Whipping Them in: Role-Playing Party Cohesion with a Chief Whip

Philip Cowley[a] & Mark Stuart[a]

[a] University of Nottingham
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PHILIP COWLEY
MARK STUART

University of Nottingham

We have used a role-play exercise to help students understand the role of the whips in British parliamentary politics, a subject with which students often struggle. In itself, this proved a valuable learning and teaching tool, but we found it became even more useful when we incorporated a practitioner into the exercise. This overcame some of the problems with role-play exercises but it also overcame some of the problems we have previously encountered with using practitioners in teaching. In this article, we outline our reasons for utilizing a role-play simulation and explain how it functioned. We then discuss the use of practitioners in teaching and learning and how the role-play overcame many of the problems we have previously encountered when using such teaching methods.

Keywords cohesion, parliament, practitioners, role-play, simulation

Introduction

Active-learning techniques, such as role-plays and simulations, are growing in popularity in academia, as their benefits become widely understood. The more active students are in their learning, the more it appears they learn (see, for example, Frederking 2005; Shellman and Turan 2006) and the better they retain that information and understanding (Pace et al. 1990; Smith and Boyer 1996; Sudzina 1997) when compared to more passive forms of education.

We have used a role-play exercise to help students understand the role of the whips in British parliamentary politics, a subject with which we have noticed students often struggle. In itself, this proved a valuable learning and teaching tool, but we found it became even more useful when we incorporated a practitioner into the exercise. This overcame some of the problems with role-play exercises (most obviously by lending the exercise more verisimilitude) but it also overcame some of the problems we have previously encountered with using practitioners in teaching. The role of practitioners in the teaching and learning of political studies is (perhaps curiously) not much studied, despite their common use. There is a considerable literature on the benefits of placements for students of politics (Curtis 2012; Curtis et al. 2009; Curtis and Blair 2010; Hindmoor 2010; Norton 2008) – in which the students go to the practitioners – but very little on getting the practitioners to come to the students (for a rare exception, see Smith 2004). But, although using

Address correspondence to Philip Cowley, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, United Kingdom. E-mail: philip.cowley@nottingham.ac.uk

practitioners brings many benefits in teaching, we are well aware of the multiple problems involved. In this article, we outline our reasons for utilizing a role-play and explain how it functioned. We then discuss the use of practitioners in teaching and learning and explain how the role-play overcame many of the problems we have previously encountered when using practitioners. This includes an analysis of the change in student attitudes generated by the exercise.

The Teaching Problem

The "whip" has been an essential part of British parliamentary life since at least the eighteenth century. It has (confusingly) multiple meanings: it is the document ("the whip") that informs Members of Parliament (MPs) of the forthcoming business; to be in receipt of a party's whip ("to have the whip") indicates membership of that parliamentary group; and the whips are the individuals responsible for ensuring that parliamentary business occurs as planned.

The whips – and the process of whipping – are not usually portrayed very positively in Britain, being seen as "the pantomime villains of Westminster politics – a combination of arm-twister, bully, and Machiavelli" (Cowley 2005, 36). The reality is more complicated. The party whips fulfil three main functions: those of management, communication, and persuasion. The task of management encompasses the need to organize the business of the House, to liaise with the Opposition parties, and to keep MPs from their party informed and organized. For this reason, the whips were once described as doing little more than "serving to achieve cohesion among those who wished to be cohesive" (Norton 1979, 13). The communication function is to act as a two-way channel of communication between the party leadership (the frontbench) and nonleadership MPs (those on the backbenches). In addition to informing backbench MPs of the leadership's plans, whips also need to communicate the views of the backbenchers to the leadership, especially when discontent is brewing. They need to be their party's eyes and ears, monitoring feelings on the backbenches.

It is the third function – that of persuasion – that attracts the most attention from outsiders and is responsible for much of the criticism of their role. If an MP looks likely to deviate from the party line, then it is the role of the whips to persuade him or her back into the fold. Tales of the tricks used by the whips to "persuade" MPs are legion. Yet, the formal sanctions available to British party whips are, and always have been, limited, especially if MPs rebel in numbers. Academic accounts of the whips' behavior – and the reasons for cohesion amongst British MPs – have therefore been more nuanced, tending to downplay the coercive role and stressing instead the more prosaic managerial functions of the whips (Cowley 2002; Norton 1979). Even when it comes to the third function, of persuasion, much of the literature outlines multiple explanations for party cohesion, rather than discipline.

