

Supplemental Materials

How to Play

The Peasants Game can be played in very different sized classrooms. Ideally, an instructor can break the class into groups of 10-15 students. However, we have used this exercise in classes as small as 20 and as large as 180. We have also used this exercise in introductory classes, upper level undergraduate classes on political violence, and graduate classes that focus on terrorism and insurgency. The exercise can be played in one class period, but we recommend using two class periods: one for the game and one for discussion. The game can be played at any point of the semester, depending on if the instructor wants to use it as a prelude to discovering the causes of revolution, or as a capstone.

We should note that the mechanics of the game are similar if one uses this game in an undergraduate introductory course or a graduate course. For different class levels, the instructor should vary the theoretical depth that is brought into the post-game debriefing. Both graduate and undergraduate students have engaged in the exercise, but the depth of discussion and theory application is different given varying levels of knowledge, participant behavior, and game outcomes.

There are two different approaches to the Peasants Game. We have run it both ways with no major noticeable difference, though, anecdotally, the second approach does motivate certain students to be more committed to the game. In the first approach, students can play simply to win. In the second approach, points that are left over at the end of the game can go towards a student's next quiz if they achieve the high score.

At the beginning of class, the class should be divided into groups with at least 10-15 students in each group. Each group represents its own "country." The game is played in phases. The phases are:

1. The instructor determines the weather, and then announces it to the class. The weather is rated on a scale of -5 to +5. Thus, the weather could be: -5 to -1, or 0, or +1 to +5.
2. Production of crops (points).
3. Distribution of crops by lord.
4. Speech by lord or private discussions initiated by lord.
5. Private decision on attacks.
6. Attack reveal and resolution.
7. Return to phase 1.

Phase 1: The Weather

Here, the instructor chooses the weather. This may be done randomly, although we encourage instructors to pick useful conditions to help students learn. Lords will be under pressure to either save points for their own benefit while sacrificing the lives of the peasants or forego savings to keep peasants alive. Additionally, peasants may behave differently during a drought (e.g., keep points due to resource constraints) as opposed to regular rainfall (e.g., give points away more freely).

Phases 2 and 3: Production and Distribution of Crops (Points)

Before the game starts, one person is chosen as an aristocratic “lord” for each group. All other students are “peasants.” Each student needs to keep track of their points, either using a spreadsheet on their laptop or using a point tracking sheet handed out by the instructor. The lords of each group start with 5 points. Everyone else starts with no points. No one is allowed to talk during this phase of the game, except directly to the lord of their group, or in response to the lord if the lord addresses them.¹

¹ It should be noted that the authors also had classes where they play this game back to back, not allowing peasants to talk in the first iteration but permitting them to do so in the second. Instructors may wish to do this if they want to illustrate the impact of information on overcoming collective action issues.

After the weather is announced, the lord allocates points to members of their group equal to two times the number of people in that lord's "country," modified by the value of the weather. For example, a lord could allocate two points to each person in their group. If it has been a good season (as determined by the instructor), the lord might have five extra points to allocate, whereas a very bad season might result in the lord having five less points than expected. The lord can distribute points as he or she sees fit. All the points could be handed out to the peasants, or they could be hoarded in the lord's treasury. Any points not handed out remain in the lord's treasury and can be used in future turns of the game.

Once the points are distributed, the lord must "eat" (consume) at least two of the points they have kept. Then, each peasant's actions are determined by the number of points they received from the lord. If the lord gave them more than two, each peasant must eat two of them and save whatever remains for the future. If the lord only gave them two points, each peasant must eat them, enabling their survival into the next round of the game. If the lord gave only one point, the afflicted peasant must flip a coin: heads they "live" (continue to the next game round), tails they "die" (the game ends for that peasant). Other peasants can share points with the peasant who only has one point if they choose to, which will allow them to avoid the coin toss. If the lord gave a peasant no points, the peasant dies unless another peasant is willing to share points in this situation.

