



YOU RULE



YOU RULE.

No, Really.

By “you” we mean you, me, all of us. In our system of government we elect individuals to learn about the issues that affect our lives. They represent our views at local, state and national levels of government.

These representatives serve on school boards, in city councils, in the state legislature or the United States Congress. We elect them to listen to our ideas and make decisions about our government that we’re too busy to make ourselves. Anyone who meets the qualifications can run for office. And all of us, regardless of age, have a voice. By that we mean you have a right to be heard and—if enough people support your views—actually make a difference.

This right to be heard is part of the system of laws established for the good of the community: laws protecting people from unjust government. The birth of this system began more than 230 years ago. A few courageous folks in the British colonies of North America dared to break away from rule by rich nobles and kings. The colonists believed that everyone was created equal and everyone should have the right to decide laws that govern their lives. This was a radically new idea. As a result, the British rulers looked upon the colonists as revolutionists, radicals, even criminals.

It's Greek to Me

Did you know the word democracy, and the concept it represents, can be traced to the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea? Here, the initial beginnings of democracy can be traced to the Greeks during the 6th century, BC. The word democracy is based on two Greek words: demos, meaning “the people,” and kratein, meaning “to rule.” Literally, “rule of the people.”



What's Your Button?

ENGAGED

SKEPTIC

On the cover you saw political campaign-like buttons expressing a range of feelings. To find out what kind of button you are, take this little quiz. For each pair, choose the option you agree with more. Each option is assigned a point value.

- 1 a. Politics bore me, so instead of getting involved I'll just play video games. [1 POINT]
b. I think democracy is the most awesome thing since pizza was invented. [2 POINTS]
- 2 a. You have to be a real loser to want to be an elected official. [1 POINT]
b. I can vote when I'm 18 and be part of making a difference. Now that's cool. [2 POINTS]
- 3 a. No legislator will listen to what I have to say, so why try? [1 POINT]
b. I'm going to speak up and make my voice heard. That's a right and privilege I'll be proud to use. [2 POINTS]

Now add up all your points. If you scored four or less, then Skeptic is your button. If you scored five or more, you're Engaged. Maybe reading on will enlighten those of you who aren't so sure about politics.

Of the People, By the People

After the colonists won the Revolutionary War, they decided to form a republic—a representative democracy in which the people rule through representatives they elect to make decisions for them. It's a government of the people where the majority makes the decisions, while the rights of the minority are protected by law. In this system the power to make laws is put in the hands of everyday citizens. These citizens—again that's you and me—hold elections to vote on which candidate they believe will be the best in accurately representing the views of the people.

INVOLVED

SMART

WHAT EVER



"That government is the strongest of which every man feels himself a part."

Thomas Jefferson THIRD PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES



Things can get **very messy**

Our democratic government took revolutionary thinking to create it. And requires compromise to make it work.

Why? Because reaching agreement in a nation as big as ours—where so many different kinds of people hold so many different points of view—is very difficult to do. Think about your friends and family, how even the people who are closest to you don't always agree. Now, multiply this thought by millions of people from all races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds, and you can begin to see why reaching agreement on local, state and national issues is hard.

To help reach agreements representatives rely on deliberation, debate, negotiation and compromise. Deliberation is when people sit down and discuss their issues and why they think their solution works. Debate is the process in which people try to persuade others to support their ideas. It's during this process that things get very messy. Passionate, often heated debate occurs. Folks who feel strongly about their views are now debating with folks who feel equally as strong about the opposite view. Did we mention, messy?

Here's the bottom line: Unless everyone agrees 100% to support one solution or another—which usually does not occur—then compromise comes into play. Compromise requires tolerance for differences and disagreements, and a willingness to make trade-offs. But a compromise only works if a majority agrees to support it. When people can't reach a compromise, nothing gets done. As a result, this means starting all over again in looking at the issues and solutions in new and different ways.