This, at least, is the message we have tried to get across in over a decade of teaching British students about their Parliament.[1] Yet, despite this, we have noticed that students often still framed the issue in more conventional terms. However much we have stressed cooperation and negotiation in our formal teaching, students still tended to think in terms of coercion and discipline. The myth of the whip as bully is so ingrained in their thinking that traditional classroom teaching and learning techniques would often fail to make students appreciate alternative explanations.

Half of the Solution

We therefore designed a role-play exercise to try to get students to experience for themselves the relationship between backbencher and party whip. As Archer and Miller noted, political science classes are natural bedfellows for active-learning techniques like role-plays: "The subject matter lends itself to discussion and debate, theories and decision-making can be evaluated in light of current events, and institutions such as Congress and the United Nations lend themselves easily to simulations" (Archer and Miller 2011, 430). The literature now contains multiple examples from political science and international relations, covering almost all areas of the discipline, including topics as diverse as the following: election campaigns (Caruson 2005; Kathlene and Choate 1999; Mariani 2007; Pappas and Peaden 2004); electoral systems (Hoffman 2009); the policy process (Grummel 2003); foreign policy decision making (Loggins 2009); arms control (Kelle 2008); the Middle East (Dougherty 2003); the European Council (Zeff 2003); and political theory (Schaap 2005). Published work on parliamentary role-plays and simulations have thus far focused mostly on the U.S. Congress (Bernstein and Meizlish 2003; Ciliotta-Rubery and Levy 2000; Lay and Smarick 2006).

Our role-play is extremely loose in structure with very few rules, props, or instructions. Its loose nature puts a lot of onus on the tutors to make it work; they are what Hativa (2000) calls "designer, choreographer, orchestrator and manager of the learning environment and teaching process" (111). But it also makes it easily adaptable. Below, we provide a sample schedule and examples of the roles given to participants. But almost all of the detail provided below could be changed, without much difficulty, to fit different legislative institutions or circumstances, as long as some basic principles (outlined below) are adhered to.

Participants do not need to understand every detail of parliamentary procedure (if that is ever possible!), but they do need to have at least a basic understanding of the stages a piece of legislation might go through as well as the tools available to an MP. As a result, we have normally run the exercise at around the midway point in the module, once students have acquired the necessary basic understanding. The aim is to reinforce previous learning that covers this topic. Beyond this, we do not ask the students to do any specific preparation for this exercise. We schedule a two-hour session for the exercise, although this includes a brief introduction and some post-role-play feedback.[2]

The role-play is based on a newly elected left-of-center government that bears more than a passing relationship to the Labour Government elected in Britain in 1997.[3] Most students begin the role-play as backbench – that is, nongovernment – MPs. They are given a role profile (see Figure 1 for an example) that explains the political situation and sets out their own personal ambitions and issue positions; some want to be ministers, others want to serve on particular select committees, and others are happy remaining on the backbenches.[4] The issue preferences are set up so that all MPs dislike *something* the government is supposed to be doing, but the levels of opposition vary. On some issues, there is opposition from a minority of MPs; on others, it is more widespread. There is always at least one issue, however, where almost all backbench MPs are opposed. The personal ambitions and circumstances – age, preference for office, and so on – also vary from MP to MP. To add color, students are encouraged to give themselves a name (which attracts the usual joke and spoof names) as well as to invent other details about themselves and their background.

You are one of the MPs from a newly elected left-of-centre government that bears absolutely no relation to the Labour Government elected in 1997. Your party has been out of power for almost two decades, but you have just won a landslide election.

Most things are going well for the government. The opposition is in disarray, and the government enjoys a substantial lead in the opinion polls. But some clouds are already appearing on the horizon.