Phase 4: Speeches or Private Discussions Initiated by the Lord

Here, the lord may choose to address their group, or have private discussions with individual peasants. Any number of possibilities are evident here. The lord may wish to publicly plan or carry out a distribution scheme with the peasants. Alternatively, the lord may wish to make private promises, exchanges, and side-deals. The lord may even wish to rule by fiat, dismissing peasant grievances out of hand and threatening retribution. Students should be encouraged to use their

creativity. We have seen different lords choose each of these paths as well as some lords choosing different paths each round. For example, we had one lord share nothing from the start until they were eventually overthrown. Conversely, another lord shared from the get-go as much as possible and there was no revolt against them. The behavior of a lot of lords though seems dependent on the amount of points they have; if they have few points, they often choose to benefit themselves. We have not noticed any differential behavior in lords related to the gender or background of the lords.

Phase 5: Private Decisions About Attacks

Once points are distributed and “eaten,” lords choose whether to repress and peasants decide whether to rebel. Attacks consume points, and all attacks occur simultaneously. Students can opt to use points to improve their odds of success in an attack. Students should write down on paper who they are attacking and how many points they wish to use. Students may expend as many of their points as they want in these attacks, although they must have at least one leftover from consumption in order to attack (or two saved if they want to launch a suicide attack).

Phase 6: Attack Reveal and Resolution

During each attack phase of the game, the following steps should be undertaken:

1. Each player writes down on a piece of paper either: A (attack) or N (no attack)
2. Players also write down the number of points they want to allocate to an attack (if it is a suicide attack, the number is 2), and who is being attacked.
3. Upon the direction of the instructor, students should then reveal what they have written to their groupmates.
4. All points attacking any one single person are added together.
5. The defender counts all their points (even if they are attacking someone else) as their defense points; logically, this could mean that two people could “kill” each other in the same round.
6. Peasants can ally and add up their points to either attacking or defending, and peasants can ally with the lord (often for promises of more food). Thus, the points for both attacks and defense can be a combination of several people. The difference between the Attacker’s and

Defender's point values is then taken. The difference is then added to the stronger player's total. Both Attacker and Defender then roll a three-sided die. If a team of people is on one side, they still only roll one die. Whichever side has the higher score- even if it is one point- wins and the other side dies.

7. Three-sided dice can be simulated by using a standard six-sided die and dividing the result by two. Alternatively, three-sided dice can be simulated at: <http://www.roll-dice-online.com/>).
8. Each player's die roll is added to their total. The player with the highest total points survives; the other "dies."

If an attack is made, and the attacker survives, the points that were originally expended on the attack are subtracted from their total for the next turn. However, attackers that win are rewarded with new points equal to the difference between the values of attacker and defender.

If the lord is killed by a peasant, that person becomes the new lord. If the lord is killed by a group of peasants, the player who contributed the most points becomes lord. If equal contributions were made to kill the lord, then a game of rock-paper-scissors should be played to determine the new lord.

Phase 7: Return to Phase 1

The game then begins a new turn, with the rounds continuing until the instructor says the game is over. Table 1 provides an example of a score sheet that can be either emailed to the students to use on their laptop or printed out for them to use.

Table 1: Example Score Sheet

Turn	Points from previous turn	Points received this turn	Points eaten or used in an attack or defense
1	0	2	2
2	0	3	2
3	1	3	2
4	2	2	2
5	2		
6			

As the game is played, the instructor should manipulate the weather such that each lord is put under pressure to either:

- a) Choose to save points for themselves and their own benefit by sacrificing the lives of their peasants; or
- b) Choose to sacrifice their savings to keep their peasants alive.

During most game turns, peasants can be expected to forego attacking the lord. Peasant inability to coordinate and their incentives to freeride so that they at least get some points will discourage such behavior. However, almost always at least one group -- and usually most groups -- will be led by a lord who is self-interested. Often the peasants choose not to rebel because given the point distribution they are likely to lose. Usually at some point though, the peasants will take the risk to rebel, even if they are likely to lose. As one student once said, “we are likely to lose but damn it, our lord is such a jerk he deserves to die – and at least we should try.” On the other hand there are occasionally times when the peasants simply will not rebel out of fear (i.e. the lord has been regularly killing peasants that are even a bit challenging) or because the lord actually behaves ethically and shares enough with the peasants for them to not be angry.

