

Legislators in the Classroom: Teaching Democracy Appreciation A Legislative Appropriations Committee Simulation

Quick Reference Guide

Prepared by Alan Rosenthal as a project of the Eagleton Institute of Politics of Rutgers University. The author can be reached at alanr@rci.rutgers.edu or (732) 828-2210, ext. 251.

This document provides a quick overview and guide to the Appropriations Committee Simulation--"Dividing up the Pot and Paying for It." [A full description of the lesson](#) and the [student handout](#) are attached.

Objectives of the Lesson:

To suggest to students that in a diverse society such as ours, people have different and conflicting values, interests and priorities.

To develop in students a familiarity with how legislatures try to settle conflicts over values, interests, and priorities by means of deliberation, debate, negotiation (including compromise) and majority votes.

To get across the idea that the work of the legislature trying to resolve differences is difficult.

To Prepare:

Read the attached lesson plan and student handout.

Consult with the classroom teacher in advance if possible.

Make at least four copies of the student handout to take to the class.

Simulation Overview:

Introduce the budget simulation to students and give an overview. Explain that you will chair the committee hearing and that they will serve as members of the committee and one subcommittee.

Divide the students into four groups to reflect the four subcommittees (Health, Education, Welfare, Homeland Security). Give a student handout to each group and ask them to consult for a period of time and decide on a position to be reported back to the full committee. Allow only a few minutes for this process.

Reconvene the appropriations committee and conduct the hearing, drawing out the differing positions and values. Try to elicit participation from most students.

Guide the committee to a vote on a balanced budget.

Debrief the committee session by using the suggested questions on page five of the lesson and by relating the simulation to what you have personally experienced in the legislature.

Full Description of the Lesson

A Legislative Appropriations Committee Simulation

Through NCSL's "America's Legislators Back to School Week" and related programs, many legislators from states across the nation are visiting classrooms to familiarize students with their jobs, the legislative process and representative democracy.

A growing body of materials is being developed to assist legislators in the classroom. One of the most valuable teaching approaches is the simulation, which engages students by having them adopt the role of a legislator in a decision-making situation. Simulations help students learn, remember, and even internalize lessons. They not only tend to increase a student's knowledge of the subject, but more important they can also promote positive attitudes toward representative democracy.

The simulation presented here was developed by Alan Rosenthal, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, and Greer Burroughs, Seton Hall University. It is intended to be used in a high school civics or American government class. A classroom teacher can conduct the simulation, but it would work even better if conducted by a legislator who has had practical experience with the subject.

Objectives of the Lesson

Democracy is not easy for students to appreciate. It is filled with conflict, it is extremely human, and it is very messy. Americans generally do not understand why there is so much conflict in politics, since they believe that there is more agreement among people than there actually is.

Appreciation of democracy does not come naturally, so it has to be taught--just as music and art appreciation have to be taught. The first, and probably the most fundamental lesson, in appreciating representative democracy, has three principal objectives:

- (1) To suggest to students that in a diverse society such as ours, people have different (and conflicting) values, interests and priorities. These differences are natural, normal and to be respected.
- (2) To develop in students a familiarity with how legislatures, reflecting differences among people, try to settle conflicts over values, interests and priorities, and try to reach settlements by means of deliberation, negotiation (including compromise) and majority votes.
- (3) To get across the idea that the work of the legislature in trying to resolve differences is difficult.

The Budget Simulation

What is important in a legislature are differences over an issue or policy, such as abortion, guns, or environmental protection. Also important are priorities or choices among items that many people favor, but not all of which can be afforded. The appropriations process, of course, is one in which both citizens and legislators differ over priorities and whether and how to fund them.

In this simulation, called "Dividing Up the Pot--and Paying for it," each student will take on the role of a member of an appropriations committee of the state house of representatives and of a member of one of the committee's four subcommittees: health, education, welfare, and homeland security.

The governor, in his budget proposal, has requested new programs costing \$1 billion more in expenditures in the jurisdictions of these committees. The requests for additional expenditures are:

Health Subcommittee

\$300 million in new funds for two programs--prescription drugs for senior citizens and pre-natal care for young mothers. The public, according to statewide polls, supports both initiatives (the first somewhat more than the second).

Education Subcommittee

\$300 million increase for pre-school programs throughout the state, but with much of it going to schools where children are not performing well. Research suggests that early intervention has positive results. Polls indicate public support for these programs.

Welfare Subcommittee

\$200 million more for a reorganization of the state division of youth and family services. It was found that children were abused under its care and its programs were failing. The additional money will pay for more caseworkers, closer monitoring and summer camps. These recommendations, polls show, have substantial public support, but not quite as much as the prescription drug and pre-school programs.

Homeland Security Subcommittee

\$200 million additional funds to increase security in the state. According to a study completed by a blue-ribbon commission, federal programs are insufficient for the potential threats facing the state. Bridges, tunnels and highways need substantial improvements in security. A plan has been adopted; implementation of the plan depends on funding. There are no poll data available, but members of the commission believe the public is very supportive.

The problem, however, is that the budget submitted by the governor is facing a shortfall in revenues because of an economic recession. Tax revenues to the state are down, but the budget is required by the state constitution to be in balance. Therefore, either budget expenditures will have to be cut or taxes increased, or some combination of the two.