The government has just announced that it will implement the decision made by the previous government to reduce disability benefit for new claimants, a decision that has caused much unhappiness amongst government backbenchers and the party outside Westminster. This bill is in committee at the moment, and the vote on the benefit reduction is scheduled for next week. There are also rumors that the government is considering wider changes to the social security system, including a reduction in lone-parent benefit and a decrease in the amount of time during which unemployment claimants can receive the full amount of benefit. The government is also considering a Royal Commission report on university funding and is rumored to be about to reduce the amount of funding available to each student. They have just announced an increase of 3p in the Old Age Pension, a decision that is in line with (very low) inflation but that has gone down very badly with the public. Internationally, a civil war is breaking out in Rosnia, and pressure is being put on the government to send British troops as part of a peacekeeping force.

You are a government backbencher. You are 46 years old and have been in the Commons for four years. You would like to be in government. You would rather the government was not cutting in disability benefit (although it does not bother you excessively), and you would be opposed to the rumored cuts in lone-parent and unemployment benefit (and especially the former). You are completely neutral on university funding and whilst you think the small increase in the OAP was a mistake, it is not one that worries you too much. You oppose the sending of British troops to Rosnia.

Note: All backbenchers receive the first three paragraphs; the final paragraph differs from MP to MP.

Figure 1. Backbencher profile.

A small number of the MPs are made party whips and are given a different role profile. They are given a more accurate version of the political situation (see Figure 2). Some of the things that are rumored to be happening are not; others are still undecided. In recent years, we have had upwards of 30 students play backbenchers, with around six playing the role of whips, a ratio that works well.[5]

The tutor(s) play both Government and God. That is, they run the exercise and represent all other actors. They speak for the executive, the opposition parties, and all forces external to Parliament. If the whips want to change the actions of the

Whips receive the same first three paragraphs as MPs, but then this:

You are a government whip. You know the true picture, which is as follows. The government wants to win the vote in committee next week. It does then intend to introduce legislation to reduce single-parent benefit and the amount of time that unemployment claimants can receive the full amount of benefit. The Royal Commission on University Funding has recommended a reduction in student funding, but the government is at present minded to reject its findings. The government knows that the 3p on OAP was ill judged (if defensible) and intends a more substantial increase next year. And the government intends to send British troops to Rosnia.

Your job is to get the government's program through. How you do this is up to you.

Figure 2. Whip profile.

government, for example, they must speak to the tutors. If the MPs want to put down a motion critical of the government or leak a story to the media, they must speak to the tutors. The tutors decide what is or is not allowed, based on their judgment. The tutors begin the exercise with a provisional timeline of events (votes, opposition announcements, and so on) (an example is provided in Figure 3) but these are soon adapted depending on the actions of the MPs and the whips. Indeed, in 10 years of running the exercise, this timeline has not been kept to once; it has always been amended, based on decisions made by the whips or the actions of backbench MPs.

There are almost no fixed rules to the role-play (apart from that the tutors are in charge); many of the details listed below are unimportant in themselves and can be adapted to suit the pedagogical needs of anyone attempting to replicate it. And we

1.   Explain rules and distribute role profiles. Introduce the chief whip and allocate whips. Tell students to read their profiles and then decide what they want to do.

2.   Make first announcement (10 or so minutes in): "The opposition have announced that they will be voting with the government over disability benefit." Explain that this ensures that (no matter how big the rebellion) the reduction in disability benefit will pass.

3.   In the run up to the disability benefit vote, make second announcement: "The opposition announces an Opposition Day debate on the pension increase, condemning the 'callous behavior of the government.' It is to be held next week." Explain that this will be after the disability benefit vote.

4.   Hold vote on disability benefit. No matter how large the rebellion, the measure passes.

5.   Make third announcement: "The government announces their intention to send British troops to Rosnia. No debate is to be scheduled."

6.   Hold vote on pensions.

7.   Make fifth announcement: "The government announces their plans for future legislation on lone-parent benefit and unemployment benefit. They intend to cut both." Explain that the opposition are pledged to vote against both (which makes the votes potentially narrow).

8.   Hold votes on Disability Benefit and Single-Parent Benefit. If there is a very large rebellion, the lone-parent vote is lost.

9.   Make sixth announcement: "The government announces their plans for university funding. They do not contain a reduction in student funding."

10.   Make eighth announcement: "The bill on benefits comes back from the Lords. The Lords have overturned both pieces of legislation."

