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To cite this article: Nicholas Clark, Gretchen Van Dyke, Peter Loedel, John Scherpereel & Andreas Sobisch (2017) EU Simulations and Engagement: Motivating Greater Interest in European Union Politics, Journal of Political Science Education, 13:2, 152-170, DOI: 10.1080/15512169.2016.1250009

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2016.1250009>



Published online: 21 Feb 2017.



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EU Simulations and Engagement: Motivating Greater Interest in European Union Politics

Nicholas Clark^a, Gretchen Van Dyke^b, Peter Loedel^c, John Scherpereel^d, and Andreas Sobisch^e

^aSusquehanna University; ^bThe University of Scranton; ^cWest Chester University; ^dJames Madison University; ^eJohn Carroll University

ABSTRACT

While the effects of simulation-based courses on the knowledge of participating students may be marginal in relation to standard lecture and discussion-based courses, this article argues that the greatest leverage is gained by increasing participating students' level of interest in the subject of study and in politics more broadly. Participants tend to become increasingly absorbed in their roles and in the politics of the institutions at the center of the simulation. To better consider this possibility, we conducted a survey of students participating in the 2015 Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation and of appropriate control populations. The survey results indeed suggest that, much more than simply acquiring knowledge about the EU, the simulation experience serves to generate more robust interest in the subject of study.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 June 2016
Accepted 14 September 2016

KEYWORDS

Political simulations;
European Union; active
learning; interest; survey
experiment

The benefits of active and experiential learning are well established within the conventional wisdom of the academic teaching community and in the scholarship on political science pedagogy. Political simulations, in which students play the roles of decision makers and deliberate over issues of the day, are a popular mode of such learning. Teacher-scholars have theorized that simulations offer several benefits, including deeper insights into political processes, improved written and oral communication skills and increased self-confidence (Caruson 2005; Newmann and Twigg 2000). Amongst the relatively few efforts to empirically investigate the potential benefits of simulations, teacher-scholars have largely focused on determining whether simulations improve students' acquisition and retention of factual knowledge (see, e.g., Krain and Lantis 2006). This article assesses another potential benefit of political simulations: Whether such exercises promote greater interest in the subject in question.

The literature on active learning stresses that interactive and student-centered activities improve learning outcomes by enhancing students' cognitive processing and promoting their ability to identify linkages between distinct high-level concepts (Omelycheva and Avdeyeva 2008). Such experiences may also facilitate deeper internalization of information, as students embed factual knowledge and meaningful personal experiences within their memories. Might these same mechanisms create, reinforce and/or strengthen interest in covered topics? Might students who learn political content through engaged and interactive

CONTACT Nicholas Clark  clarkn@susqu.edu  Department of Political Science, Susquehanna University, Steele Hall, 514 University Avenue, Selinsgrove, PA 17870, USA.

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experiences develop stronger affective connections with, and/or investments in, that material? Answers to these questions matter, as educational psychologists routinely find that interest in a topic has significant long-term effects. Hidi (1990), for example, finds that “individuals interested in a task or activity have been shown to pay more attention, persist for longer periods of time, and acquire more and qualitatively different knowledge than individuals without such interest” (554). Harackiewicz and Hulleman (2010) also stress that interest has value beyond its instrumental role in boosting achievement: “[I]nterest may be viewed as essential with respect to adjustment and happiness in life ... interest [in itself] is an important outcome” (44).

In this article, we investigate the extent to which simulations affect interest by surveying students who learn about European politics through a simulation of European Union (EU) decision making. We test the intuition that such students, as opposed to those who take a standard lecture-based course, are more likely to develop a connection with EU affairs and to feel invested in the EU’s political process. To investigate this possibility, we rely on surveys of students who participated in the 23rd annual Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation in November 2015. The surveys were administered to students before and after participating in the simulation and include a number of questions measuring both knowledge about EU affairs and interest in EU politics. The article proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing scholarship on active learning and political simulations. We then describe the survey instrument and the sample population in greater detail and proceed with an analysis of the survey findings. Our results suggest that simulations enhance participants’ interest in the subject of study and decrease the probability that students will have little or no interest in studied topics. Interest matters, we argue, because it promotes such ends as attention, persistence, and students’ perception of personal value. And simulations matter because they can promote interest.

The benefits of active learning

Traditionally, the classroom experience for college and university students has been an instructor-focused enterprise: The professor stands behind the lectern and presents his or her knowledge and wisdom to a group of students sitting quietly—and passively—in their lecture hall seats, supposedly listening attentively and taking notes on the lecture material. In fact, Omelicheva and Avdeyeva (2008) remind us that the “lecture is, arguably, the oldest known instructional technique,” dating back to Plato’s Academy and consistently “an indispensable part of teaching across the college and university curriculum” (603). The classic image and description of the professor in this scenario is that of the “sage on the stage,” who might occasionally draw students out of their passivity by using “the tried and true Socratic method” (Raines 2003, 432).

In contrast with this approach, many teacher-scholars have started to rely on instructional techniques that involve experiential and active learning. This pedagogy has emerged from a greater understanding of the Kolb Experiential Learning Model, which introduces four distinct stages/modes of student learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As Brock and Cameron (1999) point out, “[t]he key to planning lessons that take students full cycle is to note that the second word in each of the four stages’ names indicates what the learner experiences” (251).

