

Making Agreements with Friends:

Using an Analogy to Teach Informal Agreements and Bargaining in International Relations Courses

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Abstract. Making Agreements with Friends is a problem-based learning exercise that uses an analogy to introduce complex concepts to students and aid them in their understanding of informal agreements and bargaining. Moreover, this activity helps students comprehend important components of informal agreements, including reputation costs and strategies (iteration, linkage, and coercion) countries use to increase the likelihood of cooperation. Although students do not have firsthand knowledge of creating and forming informal international agreements, everyone has experience with informal interpersonal agreements. The logic students use to determine who they can trust when making interpersonal agreements and the strategies they employ to increase the likelihood that the agreements they make will be kept are similar to the logic and strategies countries use when making informal international agreements. Therefore, students have many accessible examples to draw from once the instructor helps them observe the connection between their informal interpersonal agreements and the countries' informal international agreements.

Keywords: *international relations, informal agreements, active learning, problem-based learning, analogies*

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Introduction

Informal international agreements are common and essential tools that countries use to facilitate cooperation on a wide range of issues, "from exchange rates to nuclear weapons" (Lipson, 1991, p. 495). However, students can often struggle to comprehend the rationale, uses, and limitations of informal agreements. This exercise uses a structured analogy, deciding if you should spot (lend) members of your friend group money to pay for their pub cover, to introduce important international relations concepts, and help students understand why and how countries form informal agreements, how national reputation (and concerns over reputation costs) can facilitate cooperation, and strategies (iteration, linkage, and coercion) countries use to increase the likelihood of cooperation. Although students do not have firsthand knowledge of creating and forming informal international agreements, everyone has experience with informal interpersonal agreements. The logic students use to determine who they can trust when making interpersonal agreements and the strategies they employ to increase the likelihood that the agreements they make will be kept are similar to the logic and strategies countries use when making informal international agreements. Therefore, students have many accessible examples to draw from once the instructor helps them observe the connection between their informal interpersonal agreements and the countries' informal international agreements.

Following Pallas and Butcher (2017), this exercise combines problem-based learning (PBL) with an analogy to introduce difficult concepts to students and aid them in understanding informal agreements and bargaining. More specifically, this exercise explores (1) the significance of national reputation and its linkage to diplomacy in international relations and (2) strategies countries use to make cooperation easier (iteration, linkage, and coercion). The following discussion and survey results are based on this activity in five undergraduate political science courses at Florida State University.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of active learning exercises in classrooms. Scholars have indicated that incorporating role-playing games, simulations, films,

games, and analogies leads to higher levels of cognitive engagement and enthusiasm for learning (Baranowski & Weir, 2015; Gorton & Havercroft, 2012; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012) and helps students connect abstract theories and problems to real-world situations (Austin et al., 2006; Baranowski & Weir, 2015; Bizziouras, 2013; Gorton & Havercroft, 2012). All these can help students learn and apply difficult concepts and theories, improve student performance on examinations, enhance learning outcomes, and increase student knowledge acquisition and retention (Jones & Bursens, 2015; Krain & Shadle, 2006; Nishikawa & Jaeger, 2011; Powner & Allendoerfer, 2008)

Problem Based Learning and Analogies

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is learning that centers on a "problem, a query or a puzzle that the learner wishes to solve" (Boud, 1985, p. 13). The incorporation of PBL in classrooms has several advantages. PBL encourages students to be more collaborative learners and "emphasizes understanding, problem identification, problem working and action" (Kaunert, 2009, p. 256). Thus, PBL counters "surface learning," in which students simply memorize facts rather than develop a true understanding of the material. Furthermore, PBL encourages students to solve real-world problems. Compared with traditional teaching methods, PBL helps students think critically and analytically, leading to greater retention of information and a deeper level of insight (Ishiyama, 2013; Pallas & Butcher, 2017; Smith & Boyer, 1996).

Following Pallas and Butcher (2017), I propose an active learning exercise that incorporates PBL, using an analogy. Political science professors often employ analogies to teach students new concepts in the classroom. Analogies "make the unfamiliar familiar" (Duit, 1991, p. 651). Moreover, analogies help students process new information and make new concepts easier to imagine (Shapiro, 1986). In essence, analogies "allow students to understand a new concept or situation by seeing how it relates (or is analogous to) a more familiar situation" (Pallas & Butcher, 2017, pp. 100–101).

