

Sparking Students' Interest in Civic Engagement

Working in partnership with the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Center on Congress at Indiana University, the editors of inTIME Classroom have created *Your Ideas Count!*, an eight-page magazine designed to heighten students' appreciation of representative democracy. This magazine is also intended to help students gain a deeper understanding of the legislative process, politics and representation. It addresses myths and realities about voting and democracy, and highlights the many ways in which young people can take an active role in the American political system even if they are not old enough to vote. Throughout, it encourages teenagers to make their own judgments about the value of democracy and civic engagement. This teacher's guide offers suggestions for classroom discussion and debate, along with two reproducible worksheets, quotations for analysis and resources for further exploration.

FOR DISCUSSION

Your Ideas Count! can spark lively discussion on a wide array of topics. Among them:

DO YOU TRUST OUR SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT?

To launch discussion, you might copy and distribute the survey on page 2 of this guide. These questions are designed to measure students' attitudes toward—and to spark reflection on—the American system of representative democracy. After they take the brief survey, students should tally their points and consult the key at the bottom. Then discuss: What does this survey tell you about your views of our system of government? As a class, how trustful are we of representative democracy? What are the reasons for the distrust? What steps could we take to boost our trust?

VOTING TRENDS

Direct students to the graph on page 2 of the student magazine. What trend can they identify? What factors do they think account for the increase in turnout among young voters? Will they vote the first time they are eligible? Why or why not? Ask

students: What is your reaction to the story on page 2 about technology? Are more young people getting involved in government because of changes in technology or changes in themselves?

MYTHS ABOUT THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Read aloud the questions on page 3. Before students consider the responses from federal and state lawmakers, you might discuss the four questions as a class. Then read what the legislators had to say.

AN ORDINARY DAY

The feature on pages 4 and 5 points to the myriad roles of the federal and state government in our daily lives. Ask students to come up with a list of additional ways in which government affects their lives. How conscious are students of these laws?

THEIR IDEAS COUNT!

Encourage students to read and respond to the case studies on pages 6 and 7. Can students envision proposing legislation in your state, as the Florida teens profiled on page 6 did? On what issues or problems would students want to focus? Are any of your students participating in a youth advisory council like the one described on page 7? If not, such a council something that might interest them? Why?

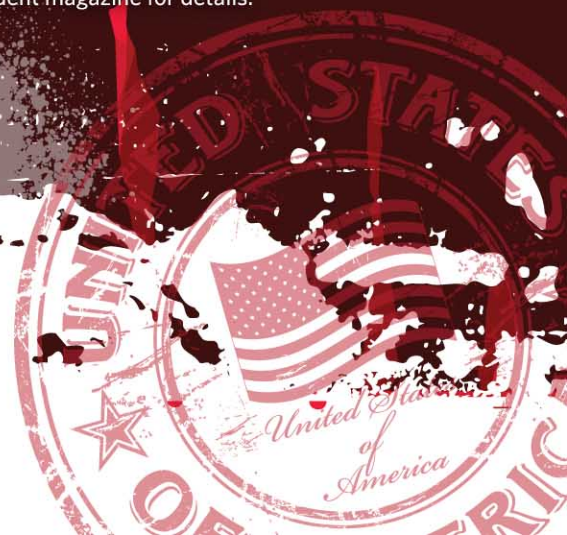
TAKE A STAND

The two brief articles on page 8 present issues of relevance to teens and ask them to take a stand. Hold a class debate on one or both of these policy questions; encourage students to conduct additional research on the Internet or at the library to articulate their own positions on building nuclear power plants and restrictions for teen drivers. Then, as a class, share your views with legislators, either by writing to them or by inviting one or more lawmakers to visit your classroom during **America's Legislators Back to School Program**. See page 4 of this guide or page 8 of the student magazine for details.



Inside This Guide:

- Measure Your Trust in Government
- Making Your Voice Heard
- Resources for Further Exploration



NAME: _____

DATE: _____

DO YOU TRUST OUR SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT?

How much faith do you have in representative democracy? Take the survey below to find out. For each pair of contrasting statements, circle one number to show how you feel about the ideas. If you strongly agree with a statement in the left column, circle 1 or 2. If you strongly agree with the statement in the right column, choose 6 or 7. Then add up your score and check the key below to see how much faith you have in our system of government.



Most legislators act unethically and are out for themselves.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7



Legislators don't care what regular people think.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7



Americans agree on what is right and necessary, so the legislature should just pass the laws that the people want.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7



Legislators are the servants of special interests that look out for themselves, not the will of the regular people. A few big interests run the government.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7



The lawmaking process doesn't work well because of politics, unprincipled deal making and needless conflict.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7



Politicians are not accountable for their actions.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

Add up the total of the numbers you circled above and write down your score:



If you scored: You Are:

- 33-42 → Trustful of representative democracy
 27-32 → Moderately trustful
 21-26 → In between
 15-20 → Moderately cynical
 6-14 → Cynical about representative democracy

For Discussion

1. What was the average score for your class? Are you surprised by these results?
2. Did you have specific lawmakers or issues in mind when you answered these questions? If you circled 1s and 2s—or 6s and 7s—were you thinking of individual politicians or our system in general? How do you distinguish between the two?
3. Journalists are often said to be cynical. What role do you think the media plays in keeping politicians accountable? What role do voters play?