Numerous articles have been published about the applicability of the Kolb model to the political science classroom (see, e.g., Brock and Cameron 1999; Fox and Ronkowski 1997; Kelle 2008; Rosenthal 1999). A range of classroom activities and instructional tools are often listed as supporting active and experiential learning, including (but not limited to) fieldwork, trigger films, case studies, laboratory projects, problems sets, guest speakers, projects on actual policy proposals, debates, media and Internet assignments, journal writing, and simulations (Brock and Cameron 1999, 254; Fox and Ronkowski 1997, 736). More recent additions to this list, and specifically in the area of European studies, are problem-based learning, blended learning, and exercises involving various social networks, utilizing today's technologically advanced classrooms (Farneti et al. 2014; Klymenko 2014; Maurer and Neuhold 2014; Mihai 2014).

Such active-learning experiences are thought to improve students' retention and understanding of information about the subject in question (Hertel and Millis 2002; Silberman 1996) beyond the traditional lecture-based classroom. The lecture format of instruction has been criticized for supporting only one empirically proven learning outcome, that being "short-term memorization of lecture content," so that the student can reproduce "information laid out by the instructor" (Omelycheva and Avdeyeva 2008, 603). Conversely, active-learning pedagogies have been praised because they produce such learning outcomes as "fostering higher order cognitive skills" in which students are able to comprehend complicated material and to draw linkages among "several components of a phenomenon in a logical and meaningful way" (Omelycheva and Avdeyeva 2008, 603–604). While the lecture-model may be ineffective for learning the "skills of application, analysis, and evaluation" (Omelycheva and Avdeyeva 2008, 604), active learning "help[s] the students understand the concrete application of the concepts and theories through the use of hands-on activities, small group analysis, role-plays, and group projects" (Boyer, et al. 2003, 432).

The use of political simulations, in particular, has generated substantial interest within the pedagogy literature. As Smith and Boyer (1996) argue, simulations have multiple, valuable learning outcomes: giving students "a deeper level of insight into the political process"; encouraging an increase in student attentiveness and activity within the learning process; encouraging greater retention of academic information over the long-term; helping students "develop critical thinking and analytical skills through collaborative efforts"; and enabling "students to develop speaking and presentation skills, [while] simultaneously building their confidence" (690–691). Simulations also create a space in which students may develop empathy for opposing viewpoints and develop unique leadership experiences (Morgan 2003; Newmann and Twigg 2000).

To date, however, few political scientists have assessed the extent to which active- and experiential-learning experiences in general—and simulations, in particular—might contribute to student interest. Research in educational and cognitive psychology demonstrates empirically what even first-time teachers intuitively sense: Students who are interested in a topic tend to engage more with material, to interrogate concepts more freely and rigorously, to lose themselves in pursuit of topic-related knowledge, and to sustain levels of engagement over time (Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff 2002; Hidi 1990; Hidi and Baird 1988; Hidi and Renninger 2006; Schiefele, Krapp, and Winteler 1992). These benefits can foster the outcomes mentioned above (e.g., depth, critical insight, confidence). As Harackiewicz and Hulleman stress (2010), however, interest can also be seen as an end

in itself. Individual interests are “enduring” and “trait-like.” They “can have a powerful influence on people’s lives, by impacting how they choose to spend their free time ... [and] the trajectory of students’ careers after college” (44).

Assessing the benefits of political simulations

This article builds on the existing literature in two ways: first, by contributing a multi-institutional, empirical assessment of the value of political simulations and, second, by expanding on prior studies to consider the benefits of simulations beyond information acquisition. Until recently, relatively few efforts sought to empirically verify whether such methods are effective for teaching political science (Smith and Boyer 1996; Krain and Lantis 2006). However, over the last decade, a number of efforts have been made to perform systematic assessments of specific experiential-learning exercises conducted within semester-long classes (see, e.g., Amyot 2014; Jones 2008; Kelle 2008; Krain and Lantis 2006; Krain and Shadle 2006). More specifically, in the field of European studies, Jones and Bursens (2014) have made significant headway in formally assessing the influence of simulations on learning outcomes (also see Jones 2008).

These contributions have produced rather mixed results in regards to the relative benefits of simulations for learning outcomes. Krain and Lantis (2006), for instance, use the same assessment instrument to compare the learning outcomes of a traditional lecture-based International Relations (IR) course with a simulation-based course focused on similar IR content. They find that both courses yield statistically significant positive effects on learning, but that neither one approach appears to have an advantage over the other. Using similar pre- and postexercise assessments, Amyot (2014) compares the results of a problem-based learning (PBL) exercise, in which student participants created their own constitution with a traditional lecture on constitutional design. The PBL groups exhibited a marginally better improvement than the lecture-based groups on the immediate postexercise assessment, but the latter performed better on that same assessment when it was administered two weeks later.

While this research may lead us to question whether students better acquire information through simulation experiences, there are a number of other potential benefits to the simulation experience. In particular, participating in political simulations may increase students’ short- and long-term interest in the topic at hand. As Dougherty (2003) notes: “By putting students in control of their learning, interactive exercises can make the real world both relevant and intellectually exciting” (245). Fowler (2005) similarly maintains that active-learning tools “encourage students to become engaged in international issues by interacting with one another and grappling with problems as a practitioner might” (156). The use of simulations may thus encourage greater interest in the disciplines of political science and European studies. Students are more likely to form “a [more] positive relationship with an academic discipline that they would otherwise find dull, difficult, and uninteresting were it presented through only one [more traditional] method” (Fox and Ronkowski 1997, 736).