Learning Objectives

The core learning objective of this active learning exercise is to help students understand the necessity of informal agreements in international relations and the logic underlying why countries honor these agreements, even when there is no mechanism to force compliance.

First, it illustrates the significance of national reputation and provides students with a deeper understanding of how the threat of reputational costs influences a country's behavior. More specifically, this activity demonstrates to students how national reputation plays a role in the bargaining process, and how the threat of reputational costs (for noncompliance) can serve as a mechanism to encourage compliance. Moreover, the exercise helps students better understand the limitations of reputation costs in influencing a country's behavior, and why it may appear that some nations do not pay the price for noncompliance, while others do.

Second, this exercise aids students' understanding of three important mechanisms countries rely upon to overcome collective action problems: (1) iteration - "repeated interactions with the same partners" (Frieden et al., 2018, p. 62), (2) linkage - "the linking of cooperation on one issue to interactions on a second issue" (Frieden et al., 2018, p. 62), and (3) coercion - "a strategy of imposing or threatening to impose costs on other actors in order to induce a change in their behavior" (Frieden et al., 2018, p. 65). In particular, my exercise has students address a dilemma common to undergraduate students and, by doing so, illustrates how they use these collective action-solving mechanisms in their own lives, even if they are initially unaware that their strategies are examples of iteration, linkage, and enforcement. By having students contemplate and discuss different strategies (often those they have used in their own lives) with their classmates to solve a problem that is relatable to them, students can construct knowledge for themselves. Students can better understand why these mechanisms aid in solving collective action problems, which can help them understand why and how countries use these tools.

Making Agreements with Friends Analogy

Step 1: The Prompt and Introducing the “Group” (5 Minutes)

I begin the exercise by warning the students that today’s activity may appear unusual and not similar to our typical class; however, by the end of the class, everything will come together. Thereafter, I ask students to form small groups of around three to five students and consider the following scenario (*after reading the prompt, I present Table 1 to the students*).

Imagine you and the following group of students (*see Table 1*) go “out on the town”, and everything is going great... until you reach the pub (or restaurant, fair, theme park) that you all really wanted to go to and find out that **the pub has a \$10 cover, and the pub only accepts cash for the cover**. The **problem** is that you are the **only one that brought cash along**. Therefore, everyone in the group turns to you and asks if you can spot (lend) them some money.

Now, let us examine the group of students you are with and what you know about them (*read the information about each group member in Table 1*).

Table 1. The Group of Students

Group Member	Past Interactions
Gabriella B.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Reliable best friend · The instant Venmo-er
Braxton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · You don't interact much. · But your friend's hangout with him a lot and say he's reliable.
Sofia S.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · New person to the group. · First time she's been out with anyone in the group.
Jalen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Has helped you often in the past. · Lent you cash when you needed it.
Ryan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Not really a friend and a bit of a bully. · You have a bad history and tension between you two is building. · Could make life miserable for everyone if you cross him.
Ethan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The friend that doesn't always pay you back. · Isn't the most reliable person and you don't get along super well. · But his parents have a beach house, so you want to stay on his good side, so he continues to invite you.
Sara A.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Your girl scout cookie hookup – you eat A LOT of cookies. · Don't always get along but your friendship is mutually beneficial
Faith	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The friend that takes two weeks of nagging and dozens of reminders but eventually always pays you back. · Longtime friend that you sometimes bicker with.
Noah K.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Pariah of the group · The “friend” who you are pretty sure purposefully forgets their wallet, so someone else has to pay (never pays anyone back)

Step 2: Deciding Who to “Spot” (10-15 Minutes)

After reading the prompt and introducing the "Group of Students" in Table 1, students, in their small groups, decide which individuals from Table 1 they would be willing to "spot" and why they would or would not spot each person. To facilitate this, I provide each group with a worksheet, which can be found in the appendix. The worksheet is a table that has all the names of the individuals in Table 1 in its first column; in the second column, students write if they would or would not lend money to each individual, and the third column has space for students to explain the reasoning for their decisions. Students should work in small groups, while the instructor can circulate among the groups to ensure that the discussions are on track.

