement and self-efficacy

- **Hendrickson, Petra. 2021.** “Effect of Active Learning Techniques on Student Excitement, Interest, and Self-Efficacy.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 17(2): 311–325. doi:10.1080/15512169.2019.1629946. She rebuilt an American Foreign Policy and National Security course around three active components, simulations, a debate and counterfactual analysis, and surveyed students on each one separately rather than on the course as a whole. Excitement, interest and belief in their own ability to succeed all rose. **The separate-component design is the useful part**, because it shows which activity did the work. Self-report, so pair it with Kartal below: students are reasonably reliable about whether they were interested and unreliable about whether they improved.
- **Clark, Nicholas, Gretchen Van Dyke, Peter Loedel, John Scherpereel, and Andreas Sobisch. 2017.** “EU Simulations and Engagement: Motivating Greater Interest in European Union Politics.” *JPSE* 13(2): 152–170. The same direction, for interest in EU politics specifically.

Who benefits, and who does not

This is the sharpest material in the whole literature and the part most often skipped. The benefits are not evenly distributed, and one well-intentioned fix made things worse.

- **Engel, Susan, Josh Pallas, and Sarah Lambert. 2021.** “Model United Nations and Deep Learning.” *JPSE* 17(4): 595–613. Women participated less relative to their numbers, the gap cost them grades, they enjoyed it less, felt less included, and reported less confidence gain. **A short intervention designed to close the gap backfired**, which the authors read as stereotype threat. If you read one study here, read this one.
- **Coughlin, Richard W. 2013.** “Gender and Negotiation in Model UN Role-Playing Simulations.” *JPSE* 9(3): 320–335. Women in the majority at the conference; men gave most of the speeches and shaped the resolutions.
- **Kaftan, Joanna, and John Linantud. 2025.** *JPSE* 21(4): 789–801. Statecraft raised everyone’s grades and closed no gap.
- **Baranowski, Michael, and Kimberly Weir. 2010.** “Power and Politics in the Classroom.” *JPSE* 6(3): 217–226. Students in high-power roles reported more understanding and found the exercise more worthwhile. The practical consequence is to rotate the powerful roles rather than assigning them once.

How it is measured, and why most self-reports mislead

- Kartal, Filiz. 2021. JPSE 17(sup1): 148–168. Students revise their opinion of their former selves downward, which inflates apparent gains. **The methodological warning to cite whenever somebody reports a survey result about skills.**
- Clark, Nicholas, and John A. Scherpereel. 2024. “Do Political Science Simulations Promote Knowledge, Engagement, Skills, and Empathy?” JPSE 20(1): 133–152. Four hypotheses, tested on 924 responses from 13 institutions over 2015 to 2020. Knowledge supported (6.35 to 7.32 on a ten-item battery, $p = .001$) but no better than a lecture course; engagement mixed; **skills not supported**; empathy tentatively supported through position shifts in an alter-ego exercise.

Reviews, and what each one can and cannot establish

- Baranowski, Michael, and Kimberly Weir. 2015. “Political Simulations: What We Know, What We Think We Know, and What We Still Need to Know.” JPSE 11(4): 391–403. The canonical skeptical review, and a review of research *design*. **It is not a pooled meta-analysis and reports no effect size**; do not cite it as though it does.
- Duchatelet, Dorothy, et al. 2019. Educational Research Review 27: 126–139. A systematic review of role-play and simulation in higher education.
- Chernikova, Olga, et al. 2020. “Simulation-Based Learning in Higher Education.” Review of Educational Research 90(4): 499–541. The real pooled meta-analysis, $g = 0.85$ on complex skills across 145 studies. *** **126 of the 145 are medical education**. There is essentially no political science in it, so the number is not evidence about a political science classroom and must never be quoted without that sentence attached. ***

The debrief, which the field says is where the learning happens

The claim is asserted far more often than it is tested. See *What the Research Says About Debriefing* on the Debrief page for the full treatment; these are the anchors.

- Wedig, Timothy. 2010. “Getting the Most from Classroom Simulations.” PS: Political Science and Politics 43(3): 547–555. The only debriefing structure built for a political science classroom.
- Crookall, David. 2014. Simulation & Gaming 45(4–5): 416–427. The strongest statement of the claim, including that running a simulation without a debrief is unethical. **An argument in an editorial, not a finding.**
- Sawyer, Taylor, et al. 2016. “More Than One Way to Debrief.” Simulation in Healthcare 11(3): 209–217. Crosswalks every named method and concludes that **no study has objectively compared them**.
- Fanning, Ruth M., and David M. Gaba. 2007. Simulation in Healthcare 2(2): 115–125. Thirty-six airline crew debriefs: instructors talked more than the crews and rarely allowed silence.
- Dieckmann, Peter, et al. 2009. Medical Teacher 31(7): e287–e294. Four interaction patterns, only one of which has participants referring to each other at all.

- Schwägele, Sebastian, et al. 2021. *Simulation & Gaming* 52(3): 364–385. Searched that journal and found 631 articles mentioning debriefing and eight that study it methodologically.
- Rose, Suzanna, Jonathan Bisson, Rachel Churchill, and Simon Wessely. 2002. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews CD000560. Single-session psychological debriefing after real trauma did not prevent PTSD, and at thirteen months a diagnosis was significantly *more* likely in the debriefed group. A different intervention after real trauma, and the comparison should not be overdrawn, but it establishes that a structured post-event conversation is not automatically benign.

When it goes wrong

Almost nobody publishes a failure, which is what makes this one worth the time.

- Hendrickson, Petra. 2023. “From ‘Spectacular Failure’ to Success: Board Games as Effective Teaching Tools.” *APSA Preprints*, 20 January 2023. doi:10.33774/apsa-2023-tq0vl. *** A WORKING PAPER, NOT A REFEREED ARTICLE, and it should be cited as one. *** It starts from an attempt to build a course around board game play that did not work, says why, and then reports what did, with data on the Risk mobile app and on Dice Catan. The argument: a game whose rules students already know is easier to adopt than one you design, and what makes or breaks it is whether the game was chosen deliberately for a concept rather than for engagement in general.

What it costs to run one

- Sobisch, Andreas, John Scherpereel, Peter Loedel, Gretchen J. Van Dyke, and Nick Clark. 2018. “The Costs and Benefits of Organizing a Multi-institutional Simulation on the European Union.” In Bursens, Donche, Gijbels and Spooren, eds., *Simulations of Decision-Making as Active Learning Tools*. Cham: Springer, 21–34. The organizational side, which almost nothing else in the literature addresses.
- Clark, Nicholas, Gretchen Van Dyke, Peter Loedel, John Scherpereel, and Andreas Sobisch. 2017. “EU Simulations and Engagement: Motivating Greater Interest in European Union Politics.” *JPSE* 13(2): 152–170.
- Shaw, Carolyn M., and Bob Switky. 2018. *JPSE* 14(4): 523–534. The in-discipline citation for emotional intensity and for helping students step out of role.

Every citation above was checked against publisher records on October 17, 2026. One correction worth noting, because it circulates: the 2017 EU simulations article is volume 13, issue 2. At least one secondary source renders it as 13(1), which is wrong.