The same cognitive process through which students internalize the experience (and, presumably, information acquired through the experience) may also implant a deeper and more abiding interest in the topic. Students who learn political content through engaged and interactive experiences may be more likely to develop an affective connection with and/or investment in that material. The use of Model EU simulations with American students

may best illustrate the first point. American college students, especially those who have never travelled to Europe, may have some difficulty in relating content about the EU to their own experiences. Thus, for those teaching about the EU, a common objective is to find methods that foster such a relationship. The simulation experience might be a way for American students to develop an interest in Europe. This outcome that could provide focus to students' later undergraduate studies and/or promote interest in European studies graduate programs (Van Dyke et al., 2000). The potential effects of simulations on interest have not received sufficient attention in existing empirical assessments of simulations' effects.

A multi-institutional simulation of the European Union

The Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation Consortium (MEUSC) offers the setting in which we investigate this theory. Over the last 22 years, several universities and colleges have participated in the MEUSC. The MEUSC brings students from institutions in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States to Washington, DC, each fall semester to participate in an experiential-learning program: a three-day simulation of the European Union's decision-making institutions and policy-making procedures. The MEUSC now has over 2,000 student alumni, who have completed the program over the last two decades. The simulation allows college students to merge academic knowledge about the European Union with practical application in debating and legislating over questions in EU politics and policy making. In this applied learning setting, students also learn critical lessons related to consensus building while protecting parochial interests, the value of oral argumentation and debate, and the complexity of public policy analysis and implementation.

The MEUSC program is managed by the participating faculty, including all administrative, financial and budgetary decisions, and oversight. At MEUSC participating universities, students enroll via an actual course or other academic club or organization that culminates in the simulation in Washington, DC, toward the end of the semester. At the simulation, students play the roles of various European leaders in several different EU institutions. Each participating school represents a particular country (or countries) within the EU. The structure of the simulation reflects the multilevel and multilayered EU policy-making process by incorporating various meetings of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the European Council.

To start, the topic for debate is chosen by the participating faculty members a year prior to the simulation. In selecting a topic, faculty members collectively discuss and consider current events of both practical and theoretical importance, the interests and research backgrounds of participating faculty members, and a desire to diversify discussions and debates within the simulation over time. As an example, at the fall 2014 simulation, the refugee/immigration crisis was chosen as the topic for 2015. This proved to be a fortuitous choice, given the escalation and sharpening of the crisis during 2015. The topics are chosen for two-year periods, with some variation in subthemes between each year. Country assignments are also made for two-year periods to reduce the prep work needed for faculty from year to year. Note that not every country is represented as the MEUSC has fewer than 28 universities participating, but every effort is made to balance representation of large and small member-states, older and newer member-states, geographical location, and traditional intra-EU country dynamics (North/South, East/West, Scandinavian vs. Mediterranean, etc.).

In the MUESC program, student delegates to the simulation represent actual “alter egos” from the European Commission, the European Council, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament. Students represent prime ministers and ministers, depending on the topic under discussion, as well as members of the European Parliament (MEPs) such as Marine Le Pen, Martin Schulz, José Bové, or Nigel Farage. The students playing the roles of European Commissioners are charged earlier in the semester with drafting a 6- to 8-page formal resolution that will serve as the draft to be debated during the simulation. One or two faculty advisors coordinate and guide the student commissioners in drafting the resolution to ensure the document’s realism and clarity. The draft resolution is composed via virtual coordination over a period of 5–6 weeks. Typically, it is divided into two parts to reflect the institutional makeup of two EP committees and two ministerial councils. Once the draft resolution is complete, Commissioners circulate it to all university delegations approximately two weeks prior to the simulation. While the detailed provisions of the draft are unknown to the student participants until shortly before the simulation, the general outline and topic of the resolution is well known to the faculty who prepare the students for the simulation over the course of the semester. As an example, with the recent refugee crisis topic, student participants had a full understanding of relevant policy issues, key concepts, and history, as well as current debates about the topic prior to receiving the resolution.

On the morning of the first day of the simulation in Washington, DC, the students visit the embassy of the country they are representing in the simulation and meet with (often high-ranking) officials to discuss the resolution and other issues relevant to the simulation. Student feedback suggests that the embassy visits are one of the most popular and useful aspects of the simulation. Once the actual simulation begins, students deliberate within the parliamentary committees and ministerial councils. These deliberations start with working dinners and parliamentary caucus meetings on the first evening of the simulation and continue with an eight-hour session on the second day of the simulation. During that session, students playing MEPs are divided into two separate committees, each of which focuses on the relevant areas of the draft resolution. On Day 3, the program convenes the EP plenary, the goal of which is to create a consensus document based on the work of the two committees.

Two ministerial councils and the European Council, meanwhile, work in parallel to the EP committees and plenary. The ministerial councils ultimately produce a joint council resolution reflecting the input and interests of the member-states. For their part, the heads of state and government formally open the simulation with a public address to all participants. When MEPs and ministers are debating and amending the commission’s draft resolution, the European Council meets in another parallel venue and simulates a summit. Under the leadership of a president, it drafts conclusions covering a broad agenda of issues of the day; its work goes beyond the narrower, legislation-focused agenda of the EP and the Council configurations.

Once the EP and the Council have amended the draft document, the simulation calls for a conciliation session where EP and Council representatives attempt to iron out differences that have emerged in their respective drafts. Such a meeting provides participants with a glimpse of an important reality of the EU’s complicated co-decision process. Following conciliation, a final amended version of the legislation is presented to both the European Parliament and the European Council for concluding deliberations and approval (or not), depending on the nature of the debate surrounding the resolution.

