

2007

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the ability of students in an Introduction to American Government class to make decisions and participate in politics. Throughout simulations designed to emulate Congress, students create legislation, attempt to gain support for it, and pass new laws dealing with four separate topics during the semester; my focus is, specifically, on the issue of prayer in public schools. Often, it seemed that students were conforming to the beliefs of the friends they had made in the class instead of supporting and promoting their own beliefs. While dissent was encouraged and some students were being persuaded by their classmates, some appeared to be completely abandoning their opinions so that they would not stand out from the group. By the end of the semester, students were changing their opinions more in the simulations than at the beginning and more readily admitting that it was for reasons other than legitimate persuasion.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

Political Science

First Advisor

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Keywords

Decision making, Political participation United States, Conformity Political aspects

**POLITICAL CONSENSUS: ABILITY OF
GOVERNMENT STUDENTS TO MAKE POLITICAL DECISIONS**

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Political Science

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on May 3, 2007

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the ability of students in an Introduction to American Government class to make decisions and participate in politics. Throughout simulations designed to emulate Congress, students create legislation, attempt to gain support for it, and pass new laws dealing with four separate topics during the semester; my focus is, specifically, on the issue of prayer in public schools. Often, it seemed that students were conforming to the beliefs of the friends they had made in the class instead of supporting and promoting their own beliefs. While dissent was encouraged and some students were being persuaded by their classmates, some appeared to be completely abandoning their opinions so that they would not stand out from the group. By the end of the semester, students were changing their opinions more in the simulations than at the beginning and more readily admitting that it was for reasons other than legitimate persuasion.

Rather than make all decisions individually, people tend to follow the lead of others. In many instances, it is easy to listen to the majority opinion and do what the others are doing. Through most decisions in life, this method can be quite effective and keep people satisfied. If the choice is where to eat for lunch one day, it is not efficient to make a list of all the possible restaurants; it is more efficient to instead choose something more quickly to conserve time and energy. While this may also work when the decision is whether or not to allow prayer in schools, or affirmative action, or to support the war on terrorism, it is important that individuals have the ability to make well calculated decisions about such matters as well. It is important to be able to understand the different sides of the issue and consciously make an individual decision (McBride, 2005).

To make informed decisions, one basic role of American citizens is that they ought to understand the government and how it works. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) explain that citizens need to know what the government is, what it does, and of whom the government consists. They need to understand the basic organization of the American democracy in that they need to understand the values of the government, including the contribution of citizens, how power is divided, the rights of the people, and how to make rules and laws. However, many people do not understand the basic principles of government or their rights. In 1989, only 20% of people could name two rights provided in the First Amendment. This limits the ability of citizens to participate in government and fully use the rights that are provided to them. By having a better understanding of how the government works, Delli Carpini and Keeter argue, individuals would be better prepared to make

decisions about the government and help implement what they feel is virtuous and necessary.

One of the reasons for this lack of understanding among citizens is that Americans have a strong dislike for the government. E. J. Dionne, Jr. (1991) explains that Americans have come to hate politics; they often see it as trivial and even stupid. Citizens feel that they are not able to affect the workings of the government or improve of the world. Therefore, many have given up following politics and have lost interest in what occurs within our government. This can lead to a vicious cycle where the individuals do not follow politics so they only hear about the bad things that happen within the government, which makes them dislike the government even more and want to follow it less, and so on. The population ends up as an uninformed, cynical group who want nothing to do with the government and believe that there is nothing they can do to change the situation. Then, instead of making decisions individually, citizens will simply follow the decisions made by those around them. This can be a legitimate way to make some decisions; if groups of people tend to think in the same way, they will probably think in the same way about politics. Therefore, following others' decisions can work, however, it can become problematic when this is the *only* way citizens are making decisions. Without the ability to make decisions on their own, individuals are significantly more likely to end up misinformed and to make poor choices.

There is a distinct difference between legitimate persuasion and false consensus. It would not be good if everyone was so sure of their opinions that they refused to listen to others. People can benefit from listening to others, and in some

instances, they may be persuaded to believe something different than before the conversation. However, the problems begin to arise when opinions are changed based on factors that are not persuasion, but instead represents a false consensus derived by individuals blindly following others. It is not good to be too stubborn to be open to other sides, but it is also a problem when opinions are changed because of something unrelated to the issue.

Citizens are quite capable of obtaining the information necessary and understanding politics. Voters must have three basic types of information to be able to have any significant influence over specific issues. Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) explain that these include knowledge of the existence of the issue, having an opinion on it, and knowing the opposing points of view on the issue. While it is true that many members of political parties believe certain things about different issues, not all members believe exactly the same thing. They explain that there is “only a limited degree of consensus as to which party advocates which policy” (1960). To be able to make decisions about all issues facing citizens, it is useful to understand party affiliation and which party typically advocates which issues (Lupia 2001), yet this is not comprehensive of all opinions. It is important that individuals are capable of researching political topics and making decisions on their own to be able to fully participate in government and be able to change the things around them.

Through the use of simulations in a college level American government class, it was the hope that these skills could be acquired and later put to use in “the real world.” Students would be participating in four simulations throughout their class in which they would be expected to write and try to pass legislation in a mock-Congress

setting. While it was expected that some students would be persuaded by others in the simulation, it was also expected that students would only change their opinions when they heard arguments with which they agreed, not because of who was saying the arguments. From the activity of the students in the class and the papers they wrote, we were able to determine some of the forces that were leading students to change their views.

Why Conformity is a Problem

Conformity can lead to a plethora of problems such as the inequality of individuals with divergent opinions or minority groups within a society. When members of a group all appear to believe the same thing, the thoughts of the group have the potential to escalate to extreme levels that are actually beyond the beliefs of most individual members (Sunstein 2003). The members do not want to lose their place in the group and become outsiders, so they publicly agree even if they might not privately. Due to this, it is important as a society to not only accept dissent, but actually promote it. While America tries as much as possible to be neutral and equal, without dissent, this cannot occur. By encouraging opposition, people have the opportunity to be heard and it is more possible for the government to acknowledge when injustices are occurring and change to reverse them (Shiffrin 1999, Sunstein 2003).

