On our first day in Brussels, the bureaucratic and political center of the European Union, we visited the European Parliamentarium, a sprawling complex of steel and glass buildings in the heart of the city center. The first of the activities we participated in during our E.U. in Focus Global Leadership Retreat was a parliamentary simulation designed to increase student understanding of the labyrinthine structure of the E.U. and the interactions of its three main institutions — the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament. Unlike the United States, a more centralized federation of states which vests the most significant powers (to declare war, levy taxes, regulate commerce, etc.) in its primus inter parentes legislative branch, the European Union, a loose confederation of sovereign nations, empowers the European Commission, its quasi-executive body, with the power to initiate legislation, administer the bureaucracy, and execute laws. Both the European Parliament and the European Council are empowered to amend proposals submitted by the Commission, but are unable to introduce legislation themselves. But each institution’s ability to amend Commission proposals is far from absolute; amendments must be agreed upon by both the Parliament — which consists of members directly elected according to democratic procedures defined by the national governments of member-states — and the Council — which is composed of European heads of state and/or government, though it should be noted that the Council only meets four times a year.
and outlines broad policy positions, leaving most of the granular detail of a given policy issue to be decided by the relevant ministers of the national government (the Council of Ministers of the European Union). While the Parliament is designed to represent and be responsive to popular opinion, the Council is meant to promote the interests of the national governments. These two bodies, not entirely dissimilar from our House of Representatives and Senate, must engage in back-and-forth negotiations to reach consensus on amendments to the legislative proposals coming from the Commission; this process is not unlike Congressional conference committees.

Not only did our simulation improve our functional knowledge of the inner-workings of the E.U. — its governmental institutions, political factions, bureaucratic organizations — it also elucidated many of the theories and approaches to public policy that we have been exposed to in our readings and that we have analyzed in class. The simulation provided valuable insights into how political considerations impact and ultimately decide what policy options are considered, how coalitions mobilize to influence policy, how information is processed and understood, how breaking developments can impact policymaking, and ultimately which policy outcomes are arrived at. In particular, this exercise in legislating and politicking clarified the theories we have read on information processing and its profoundly important role in policymaking. It further demonstrated the immense importance coalitions of aligned interests have in facilitating information processing and showed exactly how these coalitions get formed.

At the beginning of the simulation, students were randomly assigned to four different political parties that mirrored Parliament’s real factions: the Tradition Party (Conservatives), the Solidarity Party (Social Democrats), the Liberty Party (Libertarians), and the Ecology Party (Greens). No party alone enjoyed a majority in Parliament and was therefore obligated to
cooperate and compromise with other parties to advance their agenda; put another way, parties were forced to enter into coalitions. ¹ On the two issues Parliament was asked to consider by the Commission — water solidarity and the regulation of chip implants in humans — coalitions initially formed, as predicted by the Advocacy Coalition Framework, on the basis of “deep core beliefs” and “policy core beliefs,” and were subsequently modified on the basis of “secondary beliefs.” On the issue of “water solidarity”, the Solidarity Party and the Ecology Party quickly entered into coalition, bound by their shared “deep core beliefs” regarding the duty of government to improve the welfare of its people by embarking on substantial spending programs that increase the size and scope of the government. The more progressive coalition also shared “policy core beliefs” in expanding water infrastructure, ensuring the equitable distribution of water resources, and investing in research to protect the environment and reduce the underlying risk of water insecurity. The Tradition Party and the Liberty Party got together in opposition to these positions, based on their “deep core belief” in smaller government and their “policy core belief” in less government spending.

Parliament utilized what our theory on information processing calls “parallel processing,” as it broke off into two committees — one to analyze the water solidarity issue and the other to debate chip implant regulation. Parallel processing allows multiple, distinct issues to be simultaneously considered and addressed; this is done through what the Advocacy Coalition Framework calls subsystems. Subsystems consist of the relevant committees and bureaucratic agencies that oversee a given issue, as well as the organized interests which have a stake in them.

¹ It should be noted that students were required to set their personal principles aside for the purpose of the simulation and seek only to advance the clearly-defined values and objectives of the party to which they were assigned. For the most part, students did so.
In the subsystem that dealt with the regulation of chip implants in humans, coalitions formed outside of parliament to support the parties fighting for their interests within it. For example, the Solidarity Party received support from organized labor and health professionals who wanted to use chip data for health purposes and prevent its use to profit commercially, while the Liberty Party was backed by big businesses seeking to ensure that commercial use would be permitted. These coalitions, formed along the basis of “deep core beliefs” and “policy core beliefs,” proved extremely important in helping Members of European Parliament (MEPs) process information. To help MEPs understand the multidimensional issue at hand — and to advance their interests at stake — influential organizations (labor unions, health groups, and large corporations) produced and communicated their own information in an effort to bring attention to the dimension of the issue they most cared about. As MEPs, we attended meetings, took phone calls, and read letters from these interest groups and their representatives. The influence they were able to exert was profoundly evident, with every party taking the stance the interest group with aligned values wanted and using the arguments they put forward. Solidarity demanded that using data from chips to improve healthcare would be prioritized; liberty argued that companies should be allowed to use this innovative technology to spur economic growth. In understanding why coalitions formed the way they did and how they served to influence the policy outcomes, the Advocacy Coalition Framework and information processing model held up at every step.

And yet, the progress facilitated by the initial coalitions was stunted by the failure of the Parliament and the Council to reach a consensus on amending the Commission’s two proposals. While the agreed-upon amendments in Parliament to the proposal regarding the implantation of chips in humans dictated that individuals would be able to decide whether or not they were
implanted, the Council — which represents the national governments — demanded that that power be left to the member states. Parliament’s agreement — the product of the mobilization of coalitions, intense negotiations, and painstaking compromise — was rendered moot by the Council’s desire to enhance their own power. Gridlock ensued and the European Union was at a standstill. But, as the Advocacy Coalition Framework reminds us, one of the primary drivers of policy change are external events that shock the system. As our simulation began to look like a failure, an alarm went off and we were told to head to the media room. There, we watched a breaking news broadcast that alerted us to an earthquake in Germany. The devastating earthquake had destroyed dated water infrastructure, reminding European officials of the importance of upgrading and modernizing said infrastructure. The earthquake had also caused countless buildings to collapse, trapping people underneath the heavy rubble. But luckily, a handful of children had been saved because..... they had chip implants that helped the first responders locate and rescue them, thus demonstrating to European officials the potential of chip implants to save lives. As our reading on “Making Sense of Issues Through Media Frames,” helps us to understand, this catastrophic current event — and the way the media framed it to suggest that urgent action was needed to improve water infrastructure and properly regulate human chip implants — profoundly influenced MEPs, who spent time interpreting the implications and meaning of this event on policy. Ultimately, in accordance with the Advocacy Coalition Framework, policy change was accomplished as a result of an external event; the earthquake shocked Parliament and Council into agreement.

In conclusion, the parliamentary simulation we participated in underscored the vital importance of coalitions in the policymaking process, particularly the role they play in deciding
how an issue gets defined, what dimensions of the issue get addressed, what policy solutions are considered, and what policy outcomes are arrived at. In my opinion, the simulation evidenced the value of these models in helping me and other participants understand how developments unfolded. These theories, while seemingly abstract, are actually quite accurate. While they can serve as a useful framework for analyzing the policymaking process, it is difficult to appreciate their utility until you apply them to a concrete example of policymaking, as the simulation allowed me to do.