11   Vote on Lords amendments.

12.   Make ninth announcement: "The government announce a £10 per week increase in pensions."

13.   Hold vote on university fees.

14.   Conduct post-role-play feedback.

In practice, there will be multiple other announcements, depending on what students decide to do, how the government reacts, and so on, but these form the spine of the role-play.

Figure 3.   Initial sample timeline.

have used almost no props – we just declare one part of the seminar room to be the whips' office, another the voting lobby, and so on.[6] But to make it work well, there are a number of important principles that need to underpin the exercise:

- It is important always to have more than one issue bubbling along at any one time. Real-world political issues do not come along sequentially, in neat self-contained packages, to be pondered, debated and resolved; rather, issue piles upon issue, problem upon problem. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan is said to have advised new MPs to "Never rebel on more than one issue at a time, it only confuses the whips." But the overlapping nature of issues also allows MPs to do deals with whips ("I'll not rebel on Y, if we can do a deal on X"), and vice versa ("if you keep loyal on X, we'll be relaxed about a rebellion on Y").
- There needs to be enough time for the role-play to work but not so much that anyone is able to perform their role at too leisurely a pace. In the real world, politicians function under multiple pressures, with time being a key one. In 2009, for example, the Labour government suffered a Commons defeat over its policy towards the treatment of Britain's Ghurkha soldiers, despite a deal having been done that they believed would defuse the rebellion, simply because there was not enough time to tell would-be rebels the details of the compromise (Cowley and Stuart 2014b). The student MPs and whips need to function under similar time pressures. If they want to gather names supporting an open letter to a newspaper, for example, they need to be quick about it. Ditto for whips trying to work out the position of their MPs on an issue. Regular announcements – "Five minutes until the next vote" – help chivvy them along, creating a sense of pressure.
- The French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France once said that "to govern is to choose," and the role-playing MPs need to face the same reality. Whatever MPs do, they will be criticized by someone. If they all stay loyal to the government line, the media should criticize them for being gutless and spineless and praise those that rebel for being brave and true to their principles. But if most MPs rebel, the media should report that their party is now seen as disunited, with the opposition surging ahead in the opinion polls as a result. If MPs vote to keep pensions low, tell those MPs that they have been criticized by pensioner organizations or rival political parties who say that pensioners will die in poverty because of their actions, and so on. It is important that there are no pain-free options.
- And choices have consequences. If, having identified that Issue X needs money being spent on it to reduce or eliminate a rebellion, then that money has to come from somewhere. If MPs say they want to scrap the proposed cut in lone-parent benefit, then perhaps student fees – which were to stay the same – will need to rise. If the whips say that they want to delay the vote on unemployment benefits to give them more time to persuade MPs, then some other business will need to come forward in lieu.
- While none of the issues that are listed in Figure 3 are important per se – and can easily be changed to suit the individual circumstances in which the exercise takes place – it is important that at least one issue has the potential to defeat the government if the whips do not manage to identify it and deal with it, somehow. It does not especially matter which issue, although it makes sense to pick one that will occur some way into the exercise, to allow some time for the whips to identify it.[7]

The Other Half of the Solution

As with all role-plays, the participants need to suspend their disbelief for the exercise to work, and, to begin with, it can take a little bit of time before students warm up and relax into their roles. Whips tend to act quicker than backbenchers (which we have always seen as a useful reminder of the institutional advantage that party managers enjoy) but students are soon leaking stories to the media (there seem to be an inordinately high number of sex scandals amongst these imaginary politicians), asking whips for private meetings, putting down motions criticizing the government, demanding positions in government in return for their votes, organizing open letters to the press, and so on.

The exercise worked well when we first introduced it. In recent years, however, it has worked noticeably better, as a result of incorporating a practitioner in the exercise. For the last four years, we have been able to use a former whip, Jacqui Smith, who was the Government Chief Whip at Westminster between 2006 and 2007, to play the role of our fictional Chief Whip.[8]

Surprisingly little has been written on the role of practitioners in teaching politics. Yet, our experience is that practitioners are widely used: Most politics departments will have guest lectures, visiting speakers, honorary professors, and so on for at least some of their modules. Some of the benefits of using practitioners in teaching are the same as those of students being able to spend time on placement. At their best, the students get to hear someone who "does" politics; they get real-world examples in which to locate more theoretical material; even if the material delivered by the speaker is essentially the same as that conveyed by the academic staff member, it can have reinforcement value; and more often they provide insights and perspectives not available in the classroom or in the academic literature. For a student studying parliament, say, to be able to question the Leader of the House of Commons is, as one former Head of School put it, like a theology student being able to question Moses.[9] For these reasons, we are keen users of external speakers and fieldtrips.