In psychology, groupthink is the idea that groups in which the members do not speak out tend to become more extreme. Irving Janis defined groupthink as “a

deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures” (1972). Because individuals do not want to feel outside of the group, they will not even suggest alternatives if it seems that everyone else in the group agrees. An example of how disastrous this can be was the Bay of Pigs invasion. When Kennedy and his advisors discussed the invasion, there was no opposition among the group to the plan they were considering. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. explained that “Our meetings took place in a *curious atmosphere of assumed consensus*” (Janis 1972, italics in original). The lack of spoken opposition made the group assume they all agreed, even though many did not. After the fiasco, Kennedy completely rearranged his decision making process because he recognized that if someone would have spoken up with opposition, the disaster could have been averted. The Bay of Pigs was actually believed to be a bad idea by most of the advisors, but the lack of expressed opposition helped to create the debacle.

Cass Sunstein (2003) explains two other reasons that people conform: lack of information and peer pressure. Within our simulations, there may be a combination of both conditions, where the students do not have much prior knowledge on topics discussed and/or feel pressured by others to vote for/against certain issues. When one or more people within a group appear to confidently know and understand the correct information in a situation, others who do not feel they know the information as well will readily comply with the leader and believe what he or she says. The group members usually will believe the leader and not question the fact that what they are saying has the potential to be wrong. This can lead to incorrect information being

passed through groups or individuals to inadvertently promote issues they do not actually believe in.

Conformity creates a level of ignorance that could be avoided by having the individuals simply take the time to ponder what is said, ask questions about it, and determine their beliefs on the issue instead of accepting another person's beliefs. If these steps are not taken, poor decisions can be made and people can be led in the wrong direction. It is important to ensure that those who do claim to know the facts actually do, so asking questions and really listening to the answers becomes important. Encouraging individuals to disagree and contend for their own beliefs is the best way to have all opinions heard and reach a real compromise of opinions, instead of a consensus of opinions that is not actually representative of the population (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 2005).

Cillian McBride (2005) explains that there is a duty of citizens to deliberate. They must consider the views of all sides of the argument before making decisions. Without doing this, citizens will simply believe the majority opinion and see opposing viewpoints as abnormal, which can be unfair to those who have views against the norm. Our government and society were created to consider and respect divergent viewpoints and most students will encounter opinions that differ from their own in everyday life. By allowing students to simply listen to the majority in their government class and not consider opposition, they are done an extreme disservice in that they will not be prepared to listen to, understand, and benefit from opposing viewpoints in other aspects of life.

Capacity for Decision Making

To be able to follow politics and to understand their role within society, citizens must have the ability to make decisions about certain issues and determine their own opinions. It can be useful to vote along with officials or parties that normally support the individual's views as long as the individual is capable of discovering when the views differ from their own. However, many individuals are not capable of this type of decision making. In his review of William Perry's (1981) intellectual schema, William Moore (1994) recognizes that some college students are in a learning category known as dualism. The students at this position see the world as "I am right, they are wrong," but their own opinion is normally formed based on an authority's opinion. They believe that authorities are "all-powerful," resulting in the inability of the individual to make decisions without the help of someone "important" telling them what to believe. Even when individuals get past the dualism phase of the Perry schema, where the students see one side as completely right and anyone who believes otherwise as wrong, and into the multiplicity stage, where students begin to see there are different sides and understand why people might agree to either side, it is still a challenge for them to make decisions and support them. It is not until the relativism stage, which few students ever reach, that students are finally able to weigh evidence on all sides of an issue, make informed decisions, and fully support their opinions.

In terms of politics, another reason for the decline in the ability of individuals to make decisions on issues is the fact that Americans in general have decreasing

amounts of social capital, defined by Robert Putnam (2000) as the value derived from social networks and connections between individuals in society. From 1973 to 1994, the numbers of Americans who went to one or more public town or school meeting dropped by 40 percent. Not only are there progressively fewer individuals attending these meetings and learning about the politics around them, but they are also losing contact with individuals from the meetings, making them less likely to have everyday discussions about political affairs. With this occurring, citizens know less about politics from the activities they attend and from the people around them, causing few citizens to really know what is happening within their own government. Because of these changes, the amount of, and access to, knowledge Americans have about governmental issues is decreasing rapidly, making citizens feel less qualified to make political decisions.

Part of the reason for the loss of social capital is that people are starting to get their information from different places than in the past. Diana Mutz (1998) explains that instead of going to meetings and discussing politics with their friends, people get their information from the mass media. One of the consequences of this is that it is much easier to tune out what individuals do not want to hear. If a friend had a different point of view than an individual when discussing politics, the individual would be unlikely to simply walk away because they did not want to hear the opinion. This created an environment in which more people knew the different sides of the issue and were more informed. However, it is much easier now to ignore the other side. If an individual associates with the Democratic party, he or she will simply not watch conservative-leaning television programs. Instead of watching “The O’Reilly

Factor” with Bill O’Reilly, they will tune into “The Daily Show” with Jon Stewart. This way, people never have to hear opposing viewpoints because the changes in the way Americans get political information makes it so easy to just “walk away.”

Most people do not recognize the simplicities of their own decision making process. If asked, many would explain that they use a large number of cues when making a decision, not just one aspect of the idea. They also claim to use complex interactive patterns, where they evaluate many possibilities before making their decision. However, Robert Jervis (1993) explains that this is not the case; people actually use very few cues and instead of complex patterns, they use simple additions and subtractions of good and bad. Therefore, when a student tries to explain that they have a specific view, they may have trouble explaining the nuances of it. They have often not worked out the intricate details in their minds yet, and are more likely to be persuaded. The opinion to which they have come is not solidly backed by much evidence, so when opposing evidence is heard that sounds more solid than their own, people are subject to quickly changing their mind.

Often, the reason people cannot explain the nuances of a subject is not because they have never heard the ideas, but because of a concept known as on-line processing. The on-line model explains that when someone hears a piece of information about a topic, they remember hearing it, but quickly forget the details. For example, someone may have heard about the Anita Hill case when Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was being confirmed and thought that Thomas lacked moral values. They may remember that he was not moral, but forget the details about the case. When asked their opinion about Thomas, the person may explain that they

are not an admirer, but not be able to give the specifics of why. When this happens, people are unable to support their opinions when questioned about them, and therefore become easier to sway (Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001).