Specifically, the appropriations committee must cut \$500 million from the new initiatives or raise \$500 million in taxes. The only tax that can possibly be raised is the sales tax. (The others are politically out of bounds.) But polls show that the public is opposed to increasing the sales tax (and even more opposed to higher income taxes). Only 25 percent support an increase in the sales tax, 60 percent oppose it, while the remaining 15 percent are undecided.

Increasing the sales tax by two pennies on the dollar will raise the \$500 million needed to balance the budget, without cutting the requests for new programs. Increasing the sales tax by one penny will raise \$250 million, or half of what is needed to balance the budget, necessitating \$250 million in cuts. No tax increase would mean that \$500 million would have to be cut from the \$1 billion in new initiatives. The cuts can be distributed in any way among the four subcommittees.

Simulation procedure

The legislator will act as chair of the appropriations committee, which must develop a balanced budget. During the committee meeting, the chair may permit members of the subcommittee to meet and decide on committee positions. The chair will recognize members for motions and decide when to bring matters to a vote.

Debriefing

After the simulation concludes, it is important to debrief students. This enables them to compare their interpretations of the appropriations experience. Some questions that might be useful are:

Were the differences that members of the committee faced reflective of differences among people in the state?

Who were legislators representing in acting as members of the appropriations committee and subcommittees? What people or groups had special stakes in what happened?

What role did deliberation play? What negotiations took place? What compromises were made?

As a result of the final settlement, who were the winners? Who were the losers?

Was the settlement fair? Was the process fair?

Is there a better way to decide on the state budget? For example, could the issues dealt with here be put on the ballot and decided by the entire electorate of the state? Or would it be better just to let the governor decide?

A Legislative Appropriations Committee Simulation

Student Handout

"Dividing Up the Pot--And Paying for It"

Each year your state legislature reviews and adopts a budget, which specifies the money the state will be collecting (mainly from taxes) and the money the state will be spending on a variety of programs and services for its citizens. In your state, as well as most others, the governor prepares a detailed budget, which he or she submits to the legislature. The legislature may change items or increase or reduce amounts in the governor's budget before it enacts a budget bill (or bills). But the legislature has a constitutional responsibility to balance the state budget, so that the total amount to be spent does not exceed the total amount to be collected.

In your state legislature, the appropriations committees have to decide on the state budget for the following year, and then make a recommendation to the house and senate. You will adopt the role of a member of the house appropriations committee and serve on one of the committee's four subcommittees--health, education, welfare, and homeland security--which together comprise the full committee. Each subcommittee has control over the budget in its designated area.

These four subcommittees have requests from the governor for expenditure increases of \$1 billion over the previous year's budget, mainly because of important new programs that the governor wants to have started in each of these areas. Below are descriptions of the requests for additional funding in each subcommittee's area.

Health Subcommittee

\$300 million in new funds for two programs--prescription drugs for senior citizens and pre-natal care for young mothers. The public, according to statewide polls, supports both initiatives (the first somewhat more than the second).

Education Subcommittee

\$300 million increase for pre-school programs throughout the state, but with much of it going to schools where children are not performing well. Research suggests that early intervention has positive results. Polls indicate public support for these programs.

Welfare Subcommittee

\$200 million more for a reorganization of the state division of youth and family services. It was found that children were abused under its care and its programs were failing. The additional money will pay for more caseworkers, closer monitoring and summer camps. These recommendations, polls show, have substantial public support, but not quite as much as the prescription drug and pre-school programs.

Homeland Security Subcommittee

\$200 million additional funds to increase security in the state. According to a study completed by a blue-ribbon commission, federal programs are insufficient for the potential threats facing the state. Bridges, tunnels and highways need substantial improvements in security. A plan has been adopted; implementation of the plan depends on funding. There are no poll data available, but members of the commission believe the public is very supportive.

The problem, however, is that the budget submitted by the governor is facing a shortfall in revenues because of an economic recession. Tax revenues to the state are down, but the

budget is required by the state constitution to be in balance. Therefore, either budget expenditures will have to be cut or taxes increased, or some combination of the two.

The appropriations committee must cut \$500 million from the new initiatives or raise \$500 million in taxes. The only tax that can possibly be raised is the sales tax. But polls show that the public is opposed to increasing the sales tax (and more opposed to higher income taxes). Only 25 percent support an increase in the sales tax, 60 percent oppose it, while the remaining 15 percent are undecided.

Increasing the sales tax by two pennies on the dollar will raise the \$500 million needed to balance the budget. Increasing the sales tax by one penny will raise \$250 million, or half of what is needed to balance the budget, necessitating \$250 million in cuts. No tax increase would mean that \$500 million would have to be cut from the \$1 billion in new initiatives. The cuts can be distributed in any way among the four subcommittees.

Your visiting legislator will act as the chair of the appropriations committee during the discussion of how to balance the budget. During the committee meeting, the chair may permit the subcommittee members to meet and decide on subcommittee positions. During the meeting, committee members may speak or make motions only when they are recognized by the chair. Remember, each of the four subcommittees must defend its programs, but the full committee must reach a settlement that results in a balanced budget.

The alternatives are:

1. Raise the sales tax by two pennies, so no cuts are necessary;
2. Raise the sales tax by one penny, so \$250 million has to be cut;
3. Do not raise the sales tax, so \$500 million has to be cut.

Your job, like that of legislators, is to:

- Be responsive to your constituents;
- Take into account the needs of the state;
- Attend to the demands of interest groups;
- Work with your colleagues on the subcommittee, committee, and in the house (as well as the senate);
- Balance the state budget.