Yet, based on years of experience involving practitioners in our teaching across multiple courses, we are not uncritical users of external speakers. For the downsides are too often also obvious. Whilst they can be brilliant, too often talks delivered by practitioners are not. They are often pitched at the wrong level – either too general (a special problem with MPs, used to doing school visits, being asked to speak to university students) or too specific. Too often they offer relatively little of value to the module itself, however interesting they are as more general "civics" type talks. Perhaps surprisingly, given the oral culture still prevalent in politics (at least in the United Kingdom), not all practitioners make for good speakers; some may sparkle, too many drone. There are, of course, ways around some, if not all, of these problems – such as detailed briefing, coproduction of the material, and so on – but there is no guarantee that the speaker will be able to devote sufficient time to do this; and the more high profile the individual the less time they will have to spend preparing. Indeed, it is one of our rules of teaching that, whilst there is a positive relationship between the profile of a speaker and the student attendance to hear them, there is usually a negative relationship between their profile and the actual utility of the talk.

One advantage of using practitioners in role-play exercises such as this one, however, is that they do not need to do much, if any, preparation. Even if the role-play

exercise is simplified for the purposes of teaching, as long as it bears a half-decent resemblance to reality, then all it requires the practitioner to do is what they would normally do. In this case, that is for a (former) whip to whip. The first time we ran the exercise with Jacqui Smith playing Chief Whip we did no extensive prebriefing with her beyond a brief chat over lunch before the exercise got underway. Presented with a small team of "whips," and a group of potential "rebels," she just knew what she had to do and soon had them out gathering intelligence. She was doing what came "naturally," as a result of her experience of having done the job in reality. As she put it: "I have found that I respond by utilizing my knowledge and experience without having to have spent time 'remembering' and organizing it for a talk." (In one role-play, after winning a potentially tight vote with relatively little dissent, she clenched her fist and said "yes!," provoking one of us into the observation that, whilst you can take the woman out of the whips' office, you can't take the whips' office out of the woman.) It may be that we have been particularly lucky in our choice of practitioner (she is a former teacher, which may, perhaps, have helped) and it may be that the nature of the exercise lends itself to this more than some would. But we suspect that the real lesson of the exercise is that the best use of practitioners in teaching is not to use them as *ersatz* lecturers but to get them to do something that is as close to what they do in the real world.

Beyond that, the involvement of a "real" whip helped the role-play exercise in three ways. First, it added a certain verisimilitude. Whilst no one was going to forget that they were in a seminar room, and not the House of Commons, the presence of someone that they were used to seeing on TV, and whom they knew had done this job before, made the exercise seem more real. Second, it encouraged the students to take the exercise more seriously. Smith's presence reinforced the fact that this was a serious exercise; students negotiating with someone who had previously been in the Cabinet took it more seriously than if they were just negotiating with someone with whom they had been down the pub the night before. And third, it helped provide some organization in our fictional whips' office – enabling them to function more as a normal whips' office would – thus adding to the realism of the exercise. A small, but telling, example of this is when we first ran the exercise we used to book two seminar rooms next to one another; one to act as the whips' office and the other was the rest of the House of Commons. But as soon as we ran the exercise with Jacqui Smith, she dispensed with the use of a separate room and had her whips in the "Commons" all the time. When they wanted to discuss things, they would have a conspiratorial huddle. As she pointed out later, once the "real" Commons was sitting, she would have expected her whips to be out mingling with backbenchers not sitting in an office; and she expected her student whips to do the same. We now only book one seminar room.

