Class Simulation
Constitutional Convention of 1787

This simulation is one of my students' favorites. Students take the role of a historical personage and try to argue that person's perspective on the best method for apportioning the legislature and the best method for selecting the President. Other issues can be easily substituted.

Objective

The written assignment teaches students how to research independently and how to evaluate limited evidence. The simulation teaches students public speaking, persuasive argumentation, and the role of compromise in group decision making. It is also a nice way to motivate a discussion of original intent.

Administration

At least two weeks prior to the first day of the simulation, randomly assign each student a delegate from the Constitutional Convention. There were 55 delegates at the Constitutional Convention, some of which hardly spoke. If you have less than 55 delegates, consider dropping Blount (NC), Davie (DE), Dobbs (NC), Fitzimons (PA), William C. Houston (NJ), Ingersol (PA), Mifflin (PA), Robert Morris (PA), Pierce (GA), Spaight (NC), and Wythe (VA). I encourage you to consider the information available for each delegate when you grade students and to tell them that you will take those differences into consideration. Student's are asked to provide evidence for a delegate's preferences based on limited evidence. As a result, you may want to double assign some of the prominent figures, e.g., Madison, Hamilton, and Wilson, to students. Post delegate assignments and go over the written portion of the assignment early so students have plenty of time to research and write their briefs.

A few days before the simulation, stress that there are three primary actions a student can take:
1) provide a speech to persuade others of their position;
2) discuss with other delegates (during mingles, not during a speech);
3) vote (in state blocs).

Also tell them that the goal for the class is to write a paragraph stating the constitutional provision on apportionment after the first two days. Their goal for the second two days is to write a paragraph stating the constitutional provision for electing the President. The goal for each individual is to get those paragraph as close as the position of their delegate as possible. Then review the procedures for debate and voting that are posted in the assignment sheet. Also show students the grade sheet so they can see the breakdown of their grade.

On the day of the first simulation, bring a grade sheet that will allow you to record various participation and persuasion points, as well as the paragraphs agreed upon by the delegates. An excel file might work nicely. Then you basically let the students run the show, keeping them fairly tight to the voting procedures. If they are silent in the beginning, say "the floor is open for motions." Students will often make alternative motions when a motion is currently being considered, which is why I developed procedures for calling the question and writing the

question up before a formal vote is taken. There may be slow progress at the beginning of the simulation, but the difficulty of making group decisions is part of the lesson. Letting them meet together during and after class is part of the fun.

Electronic Sessions
The simulation works well face to face or through Zoom. If you use Zoom, you will want to have "pre-assigned breakout rooms" created before the first simulation – one breakout room for each state delegation. They will be used for mingles. Pre-assigned breakout rooms are likely to require a separate Zoom url, so plan ahead. You might also allow students to rename themselves in Zoom, changing their name to their delegate's name with the two letter state code in parentheses as a suffix. If Mary Poppins is assigned Alexander Hamilton, she would change her name to "Alexander Hamilton (NY)." The two letter state code is useful if you have to manually assign students to breakout rooms. They also help students know who they should talk to when forming coalitions or trying to persuade.