Making Your Voice Heard



People sometimes think their views aren't important to their elected representatives, but that's not the case. Your views do matter, and legislators want to hear from you—in person or in writing. You don't need to travel to Washington to make your voice heard. Many local, state and federal officials have open office hours; they also interact with constituents at town meetings or informally in the community. You can also invite lawmakers to visit your school. Use the questions below to focus on an issue that matters to you. Then make your voice heard by sharing your thoughts on this issue with your representatives.

1. Working in a small group, identify public-policy issues or problems that affect and concern you. These could be national, state or community issues. To identify issues, you might read newspapers and magazines, speak with people in your school or town, or think about your own needs and concerns—as well as those of your school and family. List issues you have identified here:

2. As a group, discuss the issues you identified and decide which one concerns you the most. Use a process of debate, negotiation and compromise to come up with the single issue that the members of your group agree is the most important. List that issue here:

3. What possible solutions or changes can you suggest to address this problem? Be specific.

4. Which level of government—federal, state or local—is responsible for this issue?

5. Which elected officials could you contact to address your issue? How could you contact them? List ideas here.

6. Now make your voice heard by sharing your views on this problem with the official(s) you identified in question 5. Remember, your elected officials want to hear from you!

Extension Activity

Invite your member of Congress, state legislator, city council member or mayor to come to your class. Present the issues and concerns that you identified to your representative, and request that he or she discuss them. You might also look into inviting a former member of Congress to visit. Contact the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress to see whether or not a retired member lives in your area. Visit usafmc.org to learn more.

For Further Exploration

WEB SITES

centeroncongress.org

Information on Congress, commentary from legislators, and an extensive collection of teaching materials and interactive e-learning modules from the Center on Congress at Indiana University. Topics covered in the learning modules—each of which is designed to be completed online within a single class period—include public criticisms of Congress, the importance of civic participation, the impact of Congress, the legislative process, understanding representative democracy, and how a member decides to vote.

ncsl.org/trust

Resources and publications from the Trust for Representative Democracy, a civic education initiative of the National Conference of State Legislatures. These include "Appreciating Democracy," a lesson plan designed to deepen high school students' understanding of democracy in the U.S., and data from a national poll on teen engagement in civic issues.

civiced.org

Background and information on a wide range of acclaimed curricular and community-based programs administered by the Center for Civic Education, including Project Citizen (a civic education program designed to develop interest and participation in public policy making), We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, and CIVITAS (an international civic education exchange program).

congresslink.org

Lesson plans, resources and information on Congress—how it works, its members and leaders, and the policies it produces.

apsanet.org/CENnet

Resources for teachers from the Civic Education Network, including articles, data on student attitudes toward civic participation and an extensive collection of links to organizations that focus on civic education, leadership, youth activism and service learning.

people-press.org

A forum for ideas on the media and public policy through public opinion research. Presented by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, this Web site provides survey data, commentary and data sets on public-policy issues, such as the importance of voting and global perceptions of the United States.

senate.gov house.gov whitehouse.gov

Web sites of the United States Senate, House of Representatives and White House, respectively, with biographies of and contact information for legislators, briefings on pending legislation and the text of major speeches on national issues.

See page 7 of the inTIME magazine for additional recommended web sites on civic engagement.

QUOTES

FOR ANALYSIS

"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves are its only safe depositories."

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, third President of the United States

"What I want is to get done what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is to find that out exactly."

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 16th President of the United States

"The business of government is justice."

—MILLICENT FENWICK, former U.S. Representative from New Jersey

"When it involves other people, it's a 'special interest.' When it affects you, then it's an extremely important issue."

—JIM COSTA, U.S. Representative from California

"It's a privilege to serve people, a privilege that must be earned, and once earned, there is an obligation to do something good with it."

—BARBARA JORDAN, former U.S. Representative from Texas

"The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen."

—LOUIS BRANDEIS, former Supreme Court Justice

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

—MARGARET MEAD, anthropologist and writer

Making It Personal: Meet Your Representative

Want to give your students an inside look at what it's like to serve as an elected official in our republic—and help them understand the debate, negotiation and compromise that are the fabric of representative democracy? Take part in America's Legislators Back to School Program. This annual event provides a forum for state legislators all across the country to meet personally with young constituents and to answer questions, share ideas, listen to concerns and impart a greater understanding of the legislative process. The Back to School Program kicks off the third week of September and runs through out the school year. To find out how your school can participate, visit ncsl.org/backtoschool.



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