Discussion

However much students suspend their disbelief and whoever else is involved, the exercise remains artificial. However much a student *pretends* to be interested in having a ministerial career or chairing a select committee, the threat to deprive them of it is not comparable to an ambitious MP, faced with seeing other MPs achieve office whilst they linger on the backbenches. Similarly, however much they pretend to be concerned with the fate of their party, our participants are not under comparable pressure to that faced by a real MP, who has been a member of a political party

for years, who has been socialized into it, and who hates to act against it.[10] The same applies for most of the other threats and pressures that MPs face. On the other hand, pretend MPs do not care about the issues in quite the same way as a real MP; fake benefit cuts, for example, are easier to support than ones that would affect real people and families; it is easier to vote to send troops into wars when you know no one will die.

Yet, even in the artificial setting of a seminar room, it is striking how often appeals to party loyalty, for MPs not to destabilize the (entirely fictitious) prime minister or to undermine the government can work. A decade of experience of running the exercise has shown us that there are some obvious parallels with Westminster:

- The whips soon learn about the importance of organization. If they do not divide up the mass of MPs into smaller groups for which each whip has responsibility then they quickly get swamped trying to deal with so many MPs with different demands. They have to work out quickly the following: who is opposed to them, over what, how strongly; who will compromise, over what; and what deals are needed. Threats and bullying are not sufficient, not least because in this exercise there is very little they can threaten them with.
- Threatening MPs with the end of their careers often proves counterproductive. If the MP goes ahead and rebels anyway, what leverage does a whip enjoy in the rest of the exercise? If they tell anyone who has rebelled that their career is over, then they become unmanageable. In most cases, redemption needs to be a permanent possibility.
- MPs on both sides soon learn about the importance of sticking to deals that are reached. Promise not to rebel in return for a select committee position, only then not to be given one, and you are unlikely to do the whips any favors in future. Promise not to rebel, only then to change your mind at the last minute, and the whips no longer trust you.
- The good whips also learn to divide and rule, finding MPs who will rebel on one issue and making sure they do not rebel on another.
- Somewhat to our surprise, we even noticed that the "explanation" function of the whips – to explain why the government was doing what it was doing – often worked. Even though these were entirely made-up explanations (and even though the recipient knew they were being made up!), the process of a whip sitting down and explaining to a backbencher was often enough to persuade MPs to vote with the party. Smith's view is that this is entirely understandable: She argues that too much of the discussion of the role of the whips underestimates the significance of relationships and "emotional intelligence" in the way that they interact with back-benchers. She says: "I found that treating backbenchers with a bit of time and courtesy and respecting their views even when you couldn't agree with them was a very important party management tool."

Just as in real life, the whips usually "win" in that they pass most, if not all, of the legislation, and, just as in real life, most rebellions are small and do not defeat the government. But (just as in real life) this almost never happens without compromise, without some deals having been done. We have, however, also seen the whips completely lose control of their parliamentary party – and suffer multiple defeats – on those occasions where they have tried to conform to the media stereotype of a whip and bully their way through the exercise. When the whips threaten and bully – as in the popular myth – they tend to lose. But if they negotiate, trade and deal, then they tend to win.

Student evaluations have been traditionally found to be higher in classes that contain active learning (Dougherty 2003; Frederking 2005; Green and Klug 1990). While this module scores higher than the norm for comparable modules at our institution, we cannot for obvious reasons claim that this is just because of the role-play exercise.[11] We are also limited in what we can prove about the pedagogic benefits of the exercise. Although the exercise is optional – taking part outside of formal student contact time – most take part in it, and, although students who do so perform better in exams and coursework on the module, we cannot be sure that this is not (in part, at least) because the brighter, more interested, students choose to participate.

We have, however, always believed that students have grasped the fundamental concepts that we are trying to get across better after the exercise; discussions about the role of the whips and party cohesion are usually much better after students have taken part in the exercise and tend to place a higher emphasis on negotiation and compromise rather than discipline and coercion, and student feedback is also always high on this. As one student said: "I was chosen to be a whip in the whip's role play, which I was originally scared by. But I thoroughly enjoyed it, got really involved, and ended up deciding I'd quite fancy myself as a whip … Greatly enhanced my understanding – better than reading a textbook."