When people do not take the time to understand politics, it can lead to a high level of ambivalence. They may have heard a few arguments on each side and declare themselves somewhere in the middle. Meffert, Guge, and Lodge (2004) explain that when this happens, there are consequences, two of which are attitudinal uncertainty and moderation. They do not understand the issues fully and therefore do not make a clear decision about the topic. The only decision that they are capable of making is somewhere in the middle, and they cannot take a stand on either side of the issue. Then, when it comes time to defend their beliefs, their uncertainty and moderation make it hard for them to uphold their side and they fall victim to consensus.

Sometimes, the issue is less that people do not have the ability to make decisions, but rather that they just do not care. While everyone cares about something, no one cares about everything. If the topic that is being discussed is something that a person does not care much about and therefore does not pay much attention to it, it may appear that they are not capable of making a decision. On the contrary, if the interest were there, it would be much easier to make a decision. Some very smart people simply have no interest in political issues. In these instances, people tend to make their decisions off the “top of the head.” Because they have not given the topic the proper consideration, their decision may be easy to poke holes in and they may be easy to persuade. The individual may have the ability to make a

decision on the topic but have just not taken the time to do it (Sniderman, Tetlock, and Elms 2001).

Social Psychology and Conformity

Society dictates many norms about the behaviors and actions that people should and should not do to “fit in.” When individuals step outside these boundaries, there is potential that they will be viewed as unusual and be ostracized by others. While the possibility of this happening does exist, often the perceived chance of this happening is far greater than the actual instances of it. To our knowledge never once within the class simulations were students harassed or shunned for the beliefs that they held, even if they were divergent from the rest of the group. However, to prevent this from occurring, people act in the manner in which they see others act. The changing of one’s behavior based on the real or perceived influence of others is known as conformity. One reason for conformity is that a person believes that they are uninformed and the other people nearby are experts on the matter. This conformity can occur whether the person is actually an expert, or if the people around just believe them to be.

Along with conforming to an expert, people will conform to a group of people if it appears the opinions of the group are homogeneous. In these instances, individuals partake in public compliance, where they agree in public with the group even if they may not agree with it privately. If the situation is ambiguous and an individual does not have very concrete opinions, they will look more toward others

and rely on those opinions (Aronson, Wilson and Akert 2005). Hamilton, Sherman and Rodgers (2004) explain that individuals perceive groups as highly homogeneous. When the individual sees the group, they believe that the thoughts and opinions of the group are very similar among all members. This is especially prevalent when the individual is outside the group, but can also be true of groups of which the individual is a member. Therefore, to not become the outsider, individuals will rarely dissent against what appears to be the commonly held beliefs of the group, especially if it appears unanimous (Sunstein 2003).

Particularly when moral issues arise, many find it difficult to disagree with the norm. One group that feels the pressure of those around them frequently is homosexuals. Most people in society are heterosexual, and some look down upon those who are not. The pressure to not openly admit to their sexuality is not a legal matter; even in states where discrimination based on sexuality is illegal, it is still difficult for homosexuals to be open. There are threats of seclusion if homosexuals let their practices be known, and this causes many to hide their lifestyle (Hogan 2001). Other practices and beliefs that disagree with the common perception of the community can be very difficult to express because if others feel strongly enough on the other side, any moral issue can create isolation. Issues of religion and race, or topics such as prayer in schools and affirmative action definitely fit into this category. Some may see those who are anti-affirmative action as racist or those who support prayer in schools as trying to establish a national religion. The fear of going against the group leads many to remain silent.

One of the most famous conformity studies in social psychology was done by Solomon Asch in 1952. Diana Mutz (1998) explains that in the study, Asch gathered groups of seven to nine people and asked them a series of questions. One of the people in the room was the subject being studied, and the rest were put in the room by Asch to give all wrong answers. The question was simple: tell which of three lines was the same length as a given line; an example question is in Figure 1. For a series of sets of lines, each person in the group was expected to answer the questions publicly, but the subject was the only person who had not been instructed on which answer to give. While 95% of the subjects gave the correct, independent answer, which went against the group at least once, 75% of them also conformed also at least once. Approximately one-third of the total answers given by the subjects were incorrect. While this does not demonstrate that all people are incapable of disagreeing with the group even when they know that the group is wrong, it does demonstrate that social pressures do cause most people to, at some point, abandon what they know so as to not stand out from the group. People are willing to abandon their opinion, or even what they know to be true, for the sake of fitting in.

In many cases, students take their political views from the people closest to them: their family. Herbert Hyman (1959) explains that the party affiliation between parents and children are very similar. In families where both parents considered themselves Democrats, 82% of the children considered themselves Democrats or independent Democrats. For Republicans, 73% of the children agreed to their parents' party. The children in the study did not necessarily make up their own mind on the issue; while some of them may have weighed the issues and chosen to be

affiliated with the party, many of the children simply took their cues from their parents.

Even the amount of interest that the children showed reflected their parents, and showed that some of the students were even unable to make their own decisions about these matters. Of the previously mentioned groups, less than one percent of the students said that they did not consider themselves affiliated with a party or did not know with what party to associate (independent was a separate option from this choice). However, when neither of the parents considered themselves members of a party, 22% of the children also responded that they did not associate with a party. When the parents were not providing the answers, the children seemed to have a tough time making the choices.

Design of the Simulation

Due to the belief that conformity was occurring among college students in their ability to make political decisions, several analyses were run in an Introduction to American Government class in an attempt to help students become more capable of making decisions rather than conforming to the decisions of the group. The class studied was approximately 100 students during the fall 2005 semester and 70 in the winter 2006 at Eastern Michigan University. The class consisted of mainly freshman, some of whom were well equipped for college upon their entry, and some who seemed quite unprepared. This group was broken into groups of about 20 to 25 (four groups in the fall, three in the winter) in which they remained throughout the

semester. At four instances during the semester, they engaged in three-day mock-Congress simulations where they are exposed to one of four topics including school prayer, affirmative action, the war on terrorism, and eminent domain. As facilitator of the school prayer simulations, most of my research has focused on issues within these simulations.