MEUSC faculty members have developed rules and procedures to organize the simulation meetings and deliberations, which are shared with students ahead of the simulation. The parliamentary committees and the EP plenary use established EU parliamentary procedures (which can be very different from Roberts' Rules of Order, to which most students are accustomed). The parliament is also organized based on the transnational party groupings that seek to overcome national divisions and perspectives. Students sit in parliamentary groupings, not country or university groupings. In contrast, Council meetings are more diplomatic and free-flowing, most often operating under the guise of a *tour de table* but also increasingly using new methods of (qualified) majority voting. The *tour de table* allows the discussion to move around the table, enabling each minister to offer an opinion, the ultimate goal being a gradually emerging consensus position. While the parliament is likely to take multiple votes, both procedural and substantive, the ministers try to avoid taking votes, if at all possible, so as not to isolate or back any one country into a defensive position.

For those institutions that combine the simulation with an EU course, the instructor typically identifies learning objectives focused around communication and negotiation skills as well as analytical and career-building skills. But, overall, the value of the simulation is that it captures the institutional and policy-making dynamics of the EU. It demonstrates the supranationality of the commission, the European Parliament, and the European political parties. It illuminates the relevance of "spillover" as students realize the connections between distinct EU policy issues. The simulation also illustrates the nature of power politics, as the students assert national interests in the European Council summit and the ministerial councils. In sum, the simulation gives the students a concrete sense of who is doing the acting as well as how EU actors shape and are shaped by the institutions, rules, national interests, and power structures that are mirrored in the simulation exercise and thus the "real" EU.

This type of simulation exercise entails a significant investment from the participating schools, as there are expenses associated with registration dues (which cover costs such as renting the meeting rooms), transportation, and hotel accommodations. Some schools cover all the associated expenses, while others split the financial burden with student participants. This exercise also requires that each faculty sponsor devote a considerable amount of time to preparing students, assisting in the organization of the simulation, and attending simulation activities. Ultimately, the faculty sponsors and their relevant administrators have determined that the advantages of participating in the simulation justify the costs involved.

The survey instrument and treatment groups

To determine the extent to which participation in the simulation encouraged interest in the EU, we designed a survey. Institutional Review Boards at multiple participating universities¹ approved the survey design and procedures, and all participating students granted their informed consent before participating.

Faculty advisers at colleges and universities that participated in the 2015 MEUSC administered the surveys to students. Each adviser chose whether to administer a pen-and-paper or an online version of the instrument. We designed the survey to facilitate pretreatment/posttreatment comparisons. In the "pre" phase, students who planned to

Table 1. Treatment groups.

Type of subject	<i>n</i>
Students who participated in the simulation and completed a course on the Politics of the European Union	40
Students who participated in the simulation and did not complete a course on the Politics of the European Union	13
Students who did not participate in the simulation and completed a course on the Politics of the European Union	13
Students who did not participate in the simulation and did not complete a course on the Politics of the European Union	24
Students who participated in the simulation and completed both the pre- and postinstruments	34

participate in the simulation completed the survey 2–3 weeks before the event took place. In the “post” phase, students who had participated in the simulation completed the same survey (with the small modifications discussed below) 2–3 weeks after the simulation event. We embedded a question of particular relevance to the current study within the pre/post-instrument: “To what extent would you say you are interested in the European Union?”² The survey also included a factual knowledge battery of true/false questions taken from EU public opinion surveys fielded by the Eurobarometer and the European Election Study. The full survey instrument, which included neutral questions and was designed to avoid advantaging any particular treatment group, is presented in Appendix A. We were able to match students’ pre- and postresponses via recourse to an anonymized two-factor authentication process embedded in the instrument.

Pre/post comparisons of answers to the aforementioned question offer the most direct way of addressing this study’s primary question. To generate additional insights, however, we included an additional close-ended question on the postinstrument: “Has participating in this Model European Union simulation affected your interest in the European Union?” Answers to this question elicited reflection from participants and allowed us to assess simulation-driven “interest dividends.”

Second, we took steps to facilitate comparisons between students who had participated in the simulation and students who had not participated in the simulation. To this end, a subset of faculty members administered the instrument to various groups of simulation nonparticipants. Specifically, they administered the survey to two different types of nonparticipants: (a) nonparticipants who were completing a course on the politics of the European Union and (b) nonparticipants who were completing a course on a more general subject in political science (e.g., Introduction to International Relations). The survey instrument was administered to these students once; unlike simulation participants, they were not offered a pre/postsurvey. This design facilitated differentiation between kinds of treatment (e.g., simulation participation vs. coursework that does not integrate a simulation) and between treatment in general (e.g., academic work focused on the European Union) and a control group. Table 1 reports the number and nature of subjects in the various treatment groups. One similarity across all four treatment groups was that few participants had taken coursework on the European Union before the semester in which the survey was administered; nonetheless, we include a control for previous exposure to EU-related coursework in our multivariate analysis.

Survey results

While the primary focus of this article is the relationship between participating in political simulations and interest in the subject at hand, we are building on an extensive body of

research that addresses information acquisition. We thus begin our analyses by examining simulation outcomes as they pertain to information acquisition.

In the first analysis, students who participated in the EU simulation served as the experimental group, and students enrolled in a political science course not involved with the simulation acted as the control group. The average number of correct responses to the true/false questions for the students participating in the simulation ($n = 55$) was 5.13, with a 95% confidence interval between 4.87–5.39. For the control group ($n = 37$), the average number was 4.14 with a 95% confidence interval ranging between 3.7–4.57. The difference of means t test finds that participating in the simulation had a statistically significant effect on student performance on the true/false battery; the t statistic is -4.17 , and the corresponding two-tailed p value is .0001. This is particularly noteworthy as the control group included students who were currently enrolled in an EU course or had taken an EU course in the past. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the two groups. More than 70% of simulation participants scored a 5 or 6 on the knowledge battery, whereas fewer than 50% scored at that level amongst the nonparticipants.