After all the groups have finished discussing, the instructor should reconvene the all-class discussion. Thereafter, the instructor goes through the list of names in Table 1 and, for each individual, asks the class to raise their hands if their group decided to lend money and then to raise their hands if their group decided not to lend money. Before moving to the next individual in Table 1, the instructor should call on the groups to explain the rationale behind their decisions to lend or not lend.

While going through the list of individuals from Table 1, it becomes clear that some individuals, such as Gabriella B., will have near-universal class consensus for lending her money, while groups will disagree on lending to other individuals, such as Sara A. and Ethan.

Step 3: Bargaining (10-15 Minutes)

After going through all the names in Table 1 as a class, students should return to their small groups with the following instructions:

Select 3-5 people whom you are either hesitant or unwilling to lend money. For each person, devise a **unique** deal, plan, or bargain to make you more willing to spot them (Hint: they do not have to pay you back with cash).

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize that students must come up with 3-5 unique deals, plans, or bargains. For example, the students cannot make the same deal with Ryan, Sofia S., and Faith. While the groups work on developing strategies to ensure that they are paid back, the instructor can walk around the class and ensure that the discussions are on track. Instructors should also write three empty columns on the board titled 1, 2, and 3. These categories correspond to three common mechanisms used to solve collective action problems: iteration, linkage, and enforcement.

When all the groups have finished, the class reconvenes and the instructor asks the groups what strategies they have developed. Depending on the number of small groups, each group

shares one or two of the strategies devised. After the group answers, the professor asks them to write their solutions in a certain column on the board. If the solution provided is an example of iteration (e.g., pay for you the next time you go out), tell the group to write their solution in Column 1. If a group’s solution is an example of linkage (e.g., pay for your Uber home in exchange for spotting the cover), have students write their answers in Column 2. If a response is an example of coercion (e.g., force them to Venmo you before you will give them cash), have students write their answers in Column 3. More examples of the types of responses that students may develop and their respective column placements can be found in Table 2. The class will likely struggle to devise solutions that fall into the coercion column (3). However, this is not a problem, because as students have limited means of enforcing agreements with their friends, countries have limited means of forcing other nations to abide by their agreements.

Table 2. Examples on the Board at the end of Step 3

(1) Iteration	(2) Linkage	(3) Coercion
Agreement to pay for you next time	Buy you a drink once inside	Must Venmo you beforehand
Agreement that if not paid back you won’t spot them in the future	Ethan promises you an invitation to his beach house	Have to pay back \$15
Reminds you s/he paid for you before	Sara A. gives us a free box of cookies	Won’t get an invite again if not repaid
	Agrees to be the designated driver	
	Will pay for Uber home	

Step 4: The Reveal (10 Minutes)

It is now time to reveal how this activity relates to international relations, what the columns on the board refer to, and the importance of the activity. Instructors should begin by presenting Table 1 to the students again and reminding them of the different rationales for their decisions. The class was willing to spot some of the people listed in Table 1 because of their reputations. For example, many (if not all) groups were willing to lend money to Gabriella B. and Jalen because they had a good reputation, and these reputations were formed by their past actions and their shared history. Other people, such as Ethan and Sara A., were provided loans not because of their reputations or because students believed they would pay them back, but because they could offer something of value (a beach trip or girl scout cookies). Some individuals, such as Ryan, may have been provided with money for the cover because the students did not want to cause a scene or more problems by not providing him a loan. Other people in Table 1 were only offered a loan after making an agreement, for example, they would pay for your drinks or your ride home.

The instructor should then tell the class that the logic and strategies they use when contemplating agreements with friends are not dissimilar to how countries interact with each other. *Instructors should now present Table 3 to the class (I recommend revealing the countries one at a time).*

At this point, students should quickly connect the names of the students in Table 1 to those of the countries in Table 3. The instructor should go through the list of countries in Table 3 and demonstrate how the corresponding student matches the country. For example, an instructor could tell their class - as you could trust that Gabriella B. would pay you back because of her reputation, the United States (U.S.) can be confident in making agreements with Great Britain, America's closest ally because of its long history of working together. Instructors should highlight Egypt (*Ethan*) and Saudi Arabia (*Sara A*), two countries where students often question why the U.S. works closely. U.S. cooperation with both nations serves as ideal examples of linkage.