Prior to the beginning of each simulation, the students were given approximately eight to ten articles to read dealing with the topic of the simulation. These articles were designed to represent the vast array of opinions surrounding the specific issue and came from many different sources including newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, court cases, opinion articles, etc. A few example pieces can be found at <http://atheists.org/publicschools/faqs.prayer.html> (a piece done by atheists), <http://www.portia.org/change/prayer.html> (a poem written against eliminating prayer in schools), and <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa062602a.htm> (about the use of the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance). The goal of the pieces was to expose students to the differing viewpoints around these controversial topics. After reading the works, the students were expected to write a brief paper explaining their position on the issue, using the articles to support their opinions (and to argue against opposing opinions). In many cases, these articles were the first time that students ever considered the issues and had to form opinions on them. Even for those students who had considered the issues in the past, most of them had never heard or seriously considered the opposing viewpoints, so the articles were the first time many were exposed to them. This caused a challenge to many of the students because they were

expected to support their views, and sometimes, students even explained that they were simply ignoring the articles with which they did not agree.

The simulations ran three days. During each, the students were expected to look at the current state of laws pertaining to their issue and change the laws to meet their beliefs. The school prayer status quo, which was provided to all students, is included in the Appendix to this paper. During the first two days of simulation, the students wrote proposals that would attempt to change the status quo and then they attempted to gather support from their classmates. The changes could consist of adding, removing, or changing a current law on the issue. Once a proposal had been written, students must then obtain at least three signatures (their own and two classmates) on the proposal before it even had the potential to be heard by the class. After it had meet this criteria, students tried to continue gaining support for the proposal from classmates and turned it in to the simulation facilitator. The goal was that by the end of the second day, the students had gained support for their proposals, sometimes enough to ensure passage on the third day. Some students had not made decisions by the end of the second day, and there was discussion on the final day to persuade any last students that were undecided.

On the second day of the simulation, a Rules Committee, just like would be present in Congress, was chosen. This body, consisting of five students, could either be elected by the students or selected by the simulation facilitator. If they were elected, halfway through the second day, the students would start making nominations, and then they would vote at the end of the day. Each student was permitted to vote for five people and voting was conducted by secret ballot. At the

beginning of the final day of simulation, the Rules Committee was announced to the class and become suddenly more powerful than the other members of the class. They had the ability to determine exactly which proposals would be discussed and voted on by the class and in which order. If the Rules Committee did not agree with a proposal, they had the ability to discard it and the rest of the class had no power to do anything to stop them. After the decision about proposals had been made, the chosen ones were discussed among the class and voted on, needing either a set 1/2 or 2/3 majority to pass the proposals (the percentage required to pass legislation varied by simulation).

After the final day of simulation, the students were asked to reflect on the occurrences of the three days in a second paper. The topics of the paper included what happened during the simulation, how successfully they achieved their policy aims, how they accomplished such goals, how their views changed, and how the rules in the room affected the outcomes. Again, the students were asked to reflect back on the articles presented to them before the simulation to determine if their opinions had held steadfast or if something throughout the simulation had caused their judgment to be swayed.

The purpose of the simulation relates to preparing students for making political decisions once they have left the classroom. Most students begin the class with little or no political knowledge and have never really participated in government. A few of the students may have voted, but many are fresh out of high school and have never had the opportunity. Therefore, the goal is to encourage students to believe that they are capable of making decisions and actually help them to develop the skills

necessary to participate in government. However, one of the problems with this system is that if students are not actually making the decisions on their own, rather, they are conforming to the opinions of others, the goals of helping the students to gain political skills may not have been met. While some students may be persuaded in the simulations, it was a problem when they were simply abandoning their beliefs for reasons aside from arguments about the topics. Throughout the simulations, it became apparent that some students may be following the lead of others instead of making decisions on their own, and therefore may not be any more capable of making political decisions at the end than when they began the course.

Data and Methods

The data for this study was drawn from both the pre-simulation and post-simulation papers for all four issues, focusing mainly on the school prayer topic, as well as observations made throughout the simulations themselves. After the conclusion of the term, the facilitators of all four topics and the professor coded the papers on a liberal-conservative scale from 1-6, one being very conservative and six being very liberal. Each paper was coded by two people, neither of whom were the facilitator of the topic. Therefore, I did none of the coding for the school prayer papers analyzed in this thesis. The coding was done for both semesters of the class, but since the second semester was that which I was studying and observing, most of the results are from just this group of students.

Along with this, the students were asked to participate in a survey at the beginning and end of the semester. The survey was completely voluntary, but almost every student completed it. Included in the survey were questions about the attitudes of the students about politics, political knowledge, and their assessment of their own political skills. The surveys at the beginning and end of the semester were identical in order to compare knowledge and perception changes from the beginning of the semester to the end.

The question that I was hoping to answer from the class was how much change in opinion the students were making from the beginning to the end. From the first semester, I saw students that walked into the simulation and completely abandoned the views they had expressed in their pre-simulation papers. Therefore, for the second semester, I was hoping to see how much these changes were occurring, and if there was a way to prevent it. While I knew that there was some legitimate persuasion in the first semester, I also knew that some of it was a false consensus and wanted to try to determine which students were easily persuaded to a false consensus and which students were steadfast with their opinions. If I could hold students accountable for their pre-simulation opinions, my thought was that I could prevent them from switching sides if it seemed as though they were conforming rather than being persuaded.

During the first simulation of the second semester, I read each pre-simulation paper, but not especially carefully, to see how the students would change their views without my influence. For the second simulation, I read the pre-simulation papers much more carefully, and walked into the room with an idea of who each student was

and where their views stood on the issue. For the final simulation, I had explicit notes about the views of each student in the simulation from their pre-simulation papers, with the idea that if they seemed to be steering away from their original beliefs, I may be able to help get them to re-acknowledge their original ideas and not simply buy into what the others in the room were saying. My thoughts were that by using such a method, I would help the students to decrease consensus in the room and encourage debate, making them more capable of participating in politics once they had completed the class. The goal of this research was not necessarily to promote students participating in government once they left the class, but rather to help them gain the ability to do so if they wanted to contribute.

Results

A. Contradictory Viewpoints

Part of the decision to choose the four topics that were used in the simulations was that they were controversial (although eminent domain proved to be much less than the others). School prayer, along with affirmative action and the war on terror were things about which the students were expected to know something prior to the simulations. Whether the students knew a significant amount about the topic or just a little, we assumed they would probably have an opinion before the simulations began. With the use of the articles spanning opinions about the topics, we thought that the students should have been able to make a decision and stand by it. However, the

students struggled mightily with even hearing contradicting viewpoints from the articles and the other students.