To better contextualize these results, we compare the performance of simulation participants on the first four true/false questions with survey respondents from the 2009 European Election Study (EES), which included those same four questions (Egmond et al., 2013).³ Figure 2 displays the differences between the two groups. Only 47% of EES respondents were able to correctly answer three questions, and only 17% correctly answered all four questions. In contrast, 93% of simulation participants correctly answered three questions, and nearly 62% correctly answered all four. Of course, we might hope and expect that university students participating in an EU simulation would be more knowledgeable, but these differences are still edifying for instructors teaching about the EU.

While the prior analysis documents a substantive difference between participants and nonparticipants, we still do not know how much the former actually learned by participating in the simulation. Thus, we next compare the results for participants surveyed before and after the simulation. We were able to match the pre- and postsimulation survey responses for 34 of the student participants. Prior to participating in the simulation, the average number of correct responses to the true/false questions was 5.24 with a 95% confidence interval between 4.89–5.58. After the simulation, the average number of correct responses actually decreased slightly to 5.06 with a confidence interval between 4.69–5.42. As might be expected, the result of the t test leads us to reject the null hypothesis that there

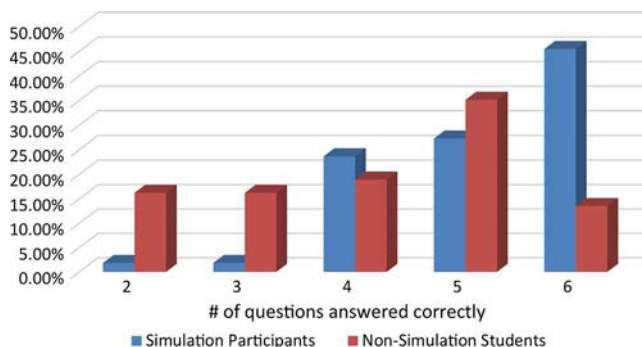


Figure 1. Comparing knowledge performance of simulation participants and nonparticipants.

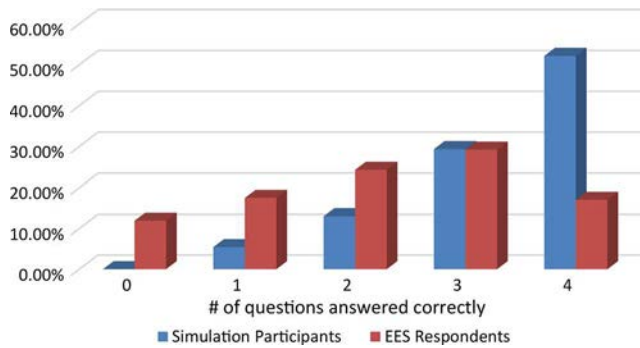


Figure 2. Comparing knowledge performance of simulation participants and European Election Study (EES) respondents.

is an actual difference in the mean between the pre- and posttreatment groups. The t statistic was 0.72 and the p value was far from statistical significance. These results suggest that the improvement in knowledge about the EU may have more to do with taking an EU course, and that participation in the simulation does not have an independent effect on knowledge about the EU.

To investigate that possibility with more precision, we further examined the effect of taking an EU course on knowledge about the EU. The survey asks respondents if they are currently taking a course on the European Union. As noted in Table 1, not all of the simulation participants took an EU course, and some of the respondents who took an EU course did not participate in the simulation.⁴ This diversity of experiences allows us to better parse out the effects of taking a traditional lecture-based course and participating in the simulation. The mean score on the knowledge battery for respondents who self-identified as taking an EU course at the time of the survey ($n = 53$) was 5.09, with the 95% confidence interval between 4.82–5.37. The mean score for those not in an EU course ($n = 37$) was 4.16, with a confidence interval between 3.72–4.6. The t statistic is -3.83 , and the two-tailed p value is .0002, suggesting that taking a course indeed has a significant effect on knowledge. Altogether, these results largely confirm earlier findings (Krain and Lantis 2006) that simulations may have a positive effect on information acquisition but are not superior to the traditional lecture-based classroom.

That simulations do not improve upon knowledge gained in the traditional classroom environment does not invalidate the purpose of such exercises. There may be alternative benefits to be gained through such active-learning techniques, including the development of a greater interest in the subject matter. Returning to the initial two groups of simulation participants and nonparticipants, we now compare their expressed levels of interest in the European Union. The survey question asks respondents “[T]o what extent would you say you are interested in the European Union?” with responses varying from 1 (very) to 5 (not at all). The mean response for students participating in the simulation ($n = 55$) was 1.85 with a confidence interval between 1.61–2.10. For those not participating, the mean response was 2.57 with the interval ranging from 2.10–3.04. The t statistic is 2.98, and the p value for the hypothesis that the two means are different is .003. In other words, the simulation participants register higher levels of interest in the EU. Figure 3 illustrates the difference between the two groups. Nearly 90% of simulation participants indicate that

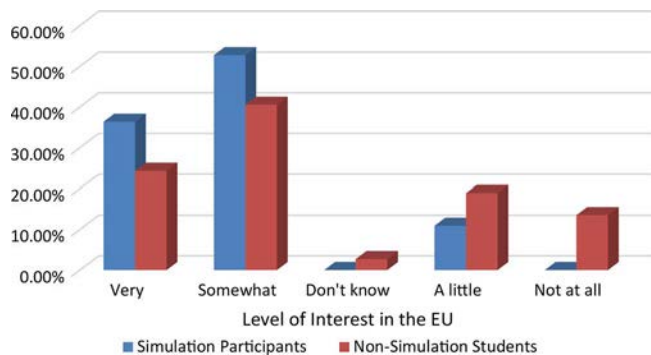


Figure 3. Comparing EU interest of simulation participants and nonparticipants.

they are very or somewhat interested in the EU. Only 64% of nonparticipants express that level of interest.