During the most recent semester, we attempted to test the benefits of the exercise more formally with a questionnaire distributed to the students at both the beginning and end of the module.[12] Amongst the questions was one on the way the whips perform their task: "Do you think the whips use coercion or negotiation to persuade MPs to vote the party line? Please indicate on this 0 to 10 scale, where 0 means they use just coercion and 10 means just negotiation (and where five means an equal amount of the two)." Figure 4 shows the responses at both T1 (the beginning of the module) and T2 (towards the end). The mean average at T1 was 4.4, with a majority of respondents giving answers lower than 5, indicating more of an emphasis on coercion than persuasion. By T2 the mean had shifted to 6.1, with a majority of respondents giving answers higher than 6, indicating slightly more of an emphasis on persuasion than coercion. Teaching about the role of the whips and the behavior of backbench MPs, therefore, had the effect of changing attitudes significantly and in the direction that we would have hoped. We cannot attribute all of this change to the role-play exercise, though. We covered this material in both a formal seminar and the role-play exercise. Those who took part in the role-play averaged 6.1 at T2; those who did not averaged 5.7. This difference is not statistically significant, although given the very small *N* involved of those who did *not* participate in the role-play (just 6 of the 53 students who completed the T2 questionnaire had not done so), it would be very hard to achieve statistical significance.

We would require a much larger sample – and, moreover, one involving greater differentiation – to be able to unpick these effects further and to distinguish between the separate effects of (1) the conventional seminar class, (2) the role-play exercise, and (3) the involvement of a practitioner in that role-play. To do so may be possible, but, in this particular case, it would require us to create a formal control group of students who did not experience the role-play exercise and another control group of students who experienced the role-play exercise without the involvement of the practitioner. There are obvious ethical issues involved in doing so. We are similarly constrained by the fact that, because this module runs in the final year of the students' degree program, we lack the ability to track longer term attitudinal changes, although we note that Bernstein and Meizlish (2003) found enduring benefits from
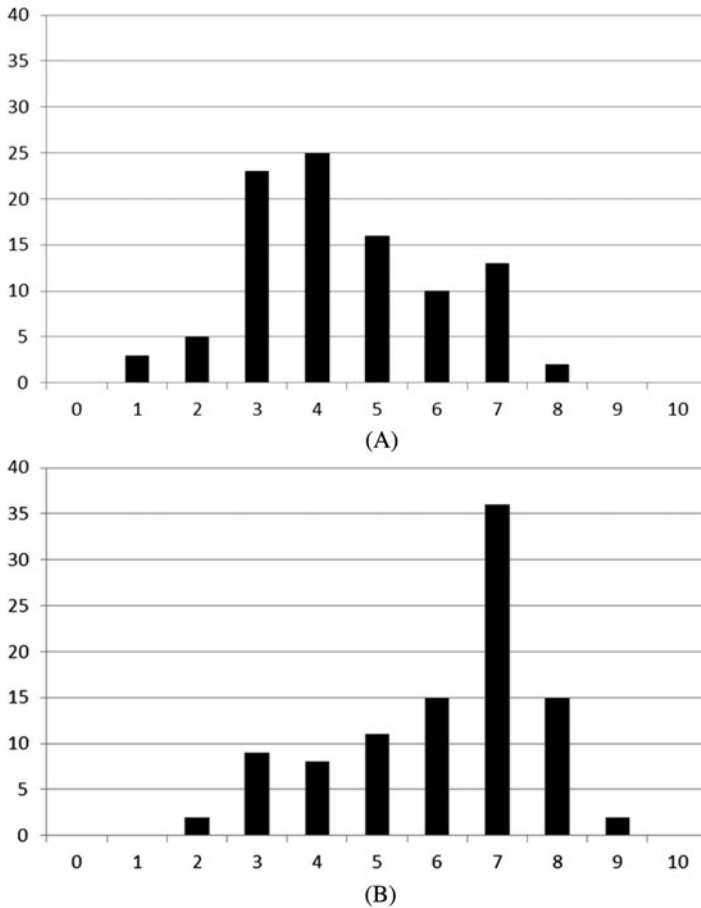
Note: Question wording: Do you think the whips use coercion or negotiation to persuade MPs to vote the party line? Please indicate on this 0-to-10 scale, where 0 means they use just coercion and 10 means just negotiation (and where five means an equal amount of the two).