Even before the beginning of the simulations, many students found it very difficult to deal with contradictory opinions. In both the simulations and the pre-simulation papers, students expressed the challenge they faced when they read articles on all sides of the issues. Often students explained in their essays the difficulties they faced when trying to make sense of all sides and choose their own opinion. One student explains that “when I was reading the articles, I was basically confusing myself. I was agreeing with something and other things were making me very mad. But all together, I am contradicting myself.” Some students even wrote about reading articles that they did not agree with, so they simply ignored the article. In response to one article, a student explained that “I don’t think this article had any substance to it and should not be included with the other articles because of that.” Several of the articles were very opinion-based, but because this student disagreed with the content of this particular article, they ignored it and acted as though it did not exist instead of trying to understand where the author of the article was coming from. Overall, many students explained the difficulty they had dealing with different sides, some of which ran completely perpendicular to their own beliefs.

Some students found it very difficult to disagree with the articles. One student explained that “There were not any times where I found myself arguing or disagreeing with anything.” The articles come from many different opinions so the student could not possibly have an opinion if they agree with everyone. Often, students have trouble disagreeing with an “authority” because they supposedly know

everything (Perry 1970). However, the students also have trouble determining who exactly is an authority. Another aspect of the articles that the students read was that they came from many different sources, some of which were not very credible. One, written by a teenager, was a poem about why prayer should be in schools. The students were given no information about the author other than where they were from, but the students automatically assumed they were credible because we had provided them with the poem. Along with problems disagreeing with opinions, the students had troubles disagreeing with people they believed to be authorities (Moore 1994).

Even in the simulations, students seemed to have some difficulty choosing sides, finding students that agreed with their side, and working only with these students. In the later simulations of the semester, the students had built a friend base with whom they had worked on previous simulations. When the third simulation of the second semester began, the students in the school prayer room immediately sat down with the same groups they had worked with for the first two simulations. Some of the most liberal students based on pre-simulation papers were in groups with some of the most conservative students trying to work to write proposals. For example, two students were working together, one of whom had said her pre-simulation paper that in situations such as prayer prior to after-school activities like athletic events that students “need to realize that prayer comes along with the game and they need to deal with it” while the other student working with her had written that “I agree with the courts’ decision to ban prayer before the football games.” Instead of finding other people with different viewpoints, these students attempted to work together and try to reach consensus, even though they were coming from opposite sides of the issue.

Even students who recognized that they had different views than the people they were talking to tended to sit where they were and argue instead of trying to find people on their side. Several times throughout the simulations I needed to ask students to move to other groups where their views would be better received rather than argue with whomever they were sitting near. While discussion was encouraged and argument was permitted, it was not productive when the students were attempting to write proposals with students with whom they completely disagreed.

In the voting for the Rules Committee, students appeared to vote based on how much they liked the people running, rather than how the candidates felt about the issue ideologically. The students tended to be aligned based on either who was sitting near them from the start of simulation, or who they had made friends with in earlier simulations. When it came time to nominate candidates for the Rules Committee, students either nominated themselves or people in close proximity to them. The voting was done through a secret ballot, but over half the class in each of the three simulations voted for both conservative students ideologically as well as liberal students. In the compilation of ballots, it became very clear that the students who had been voted for on each individual ballot tended to be clusters of students who had been sitting near each other and sometimes were nearly opposite ideologically. The students were voting for their friends, who they saw speak a lot, or who really wanted it, but not for the people they believed would help pass their proposals. In greater society, if this occurs, it turns elections into popularity contests, making the beliefs and platforms of candidates not play the most important role in decision making as they should.

B. Adherence to Original Beliefs

One of the main questions to be asked throughout the simulations was whether students were actually adhering to the beliefs explicated in their pre-simulation papers. Did the post-simulation papers express the same opinions as the pre-simulation papers, or had the views of the students changed somewhere throughout the process? From the coding done by the facilitators, I was able to see how much the opinions of students changed throughout the simulations. From the numbers the students were given on their pre-simulation and post-simulation papers on the 1-6 liberal-conservative scale, I could subtract to get the amount of change. Table 1 shows the number of students who wrote both papers in each simulation and the average difference between pre-simulation and post-simulation papers.

Through the three simulations second semester, the number of students that completed both papers declined in the groups, but this may be due to some students leaving the class part way through the semester. This may have to some extent “weeded out” the less proficient students and the more skilled students remained as the ones who were still writing both papers. Especially with the dropping out of this nonrandom group of students, the expectation was that by the third simulation, ideological changes would have decreased. The remaining students were expected to be better students who would also be more likely to be good at maintaining their positions, but the change in ideology actually increased from one simulation to the next. Whereas the hope was that students would feel more comfortable later in the semester adhering to their beliefs around their peers, this was actually negated by the ideological changes seen among the students.

During the second simulation, I had the facilitator who had the students at that time that I would have for the third simulation draw a seating chart of her room. From round to round, the groups stayed in the same rooms, so the students would be in the same room when I had them for the third simulation. When I walked in on the first day of the final simulation, I knew who each and every student was without even asking their names. The students were sitting in the exact same seats that they had been in for the simulation prior. For the first simulation, the students may have bonded over the issue, finding other students that agreed with their point of view on the issue and worked with them. By the third simulation, the students were simply talking to the friends that they had made in earlier simulations. Therefore, if the students had bonded over the war on terrorism and agreed on that, they were immediately assuming that they would also agree about prayer in schools, and therefore worked with the same students. However, the pre-simulation papers from these groups proved that they did not necessarily agree about school prayer.