The next question concerns whether simulation participants experienced an increase in their engagement with the EU as a result of the experience. Returning to the same 34 students for whom we were able to match pre- and postsimulation responses, the average score for respondents assessing their own interest in the EU was 2.06 prior to the simulation with a confidence interval between 1.68–2.44. After the simulation, the average self-assessed interest increased to 1.62, with the interval varying from 1.35–1.89. The *t* statistic is 1.9, and the null hypothesis that the two means are not equal has a *p* value of .06. As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of respondents declaring that they were very interested in the EU increased from 35% before the simulation to 50% after the simulation. The percentage of respondents indicating they were only a little interested in the EU declined from 20% before to 6% after the simulation. These results suggest that the simulation experience may, indeed, enhance interest in the subject at hand.

To test for the possibility that the traditional classroom experience enhances interest, we analyze the differences between respondents taking an EU course and those not enrolled in any such course. The average response for students taking an EU course (*n* = 53) was 1.89 with a confidence interval between 1.64–2.13. For those not enrolled in an EU course, the average response was 2.54 with the interval ranging from 2.07–3.02. The *t* statistic is 2.68,

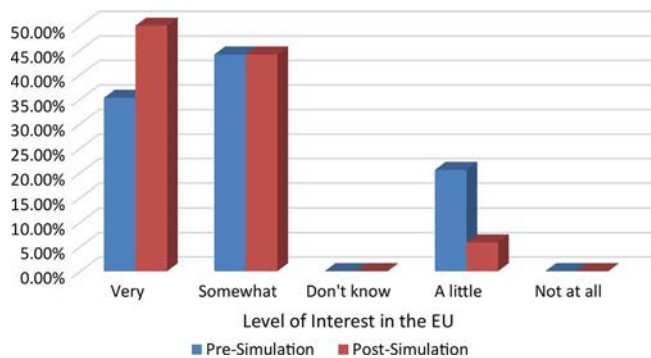


Figure 4. Comparing EU interest of simulation participants before and after simulation.

and the p value for the hypothesis that the two means are different is .008. This suggests that taking a course on the EU is also associated with greater interest in the EU.

To conclude, we conducted a pair of multivariate analyses that incorporate demographic and behavioral predictors (sex [female], age, frequency of travel to Europe, and frequency of political discussion) into models explaining both interest in and knowledge about the EU. As shown in the first column of Table 2, neither of the coefficients for having taken an EU course or having participated in the simulation registers a statistically significant effect on interest. However, greater frequency of political discussion, increasing performance on the true/false knowledge measure, and decreasing age (92% of respondents fall between 19–22) all correspond with greater levels of expressed interest in the EU.

As both the simulation and classroom experiences appear to affect knowledge, the knowledge coefficient may be capturing some of the variation that would otherwise be attributed to these variables. The classroom coefficient remains insignificant after removing both the knowledge measure and the simulation dummy variable from the model. However, after removing the knowledge measure, the simulation coefficient comes very close to statistical significance (.07). Thus, we estimate the predictive margin of the probability of expressing each of the different levels of satisfaction for both those who did and did not participate in the simulation. Those students who participated in the simulation are .15 more likely to respond that they are very interested in the EU, a relationship that holds at the 99% level of statistical significance. Participating in the simulation decreases the probabilities of responding “a little” by .08 (at the .01 level) and “not at all” by .04 (at the .05 level). The simulation measure has no effect on the “don’t know” response.

The second column of Table 2 documents the results of the analysis of knowledge about the EU. Of note, here the coefficient for the classroom dummy (signifying a student has taken a course on the EU) reaches statistical significance, while the simulation dummy does not. Here again, more frequent political discussion and declining age both correspond with higher performance on the knowledge index. Unsurprisingly, greater interest in the EU is also correlated with more knowledge about the EU. However, contrary to what we might expect, decreasing the number of visits to Europe appears to be correlated with greater knowledge about the EU. That result is likely due to most respondents having never visited or having only visited Europe once.

Altogether, these results largely confirm past research and our expectations as to the benefits of the simulation experience. The comparison of simulation participants

Table 2. Predictors of interest in the European Union.

	Political interest	Political knowledge
Female	-.05 (.48)	-.59 (.46)
Age	.45** (.16)	.36* (.16)
Frequency of Visits to Europe	-.07 (.15)	-.33* (.17)
True/False Knowledge	-.43* (.22)	
Interest in the EU		-.41* (.2)
Frequency of Political Discussion	-.37* (.18)	.38* (.18)
Simulation	-.62 (.51)	.76 (.49)
EU Course	-.02 (.28)	.77** (.29)
N	81	81

Note. Cells report coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from an ordered logistic regression model. The dependent variable in the first column is the level of a respondent’s expressed interest in the EU with lower values indicating greater interest. The dependent variable in the second column is the level of a respondent’s factual knowledge about the EU with lower values indicating less knowledge.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

(including students who did not take an EU course) and nonparticipants suggests that simulations may increase knowledge, but the other analyses indicate that any such effect is not beyond the increase that can be attributed to the traditional classroom experience. In fact, simulation participants actually registered slightly lower levels of knowledge on the (admittedly imperfect) knowledge scale after having participated in the simulation. Additionally, taking an EU course has a positive, statistically significant effect on knowledge, while participating in a simulation does not appear to have a significant effect. In contrast, simulation participants expressed higher levels of interest in the EU after having participated in the simulation. Moreover, in the multivariate analysis, having participated in a simulation has a much stronger relationship with interest than having taken an EU course. This finding reinforces the notion that the greater value of simulations may lie in stimulating student engagement with the subject of European integration.