Value of the Game

This game serves as a starting point for demonstrating to students how the comparative politics meta-theories put forth by Lichbach and Zuckerman (2009) (rational actor, structure, and culture)⁴ can be used to explain political outcomes. The rational actor paradigm highlights individual decision-making; individuals are utility maximizers in that they will make decisions based on how much benefit they can realize in relation to the costs. In the context of this game, rationality often enters the discussion when students are asked about their motivations. For example, the lord of a group may decide to keep points for themselves or distribute them to other members of their group to prevent a potential uprising; either case could be explained by rationality. After the game, the instructor may also wish to discuss the reasons for why the aggregation of individuals' choices make it more difficult to act collectively against the lord. For example, if a peasant receives no points on a particular turn, the only way for them to survive is for another peasant to share points with them. Points are distributed publicly at the beginning of each turn. However, it can be private, depending on the instructor's theoretical need. For the potential lifesaver, giving points to another peasant is suboptimal in the short term as points are scarce and giving points to others may cost them their lives in the long run. On the other hand, the more peasants that survive, the more likely that they can successfully assassinate their lord (if they so choose) as their points will be added together.

One difficulty for the peasants is that they cannot coordinate an attack with one another, per the rules of the game, and thus the likelihood that an attack will fail is high. Students may avoid attacking the lord if they are not confident that others will do so; if insufficient peasants attack the lord, all may die. Therefore, instructors may want to play this game with students in combination

⁴ We employ this theoretical framework throughout the semester.

with readings about collective action problems such as Olson (1965), Ostrom (1990), and/or Lichbach (1995), and any of several readings in IR that highlight the Prisoner's Dilemma.

The structural paradigm emphasizes that political outcomes are primarily explained by structural or environmental factors such as political institutions, resources and, in the case of this game, weather. Structural accounts help explain constraints and the timing of change. This game may be linked to discussions of how collective action is impacted by political opportunity structures, “consistent- but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national- signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements” (Tarrow 1996, 54).

If, at some point during the game the peasants did rebel, the discussion may be linked to structure if students reveal that their decision to attack was about a perceived change in the likelihood that they would be successful (which is interesting because students do not know each other's points unless they attack each other). For example, this might take place if the lord was previously weakened by a failed attack. Regarding the ways in which changes in the political opportunity structure facilitates collective action, the game may be paired with readings or a discussion of Skocpol (1979) or McAdam (1982). Additionally, discussion of the structural paradigm can be linked to the rules of the game that made collective action difficult. This could include the point differential between the lords and the peasants, the peasants' inability to coordinate amongst themselves, and how the weather impacted crop production and, ultimately, peasants' well-being.

The cultural paradigm may be the least relevant to this exercise but has some potential applications.² Culture emphasizes that political outcomes (vis-à-vis individual and group behavior) is shaped by identity, norms, values, traditions, symbols, and so on (Ross 2009). Acts of altruism

² Cultural sources of power asymmetries among actors is obviously fundamental to relations between lords and peasants. This is not something we specifically address, but instructors can easily integrate discussion of the cultural aspect of power asymmetries if they so choose.

during the game may be linked to the cultural paradigm. For example, a lord deciding to evenly distribute points to the peasants because “it’s the right thing to do” (not for strategic reasons) is a manifestation of a cultural norm. Furthermore, a peasant deciding to share points with another “dying” peasant for altruistic reasons (not strategy) is cultural. Geertz (1973) is one of the classic works in the cultural paradigm.

The Peasant Game also creates a strong basis for a discussion about why oppression exists and why groups sometimes rebel even if they are likely to lose. The debriefing may invoke grievance theory and the concept of relative deprivation, especially in the event that the peasants decided to attack the lord and lost. The instructor may ask students about their motivation for attacking the lord, a discussion of the costs and benefits of revolting, among others. Weaved into the debriefing, a discussion of Gurr (1970) and Lichbach (1995) is especially relevant.