Even with my attempts to pull students back to their original beliefs, many could not be brought back. One of the most active students in the third simulation of the second semester abandoned her beliefs as soon as she walked into the first day of simulation. One article that students read prior to simulation was about whether or not “intelligent design” ought to be taught in schools. The article explained that courts had mandated the removal of stickers from textbooks in a school district that said that evolution may not be valid and that “an intelligent designer” may have played a role in the beginning of man (ACLU 2005). The student explained in her pre-simulation paper “I found myself devastated at the fact that a school district

would even try to get away with discrediting science in order to restore what they call ‘creationism’ in public schools.” However, when the student got into simulation the first day, she immediately began working on a proposal with other students that ended up reading “All schools should teach ‘intelligent design’ along with the theory of evolution.” There was no way that this student could be pulled back when she had completely abandoned her point that much already. Since this student had been active in prior simulations and this one, she probably would have had the ability to convince other students, but did not use this advantage at all. Despite my attempts to remind students of their opinions from their papers, most simply explained that their opinions had changed.

A piece of this puzzle may be that the students never really had opinions before the beginning of the simulation (or at the end for that matter). When the students were given the pre-simulation assignment, it asked them to read an article and then write their opinions about the topic. Even after reading the articles, it is possible that some of the students still did not care about prayer in schools. One student explained in her pre-simulation paper that “Until now I haven’t put any thought into this subject but I guess if I had to choose one way or the other I would oppose...it.” While she took a stance on the issue, she also made it clear that she really did not care much about it. Though she did express an opinion and support it throughout the paper, it would have been very easy for her to change sides throughout the simulation because it was not something she felt strongly about. Whereas she may have been influential on a topic she cared a lot about, she did not do much to try to convince others during school prayer. Another student explained that “My

opposition only means that I have found more negatives than positives, but I am still for the most part undecided.” Again, this student, when walking in on the first day of simulation, would probably not readily try to convince others, but instead look to be convinced.

Part of the problem is that many students may have feared that they would be docked points if they did not take a stance on the issues. There may have been cases of taking a strong stance because they felt it was “what the professor wants to hear.” Then, when the students that felt this way got into simulation and saw other students that did have strong opinions and reasons for them, it was easy to agree with them because they seemed to know what they were talking about. As the class went on, the students had found their group of friends with whom they would agree. In this case, some of the changes may have been less due to a huge change in ideology, but more that some students were just not interested in the topic.

However, when looking at how important the students viewed the issue, it became apparent that not just the students who viewed school prayer as unimportant were changing their views in the simulation. While some students clearly did not have opinions because they probably did not care, even the students who did claim to care about school prayer were changing. Table 2 shows the results of how much students were changing based on a question in the survey at the beginning of the semester asking the students how important of an issue they found school prayer to be. There is very little difference from the students who found the issue to be very important from the students that found it less important. Even when the students

thought it was an important issue, they were still changing their opinions about school prayer.

Another issue was that some of the students were going into the simulations looking for an opinion. Often, the students who did not take a stance before the simulation explained that they were hoping to develop one as the simulation progressed. One student explained that “I don’t really have a strong opinion on school prayer...Hopefully after the simulation though I will be able to come up with a solid opinion on school prayer. I think it will be easier for me to listen, understand and take others’ opinions into consideration since I don’t have a real stand on the topic.” Students such as this one were actually walking into simulation without an opinion hoping to find someone to give them an opinion. In this instance, I would be led to believe that the opinion the student developed in the simulation was probably that of a friend she had made, especially since this was the third simulation that the student had attended. Despite that, this student was actually elected to the Rules Committee even though she had few thoughts or opinions about the topic.

C. Who Changes?

i. Activity in the Simulation

While it is apparent that many students did change their positions on the issues, it is also apparent that others did not. In the simulations, some students were very active and always trying to persuade others to agree with their positions. However, other students sat back and were persuaded. There were certain groups of people that I could see that did not make the same effort as other groups to achieve

their political goals. While there were definitely exceptions to the rule, there were some interesting correlations.

The first thing that I examined was attendance. While majority of the students attended all three of the days of simulation, there are some trends among the students who attended less frequently, which can be seen in Table 3. There were two students that attended zero days of simulations, but still wrote papers before and after the rest of the students participated in the simulation. There was absolutely no change for either student in their ideology, which makes sense because they could not have been persuaded without exposure. There was also little change among the few students that only came to one day of simulation. These students may not have been around enough to see what the class was deciding on the issue and probably were not very active in the day that they were in attendance. Therefore, change was limited because of this.

The group that changed by far the most was the eight students that came to two of the days of simulation. By missing one day of simulation, it is likely that these students were not extremely active in writing legislation, and therefore just “went with the flow.” Being behind because of the missed day may have caused the students to just agree to whatever their friends were telling them to say. While there was change among the students that attended every day, it is much lower than the students who missed once.

These results can be bolstered when looking at the amount students participated in Table 4. Each student was given a grade from 0-5 based on how much they participated in the simulation. The only students that received a grade of 0 were

the two who did not attend, and 5s were reserved for the most active students. The students who got a 3 or 4 for participation had the most ideological change. These students were active, but they were not the most active. Students who received scores of 5 were extremely active, and the other students came to listen to them frequently. These students were often the ones who persuaded the 3s and 4s to join with their side.

ii. Demographics

Of the 41 students that wrote both school prayer papers during the semester, 27 of them were Caucasian. Many of the others were African American, but not all. When comparing the change in ideology between the Caucasian students and the remainder of the students, the Caucasian students changed their opinion about .14 less than the other students. While not a huge difference, it is apparent that there was some level of separation. At the same time, the non-Caucasian students attended simulation less and got lower participation scores than the Caucasians. Therefore, it seems the non-Caucasian students were more subject to persuasion and ideological change.

When comparing sex, there was again a difference. The 27 women in the class changed their opinions less than the men in the class. The men changed their opinion about .18 more. Again, while both groups changed their opinions to a large degree, the men were making a larger leap. One explanation for this was that there were more women in the class and this could have affected the power in the simulations. Because there were more women, there were more people to join behind

and support, and they may have overpowered the discussion. In many of the rooms, there were females who seemed to run the conversation more than there were very active men from my own observances.

Table 5 shows the demographics when they are broken down by both race and gender. As would be expected, the group with the smallest amount of change was the Caucasian females and the group with the most change was the non-Caucasian males. From my position of facilitator, I saw several Caucasian women that play very active roles in creating legislation. There were slightly fewer Caucasian men that were important, but still several. I can think of only one or two non-Caucasian students that played an important role in the legislative process. While there were fewer students that were not Caucasian in general, the amount that played an important role were not proportional to the Caucasians.