Conclusions

The benefits of using political simulations and other active-learning tools are apparent to most, if not all, educators that have incorporated them into the classroom, but efforts to empirically verify those assumptions are relatively recent and have largely focused on learning outcomes. Some of this research has produced rather mixed results as to whether simulations facilitate greater information acquisition, suggesting that simulations may be as good as, without surpassing, traditional classroom lectures. This article's knowledge-focused analysis tends to corroborate these findings: Simulations may promote information acquisition, we find, but are not superior in that regard to more traditional classes. We have argued, though, that there are other benefits to be gained from the simulation experience; specifically, students' level of interest in the subject under study. We have analyzed the effects of simulations on both student knowledge and student interest, using pre- and postsurveys of participants in a large, multi-institutional simulation (the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation) as well as surveys of students just taking a course on the EU and those with no exposure to the EU at all. The results largely affirm our expectations that the simulation experience enhances participants' interest in the subject matter of their experience.

We believe there are benefits to generating a more invested and engaged student population. Such interest tends to facilitate the development of other skills and abilities, motivating students to seek out additional information on the subject and sustaining their commitment to learning about the topic beyond a semester-based course. Many of the faculty involved in the MEUSC have taught and advised simulation participants who went on to graduate studies focused on Europe and the European Union and who credited the simulation with stimulating their interest in the European Union. These experiences may thus increase long-term information acquisition even if the short-term benefits are not immediately visible. More interested students may also be more likely to speak out about the topic and, in so doing, develop public speaking, leadership, and debate skills. In other words, greater interest may be the mechanism through which simulations achieve the many benefits that are often attributed to active-learning experiences.

This article builds on past research by assessing the relationship between simulations and interest and in performing that assessment with a multi-institutional simulation. Much

of the existing research focuses on class-based simulations, often focused around a single lesson. This research is clearly valuable in addressing the teaching circumstances of many college instructors, but it overlooks the unique benefits that might be achieved through participation in large simulation programs such as Model European Union, Model United Nations, and Model Arab League. While requiring a much larger institutional investment, these simulation programs offer the potential advantages of introducing students to many new people (another benefit often identified by MEUSC participants) and more fully immersing students in the simulated environment. The institutional dynamics modeled within the MEUSC could not, for instance, be achieved in a classroom setting due to the differing scope of that environment. By connecting the existing pedagogy research with such a simulation program, we hope to generate a body of research that contributes to each.

Following on that objective, we hope to continue to implement, and improve upon, the survey in future years. Part of the difficulty in assessing the outcomes of a large multi-institutional simulation lies in coordinating institutional reviews and survey implementation across a number of colleges and universities. Using this last year as a template, we plan to develop a clearer protocol for faculty who choose to participate in the assessment process. We also plan to expand upon the initial survey to include measures of other skills and abilities, such as public speaking and leadership. Ultimately, we find there to be enormous potential in establishing a larger database that measures the benefits of the simulation experience for multiple generations of participants.

Notes

1. The participating institutions include Susquehanna University, The University of Scranton, James Madison University, Lebanon Valley College, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, West Chester University, and John Carroll University.
2. The possibility exists for selection bias, meaning students enrolling in an EU course due to prior interest. However, we seek to account for prior interest in the multivariate models, which include controls for students who have visited Europe, who have taken other classes on Europe, and who report having discussed Europe outside of the course. Moreover, the pre/post comparisons account for prior interest by measuring if interest has increased, decreased or stayed the same for the same respondents at different points in time. We would also note that many of these courses take place at small, liberal arts colleges, which do not offer as large a variety of potential electives. Thus, many students enroll in the courses to fulfill general or major-specific requirements and not out of a prior compelling interest in the material.
3. The EES only included those four questions.
4. The correlation between taking an EU class and participating in the simulation is .4, suggesting that the two are relatively weakly correlated.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Steve Jackson, Diane Johnson, Kayla Merkel, Zach Mull, and Sage Weikel for their assistance in administering the survey and collecting the data.

Notes on Contributors

Nicholas Clark is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Susquehanna University. His research focuses on public opinion, political representation, and electoral behavior within the European

Union, seeking to empirically assess theoretical claims about the quality of democratic citizenship and governance in multilevel political systems such as the European Union. His research has appeared in such publications as *European Union Politics*, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, the *Journal of European Integration*, *European Politics*, and *Society and Political Studies*.

Gretchen Van Dyke is an Associate Professor of Political Science at The University of Scranton, where she has taught International Relations and American Government since 1994. Following her undergraduate degree in Political Science at Trinity College, Washington, DC, and three years working in the House of Representatives on Capitol Hill, Dr. Van Dyke completed both an MA and a PhD in Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia (UVA). At UVA, she focused on the development of national security policy during the Kennedy Administration, within the broader context of broad theoretical questions about the national interest, presidential leadership, and foreign policy decision making. Dr. Van Dyke teaches an array of electives in the subfields of International Relations and American Government, including U.S. Foreign and National Security Policy, War and Peace, Genocide, International Humanitarianism, European Foreign Policy, the European Union, Women in the Global Community, and the American Presidency. Her publications and research interests have addressed national security decision making and policy implementation as well as the pedagogy of International Relations, specifically the value of active and experiential learning as it relates to civic education, engagement, and citizenship. She and her students have participated in the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation program since 1996.