Table 3. Countries' Relations to the U.S.

Country	Past Interactions
Great Britain	· America's closest ally ¹
Belgium	· EU headquarters
South Sudan	· Newest country (2011)
Japan	· U.S. borrowed heavily from Japan in the 80s and 90s
Russia	· Cold war – U.S. and the Soviet Union main rivals · Ukraine conflict – U.S. and allies key supporters of Ukraine
Egypt	· Since the Carter administration the U.S. has given around a billion dollars a year in aid · In return the U.S. military get priority access through the Suez canal & Egypt doesn't go to war with Israel ²
Saudi Arabia	· Often disagree and conflicts arise. · However, generally have been bound by common interests in oil and security. ³ · Saudi Arabia has been a key supplier of oil to the U.S. · The U.S. has been a key supplier of weapons to Saudi Arabia
France	· America's first ally · U.S. Congress renames French fries "Freedom fries" over France's refusal to support the U.S. position on Iraq. ⁴ · France recalls ambassador from the U.S. after U.S. makes nuclear submarine deal with Australia ⁵
North Korea	· Exiled themselves from the international community. · North Korea has agreed to multiple nuclear arms deals and has subsequently broken those agreements ⁶

¹U.S. Department of State, "U.S. relations with United Kingdom," June 2, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-united-kingdom/>

²The Guardian, "US embassy cables: Egypt's strategic importance to the US," January 28, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/199866>

³Council on Foreign Relations, "US Saudi Arabia Relations Backgrounder," December 7, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabia-relations>

⁴CNN, "House cafeterias change names for 'French' fries and 'French' toast," March 12 2003, <https://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/11/sprj.irq.fries/>

⁵Associated Press, "France recalls ambassadors to US, Australia over sub deal," September 17, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/france-recalls-ambassadors-us-australia-submarines-0322cefb3783f9e90ee8f0c3a738717e>

⁶Council on Foreign Relations, "North Korean Nuclear Negotiations," <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations>

After completing the comparisons in Table 3, instructors can turn to the lists on the board and tell students:

As you all used different strategies to make deals with students you were hesitant or unwilling to lend money to – countries use similar strategies when making agreements with countries, particularly countries they believe may not honor their agreements. The numbers of these columns refer to three important tools countries use to ensure compliance. 1 – iteration, 2 – linkage, and 3 – coercion.

Discussion: Success and Limitations

I used this activity in four upper-division international relations classes and one introductory-level political science course at Florida State University.¹ In all the courses, this activity was implemented as described above, and all learning objectives were achieved. I have found this activity has consistently had a positive impact on students and has consistently been one of their favorite and most impactful classes.

Students were asked to participate in an optional and anonymous survey regarding the activity for four of the classes, wherein I used this activity (two International Organizations classes, one American Foreign Policy class, and one American National Government class).² Over the four classes, 96 students completed the survey (60% of enrolled students). Students were asked, "how strongly they agree or disagree" [5-point Likert scale], with the six statements presented in Figure 1.

As presented in Figure 1, 91% of the students strongly agreed that they enjoyed the activity; 88% of the students strongly agreed that the activities were helpful; 91% of the students strongly agreed that this activity should be used in future classes; 93% of the students strongly agreed that this activity helped them better understand the role of a

¹Two International Organizations classes (69 students), two American Foreign Policy classes (79 students), and one American National Government class (42 students)

²Students did not receive anything for completing the survey nor was it possible for me to know who took the survey and who did not.

country's reputation in international relations; 90% of the students strongly agreed that the activity helped them better understand the consequences that a country faces when it develops a bad reputation; and 89% strongly agreed that the activity helped them understand why countries continue to cooperate with countries with bad reputations. None of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the statements presented in Figure 1.