There is more to note about the different demographics within the class; the demographics that were less likely to change their opinion were also the students with higher attendance and participation. On average, the females in the class attended .3 more days than the males and received .7 more participation points out of a possible 5. The males were less likely to attend and participate, and more likely to change than the women. At the same time, the Caucasian students attended just over .5 more classes on average than the non-Caucasian students. The Caucasian students also received an average of one more participation point. Race is definitely correlated to the amount of ideological change, but it is also showing vast differences for the amount of work that students put into the simulations.

iii. Knowledge

On the surveys that the students were given at the beginning and end of the semester, there were several questions that were used to gauge their political knowledge. For simplicity's sake, this section will only focus on the answers that the students gave in just the pre-class surveys. Of the ten knowledge questions, there were five from each of two categories: textbook knowledge (such as "How long is a senate term?") and current event knowledge (such as "Who is the current Speaker of the House?"). My hypothesis was that the students who knew the most about the topics would be the students that remained loyal to their position the most.

The textbook knowledge questions seemed as though they might not have as much of an effect on ideological change. Table 6 displays the average ideological change based on the number of questions the students got correct. The two groups of students that had the smallest change were the students who got two or five questions right. To some extent, this may make some logical sense. The students who got two questions right were also the students with the second lowest attendance, just below that of the students who got three questions right. The students who got all five questions right had the highest attendance of any group. These also hold true for participation in the simulations.

The data in Table 7 is a much bigger cause of concern. It would make sense for the students who had the most current event knowledge to be the most influential in the simulations and therefore have the least change. After all, if students know more about what is going on in the world, they should be more capable of making decisions and sticking to them when it comes to school prayer. However, this was

not that case. The students who had the least change by far were actually the students who had the middle score, with two questions right. Many students got one more question right than this group, yet they changed their opinions almost twice as much. Therefore, the convergence of opinion actually may be around a less informed group than some of the students in the class.

The students who got three of the questions right, which only one student got more than, were actually the students with the lowest attendance; they were also the students with the lowest participation. The attendance and participation scores decreased with each additional question correct; the lowest scorers were around the most and the most active. This may be even more concerning; the people that are and the most involved are also the least knowledgeable. If the people that are most active are the students who are the ones who are changing the least and persuading the others, than again, the class is adhering to the opinions of the ones that know the least.

D. False Consensus or Legitimate Persuasion?

While it seems that many students changed their opinions at least to some degree throughout the simulation, the question arises of whether the students were legitimately persuaded to agree with the opposing viewpoints, or if they formed a false consensus. By the end of the semester, more students felt that they were able to explain their political views to others and weigh the pros and cons of political positions; they also felt more able to explain their views and persuade others. However, there was also a large increase in the perceived ability of the students to

reach a compromise. Table 8 shows the survey data about students' perceived skill levels. Because students feel they are able to compromise so well, it may be that students are changing their viewpoints as a compromise with other students so that they will be able to pass as many proposals as possible, even though they were voting against their own beliefs, or at least what used to be their beliefs.

In the third simulation of the second semester, one student made it his personal mission to prove that false consensus was occurring and to see if he could pass a proposal that he did not necessarily even believe. He made it his goal to convince as many people as possible to vote for a proposal that read "If there is going to be a public prayer, those who do not wish to pray have the option of discretely going to the back, putting their fingers in their ears, spinning around, and singing quietly 'lalalalalalala.'" His other goal in the class was to "test to see if it was possible to get the majority of the class to vote against their own proposals."

In the end, the student's proposal did receive approval by 11 of the 17 students in the simulation, just shy of the 12 votes necessary to meet a 2/3 majority. This occurred even despite my repeated attempts to get students to see the lack of value of the proposal and to get them to oppose it. The author of the proposal explains in his post-simulation paper "I found that with the right approach, you can get anything approved. The kicker is that my proposal was written based on a mockery of religion and most all other proposals were leaning toward pro-religion." The author of the proposal was very sociable to everyone in the room and acted as if they were all his friends. This proposal demonstrated that many students were being

persuaded to completely abandon everything they had formerly said to vote for a proposal that negated everything else they were trying to accomplish.

In the final simulation, I was able to compare the pre-simulation ideologies of students that were sitting in groups together and then look at the same groups after simulation. One group of three students had ideologies on their papers of 1, 4, and 4 on the liberal-conservative scale. Those same students, on their post-simulation papers, had scores of 4, 5, and 5, respectively. The student who went from a 1 to a 4 was also the quietest of the three members of this group. Other groups throughout the room made similar changes, where the convergence was toward the majority. It also seems that the groups tended to move toward the leaders of the individual groups. The students moved on average 1.25 points on the scale in this simulation, so while some of the members of the class remained close to their original beliefs, the others in the groups were moving very far to be along side them.

Some students even acknowledged that they were not adhering to their beliefs for the sake of the other students in the simulations. In one post-simulation paper, a student explained that “we didn’t want to offend anyone.” Another student expanded on this idea, saying that “I know that this was not the most effective way to participate in the simulation, but to be quite honest, it was the only way I knew to not piss people off.” The students were aware when they switched support to the other side and did it more for the sake of the goals of others than their own goals. These students were exemplifying the idea that individuals will agree to things in public that they do not necessarily believe for the benefit of fitting into the group. They are

willing to abandon their own beliefs to not feel like an outsider, which supports the beliefs that decisions were not being made based on the issues themselves.

By the end of the set of simulations, it became obvious that students had determined who they normally agreed with, who they got along with, and who they wanted to work with long before asking ideological positions of their classmates on the issues. Due to my inability to pull conforming students back to their pre-simulation paper opinions, I believe that students were forming a consensus based on what they saw as the group norms. They did not want to appear ideologically different than the friends they had made and seem like an outsider, so they adhered to the views that they saw throughout the rest of the room and the opinions of the friends they had made.

Conclusions and Implications

The most basic function of the simulation model class is that students will learn skills relating to government by actually using them in the class. The skills that the students use will remain with them longer than the facts, and will be useful in other classes as well as in making decisions on political issues. By looking at the ability of students to make decisions on their own and how they form consensus in a group, the students have adhered to the models of conformity set forth by social psychologists.