Figure 4. Attitudes to role of the party whips, pre- and postteaching: (A) Attitudes at T1; (B) Attitudes at T2.

their use of a Congressional role-play exercise (see also Deitz and Boeckelman 2012). We have elsewhere found (Cowley and Stuart 2014a) that teaching students about parliament raises their levels of trust in the institution more generally (albeit from levels that were already very high compared to the wider population) but we wonder (although have yet to test) the extent to which students are able to draw wider lessons from this exercise. If the role-play helps them appreciate a gap between the conventional portrayal of politics and something closer to that experienced by practitioners in this particular case, do they draw wider lessons about their understanding of politics from this? And, again, does the involvement of a practitioner help them do so? We do not have the data to answer such questions. Given the widespread use of practitioners in the teaching of political science, however, there is a need for more research on both their use and impact.

Conclusion

We have been keen users of both role-plays and practitioners in teaching for many years. Both have a valuable role to play in learning and teaching politics. The exercise described above ran for several years as a more conventional role-play, involving just tutors and students before we integrated a practitioner into the exercise. It worked well in its initial incarnation, but our experience with integrating a practitioner into it was that it was transformational, greatly enhancing the role-play. We may have been lucky in our choice of practitioner, and not everyone will have a former Government Chief Whip who happens to be passing by that they can utilize in this way. But almost all departments of politics have dozens of similar contacts with practitioners, of different types, who they routinely use to give talks or similar exercises with students. Our experience demonstrates that there are more imaginative ways of utilizing such contacts.

Notes

1. The module has been taught since 2002 at the University of Nottingham. It is an optional, elective, module, which runs in the final year of an undergraduate's study.
2. For various prosaic and practical reasons, we have run this as a one-shot, self-contained exercise. But there is no reason why it would not also work, with only some slight adaptation, over a number of sessions across a longer time period.
3. Despite the obvious resemblance to the Labour government elected in 1997, we are keen for the issues to be somewhat abstracted – hence the use of Rosnia, rather than Bosnia, and other such changes.
4. We have 10 different role profiles for backbenchers, distributed randomly amongst the students. We are happy to supply copies of the profiles on request.
5. Just as at Westminster (Searing and Game 1977), those chosen to be whips have not been a random or representative selection of all those available; we have tended to select slightly more practical students to act as whips, although (again just as at Westminster) we have never made the selection criteria explicit.
6. The only exception is that we do use some crudely modified pictures of the media (newspaper front pages, TV reports, blogs, and so on) that act as samizdat news reports to make announcements and to drive events along. Whilst some of these can be prepared in advance, the nature of the exercise means that they need to be interactive, reacting to whatever students have chosen to do, and so most have to be written during proceedings. We therefore go to the exercise with a series of blank templates on a PowerPoint file and hastily write headlines as the exercise unfolds.
7. If one wants to make the exercise even harder for the whips, obviously all that is necessary is to increase the number of issues that have the potential to defeat the government.
8. Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith (b. 1962), MP for Redditch (1997–2010), Chief Whip (2006–2007), Home Secretary (2007–2009).
9. We recall one student who had often struggled to accept a point made to him about the way the whips' office functioned; at Westminster, the Chief Whip made exactly the same point to him – and at that point he "got" it.
10. As one MP, who had rebelled, once put it: "It really upsets me. I feel awful. I always feel guilty going into the lobby with them [the opposition]. I think, 'What the hell am I doing in here with this lot?'" (Cowley 2005, 26).
11. It has always scored better than the average for comparable modules, and on several occasions has won the student-organized prize for the best politics module in its year. But there are several other aspects of the module that help make it successful – including a field trip – and so we would be reluctant to attribute too much to the role-play exercise alone.
12. The data were gathered from a two-page paper questionnaire, containing 12 questions in total, which students completed. The T1 survey was carried out during Week 1

of the module (on September 30, and October 2, 2013), when high attendance could be guaranteed. There were 66 students then enrolled in the module; 61 (those who attended the first class) completed the baseline survey (that is, a response rate of 100% of attendees, 92% of the module enrolment). Students were told that they could leave any question blank if they did not know the answer. The follow-up survey was administered on November 28, during a field trip to Westminster (another occasion on which we could guarantee high attendance) after eight weeks of study. The participation rate for the second survey was 53 (or 85% of those still enrolled in the module).

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