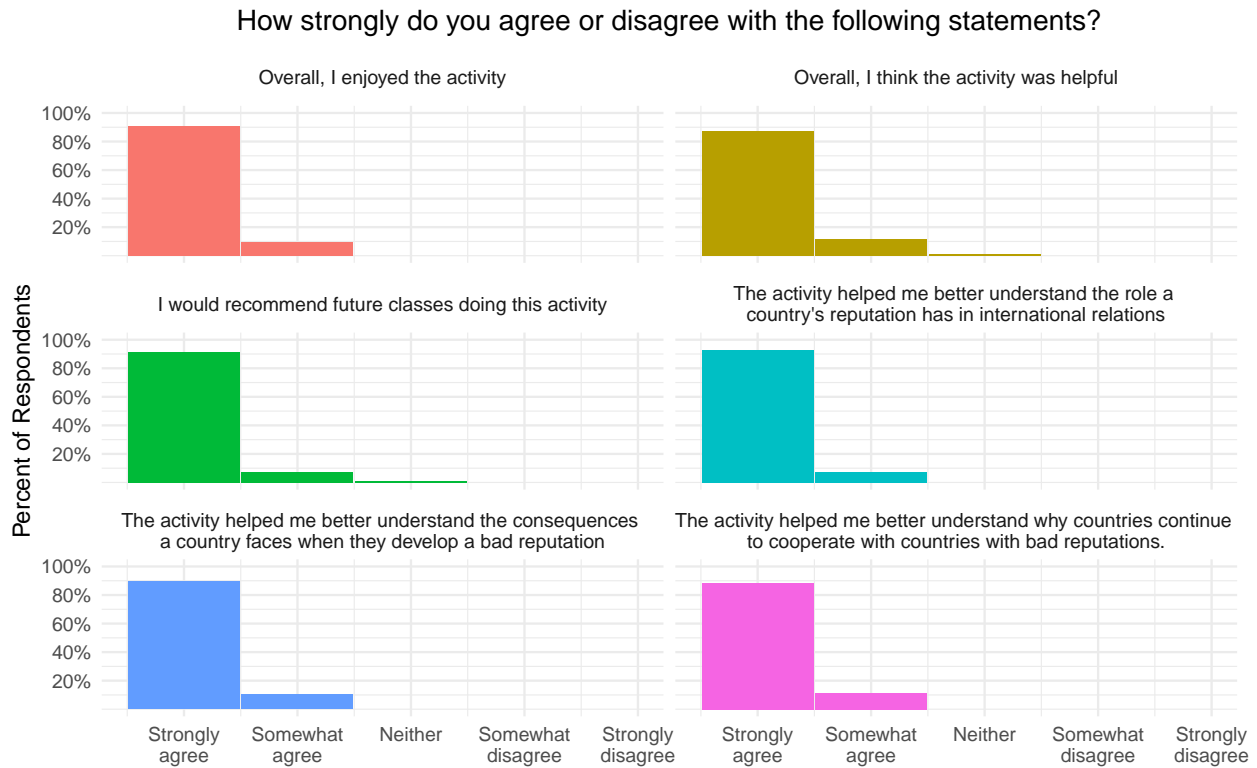


Figure 1. Anonymous Student Survey

Furthermore, students were asked to provide feedback on what they liked about the activity, what could be improved upon, and whether they had any other thoughts or comments. Figure 2 presents a word cloud of the student responses to what they liked about the activity. The most common responses described how the activity made it easier to understand the material, was relatable, and was a fun and enjoyable way to learn new concepts. Many statements described how the activity simplified understanding state relations because they

perform this activity in longer class sessions, although the 50-minute course does provide sufficient time. Another suggestion is to provide a budget (the amount of money that students can lend) and a dollar amount for the cover.

In conclusion, this problem-based learning exercise uses an analogy to introduce complex concepts to students and aid them in their understanding of informal agreements and bargaining. This activity helps students comprehend important components of informal agreements, including reputation costs and strategies (iteration, linkage, and coercion) countries use to increase the likelihood of cooperation. This active learning exercise has been used in multiple classes and consistently receives positive feedback from students.

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Appendix

Person	Lend?	Why? What's your reasoning
Gabriella B.		
Braxton		
Sofia S.		
Jalen		
Ryan		
Ethan		
Sara A.		
Faith		
Noah K.		