Peter Loedel is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for International Programs at West Chester University. His mission is to develop international partnerships, to promote education abroad opportunities, to recruit international students, and to generally support comprehensive internationalization at West Chester University. Previously, he served for 13 years as the Chair of the Department of Political Science. Dr. Loedel received his BA in International Relations and a BA in Germanic Languages and Literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). He also completed his MA and PhD in Political Science in 1994 from UCSB. He has published three books: *The Promise and Reality of European Security Cooperation*, coedited with Mary McKenzie (1998, Praeger Publishers); *Deutsche Mark Politics: Germany in the European Monetary System* (1999, Lynne Rienner Publishers); and *The European Central Bank: The New European Leviathan?*, 2nd edition, coauthored with David Howarth (2005, Palgrave). Dr. Loedel has also published articles in leading journals and book chapters on the subject of European monetary politics as well as teaching/pedagogy in the field of international relations and the European Union. His teaching interests include international political economy, the European Union/Politics, and African Politics.

John Scherpereel is Professor of Political Science at James Madison University and Director of JMU's MA Program in Political Science with a concentration in European Union Policy Studies. His research, which focuses on the relationship between politics and administration, the dynamics of territorial governance, and the politics of representation, has appeared in such publications as *European Politics and Society*, *Governance*, the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, the *Journal of European Integration*, and *West European Politics*.

Andreas Sobisch a native of Hamburg, Germany, is an Associate Professor of Political Science at John Carroll University, in Cleveland, Ohio, where he has taught Comparative Politics since 1990. He received his MA and PhD degrees from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. His research has focused on European integration and political violence, and he is author, with Ian Davies, of *Developing European Citizens* (1997). From 2005–2015, he was director of the Center for Global Education, where he was responsible for developing and directing John Carroll's international partnerships and education programs. He has been involved in the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation program since 2000.

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Appendix A: Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Please do not put your name on this document. Your responses to these questions will in no way be factored into your grade.

Date:

What is your class rank (i.e., first year, second year)?

How old are you?

What is your gender? Male/female

What is your favorite book or movie?

What is your favorite color?

Have you ever visited Europe?

If so, how many times have you visited Europe and for how long did you stay during these visits?

Have you taken a class on the European Union?

1. Yes, I am currently taking a course on the European Union.
2. Yes, I took a course on the European Union in a previous semester/term or in high school.
3. No, I have never taken a course on the European Union.

If so, when did you take a class on the European Union?

1. Before my undergraduate studies
2. During my first year of college
3. During my second year of college
4. During my third year of college
5. During my fourth year of college
6. During my study abroad.

Have you prepared for an EU simulation through any of the following?

1. A club or organization;
2. A one-credit simulation mini course.

If so, for how long were you or have you been a part of that club, organization, or one-credit mini course?

Have you ever participated in the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation or some other simulation of the European Union in the past and, if so, how many times have you participated in an EU simulation?

To what extent would you say you are interested in politics?

1. Very
2. Somewhat
3. A little
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

To what extent would you say you are interested in the European Union?

1. Very
2. Somewhat
3. A little
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

When you get together with friends and relatives, would you say you discuss frequently, occasionally, or never about...

1. Local political matters: Frequently, occasionally, or never
2. National political matters: Frequently, occasionally, or never
3. International political matters: Frequently, occasionally, or never

To what extent do you think that you are well informed or not about European matters?

1. Very well informed
2. Fairly well informed
3. Not very well informed
4. Not at all informed
5. Don't know

Using the metric below, to what extent do you ____?

1. Every day/almost every day
2. Two or three times a week
3. About once a week
4. Two or three times a month
5. Less often
6. Never

7. No access to this medium

Watch television on a TV set

Watch television via the Internet

Listen to the radio

Read the written press

Use the Internet

Use online social networks

Where do you get most of your news on American political matters?

1. Television
2. The written press
3. Radio
4. The Internet
5. Other

6. You do not look for news on American political matters.

Where do you get most of your news on European political matters?

1. Television
2. The written press
3. Radio
4. The Internet
5. Other

6. You do not look for news on European political matters.

And would you say that your sources of news about European political matters are mostly American or European based?

1. American based
2. European based
3. Do not know

Please answer the following true/false questions:

1. Switzerland is a member of the European Union. T/F
2. The European Union has 28 member states. T/F
3. Every country in the European Union elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament. T/F
4. Every six months, a different Member State becomes president of the Council of the European Union. T/F
5. The European Union has a single seat on the United Nations Security Council. T/F
6. The European Union has primary authority to legislate in the area of education. T/F

How would you explain the purpose or objectives of the EU?

What was a major change introduced by the Treaty of the European Union (sometimes referred to as the Treaty of Maastricht)?

The following two questions were only included in the postsimulation survey:

Has participating in this Model European Union simulation affected your interest in the European Union?

1. Yes, I am far more interested in the EU.
2. Yes, I am slightly more interested in the EU.
3. No, I am no more interested in the EU than before the simulation.
4. No, I actually have less interest in the EU than before the simulation.

How would you describe your experience with the EU simulation? What benefits, if any, did you derive from participating in the simulation?