My objective throughout the second semester of simulations was that I would be able to encourage the students to remain with their beliefs throughout the

simulations and not conform to the rest of the class when it seemed that this was becoming a problem. However, this did not work out as planned. Instead, as the students got more comfortable with each other and became better friends, it appears they were even more willing to abandon their beliefs for the sake of the group. While it can be quite beneficial to the students that they have gained social capital which they did not have prior to the class, I fear that they have not learned to make decisions about political issues any better than before they joined the class; instead, they have learned to adhere to the opinions of others.

The question still exists of how to encourage legitimate dissent among the students. It is quite possible that if voting on the issues had been private instead of a public raise of hands, there would have been more opposition to the majority when the students voted. While this was never tried with school prayer, other simulation rooms tried this technique and saw some success in that there was more opposition to the majority. However, the voting for Rules Committee was private and there seemed to be consensus, so private voting on the proposals may not have changed the results. Also, had the students not remained with the same group throughout the entire semester, it is possible that students would have been more able to argue with their classmates because they would not already consider them friends. Due to the consistent increase in ideological changes from one simulation to the next, I believe part of the changes occurred because of the bonds the students had made and could have been prevented by changing the groups between simulations. However, due to the perceived increase in ability to weigh pros and cons of issues and make a difference, the students may at least feel confident and competent enough to make

political decisions in the future, in which case the goal of preparing students for participation in government has been achieved.

If this trend is generalized to the greater public, there could be some implications, especially during elections. The students displayed evidence that they agreed more with whom they liked than who they necessarily agreed with ideologically. With political ads, the candidates try to exploit this, and it may work better than political scientists would hope. Many ads attack the character of the candidates rather than the issues they support. While most Americans would not proclaim that they vote for candidates based on such features, they may actually, consciously or subconsciously, do it.

With the 2008 presidential campaign in full gear, there are two Democratic candidates that exemplify this point. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama are two of the frontrunners for the party, but they each have flaws in that they are biologically different than the rest of the candidates, and every other president our country has seen. People explain that they are not sure if they are ready to see a woman or an African-American run our nation. Even beyond gender, people talk about Clinton's marriage as a reason to not support her. It is hard for people to look past the surface and at the actual platforms for which the candidates stand. While many do have legitimate objections to these candidates, some are basing their decisions on looks and private issues (and likeability).

The students that attended the class and simulations will probably not rush out and join an interest group or lobby Congress. Most will not follow politics and government much more than before the class, if at all. However, when important

political issues come before them, they do claim to feel more confident analyzing and making decisions on the issues. Even if this is not true, they may have developed some cues for voting, such as talking to the people they are close to for thoughts, although this is a problem when done blindly. The students in the class, and probably Americans in general, need to work on making independent decisions before they can be considered competent voters. Until that step has been taken, they will continue to make decisions based on factors unrelated to the issues.

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Appendix

Current Laws Pertaining to School Prayer

- Students may pray during non-instructional school hours.
- Schools may not discriminate against students on the basis of religion.
- Students may organize prayer/religious groups just the same as any other school extracurricular activity.
- Teachers may not participate in prayer with students. They can, however, participate in religious activities in schools when not acting in an official capacity, for example, during lunch.
- Students are allowed to use religious references in school work and this work is to be judged based on academic standards and not religious content.
- It is permitted for students/speakers to pray aloud before assemblies, graduation, or sporting events so long as they were not chosen specifically to pray.
- The Pledge of Allegiance currently contains the phrase “under God.”
- Some schools currently teach the theory of “intelligent design” along with the theory of evolution.

Table 1: Change in Ideology from Pre-Simulation to Post-Simulation by Simulation Number

<i>Simulation Number</i>	<i>Number of Students Who Completed Both Papers</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
1	16	.8125
2	15	1.1333
3	12	1.2500
Total	43	1.0465

Table 2: Change in Ideology Based on How Important Students Believed the Issue of School Prayer to Be

<i>Amount Students Cared about School Prayer</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
1 – Care a Great Deal	6	1.0833
2	12	1.0417
3	12	1.1250
4	2	1.0000
5	4	.6250
6 – Don't Care Very Much	5	1.2000
Total	41	1.0488

Table 3: Change in Ideology Based on Attendance

<i>Days of Attendance</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
0	2	.0000
1	4	.5000
2	8	1.6875
3	29	1.0172
Total	43	1.0465

Table 4: Change in Ideology Based on Participation

<i>Participation</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
0	2	.0000
1	3	.8333
2	7	.8571
3	7	1.2857
4	12	1.4167
5	12	.8750
Total	43	1.0465

Table 5: Change in Ideology Based on Gender and Ethnicity

<i>Ethnicity and Gender</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
Caucasian Male	10	1.0000
Caucasian Female	22	.9318
Non-Caucasian Male	6	1.4167
Non-Caucasian Female	5	1.2000
Total	43	1.0465

Table 6: Change in Ideology Based on Textbook Knowledge

<i>Textbook Knowledge Questions Correct (0-5)</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
1	2	1.2500
2	11	.9545
3	7	1.2143
4	10	1.1000
5	11	.9545
Total	41	1.0488

Table 7: Change in Ideology Based on Current Event Knowledge

<i>Current Event Knowledge Questions Correct (0-5)</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Average Change in Ideology</i>
0	5	1.1000
1	7	1.2857
2	16	.6875
3	12	1.2083
4	1	3.0000
Total	41	1.0488

Table 8: Self-Reported Gains in Political Skills (All items coded 1-6, where 1 indicates lowest levels of perceived skill and 6 indicates highest levels)

<i>Question</i>	<i>Pretest Average</i>	<i>Posttest Average</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Skills in Managing Information			
I can explain my political views to others	3.81	4.49	0.69 t=5.73, p<.000
I can weigh the pros and cons of political positions	3.86	4.46	0.61 t=4.35, p<.000
Skills in Working with People			
I can persuade others to support political positions	3.44	4.19	0.75 t=5.69, p<.000
I can help diverse groups work together	3.60	4.19	0.59 t=3.89, p<.000
I can deal with conflict when it comes up	4.27	4.61	0.34 t=2.38, p<.05
I can react compromise	4.28	4.74	0.36 t=2.74, p<.01

Figure 1: Asch Line Example

Given Line: _____

Which of the following lines is the same length as the given line?

A) _____

B) _____

C) _____