

SECTIONAL POLITICS: DIRECTIONS

Sectional Politics is a relatively quick (20-30 minute) classroom simulation in which students assume the role of United States Senators during the 1830s and early 1840s. The class is divided into groups of six to nine students with each group representing a US Senate. Each US Senate is further divided into thirds with two or three students assigned to each region: Northeast, Southeast and West. Students receive a one-page double-sided handout specific to their assigned region which explains their role as a Senator and the points awarded to their region for the passage or defeat of each of the six pieces of legislation. Then the logical arguments supporting that region's political positions are outlined in six paragraphs, each paragraph focusing on a separate issue. Since student identities, political arguments, and point awards are all organized by region, the students naturally negotiate and vote in regional blocks, even though each Senator actually casts an individual vote. As a result, two regional blocks (4-6 students) can always out vote one regional block (2-3 students) even when each region does not have exactly the same number of students. This organization of the simulation facilitates classroom management and student learning. The typical classroom would contain three to five of these "Senates" with six to nine students each. Instructors cruising the classroom can clarify procedures, listen to political arguments, prompt discussion, initiate closure and/or evaluate student contributions.

Each "Senate" develops its own dynamics. Some will engage in a thorough discussion of the issues with members attempting to persuade each other of the validity of their views. The instructor will need to suggest compromises, initiate votes and ensure closure. Others groups will focus on identifying what each region wants, arranging compromises and negotiating political deals to reach the desired conclusion. The instructor will need to prompt a discussion of regional viewpoints and arguments, possibly revealing the importance of that information on the upcoming exam. Certain individuals will assume a dominant role due to their knowledge, personality or assertiveness. The instructor may have to prompt discussion from less active students with suggested arguments or bargains. The "Senator" who initiates discussion may have the advantage of setting the agenda. On the other hand, a domineering student may prompt the other two regional groups to cooperate to thwart the domination.

The discussion following the simulation is a dynamic situation that will change each time this simulation is done. The scores for the West, the Northeast and the Southeast should be recorded for three or four groups and displayed for the class. Students can then compare and contrast the scores for different groups and discuss how these scores were attained. Which pieces of legislation were passed, which were defeated, and what political bargains or deals were made? This discussion should raise a number of teaching points, but the teaching points will be different every time simulation is done. Different issues will be raised, different examples will be used, and different actions will take place that will provide the teacher with the opportunity to comment, elaborate and compare the simulation with real-life. The teacher can summarize the discussion, elaborate on issues raised by the students, or point out other important aspects that should be considered.