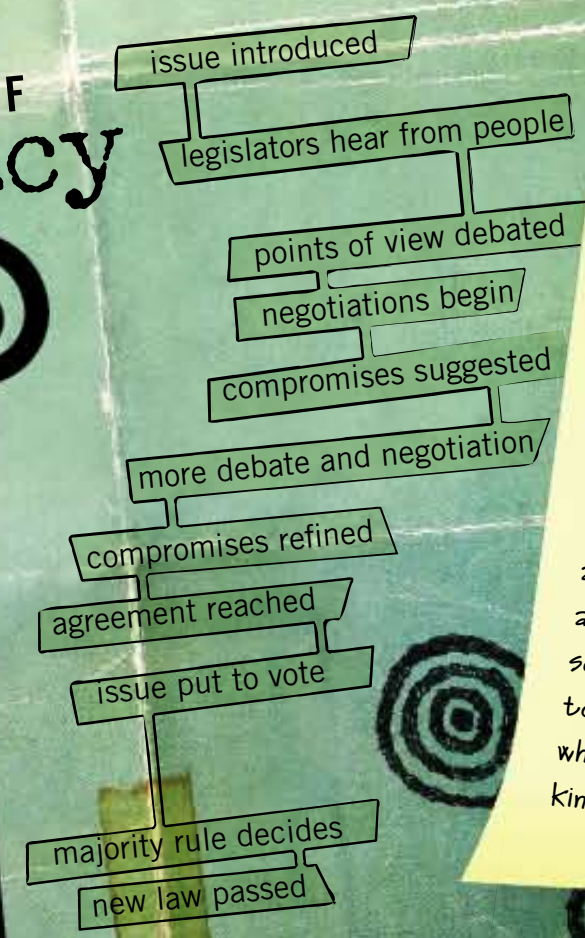
FINDING COMMON GROUND

As you can see, our system requires a lot of discussion. But talking things out is what makes it possible for lawmakers to work together in finding solutions. It's the only way legislators can find areas of agreement—often called "common ground"—among the various values, interests, priorities and opinions of the voters they represent. Our country is strengthened by the different kinds of people within it. But as a result we can't always get our way when others have opposing goals. So, it's very important to build relationships of trust in order to work out differing points of view. And to believe in how our system works.

"I am a compromiser and maneuverer. I try to get something. That's the way our system works."

Lyndon Baines Johnson
36TH PRESIDENT OF
THE UNITED STATES

PILLARS OF democracy



Is Compromise Selling out?

When various opinions exist between the views of different groups, districts, parties, even branches of government, there will always be conflict. And there will always be a need for deliberation and compromise. Don't think so? Get five of your friends together and try to decide what movie to go to or what kind of pizza to order. You'll see.

The ORIGINAL Vote That Rocked

Did you know that for nearly 200 years, Americans under the age of 21 couldn't vote? Then, in the mid-1960s, a group of young adults and other like-minded citizens became activists for change. They wrote and called their members of Congress. They marched in protests, chanted slogans and staged sit-ins. They grabbed headlines and rocked the nation in debate. And won. In 1971 states ratified the 26th Amendment to the Constitution and gave 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds the right to vote. Who said young adults can't make a difference? Your ideas do count, don't ever doubt this fact.



Illustration Credit: Scott Brooks



Me, The People.

Where in the world could you find an Olympic athlete, a teacher, a tugboat captain, a nurse, a jewelry designer, a combat pilot, a surgeon and a border patrol officer working together to find solutions to our nation's problems? Answer: in state legislatures and in Congress.

National and state legislators are ordinary people—like our family, our friends, neighbors, perhaps even you someday—who answer a call to public service and want to make a difference through politics. But you don't have to be elected to make a difference. Your point of view is important and so are your efforts to bring about changes. You can help make changes in your school, your community, your city, state or even our nation.

Turn Up The Volume

A legislator's job IS to listen. Sadly, folks often don't speak up about things that matter to them because they fear no one will listen or care. But, if something is important to you, it's probably important to other people. So, the next time you see something that can be improved at school or in your community, talk to someone who can help. You may want to do some research first to make a clear case. And once you present the facts, you might be very surprised to find out how many others share your views, and how much your voice really does count.



Give Democracy a Fresh Voice: **YOURS**

Not many people think about the kinds of laws they'd like to have passed. Even those few who do often don't convey their ideas to their legislators. Your elected representatives need to hear from you to understand the issues you care about. When you add your fresh voice to the many different voices expressing the same opinion, a clear pattern begins to emerge. And this makes an impression on lawmakers.

To do their jobs, legislators must learn about what we care about. They do this by listening to people who write, visit or call. They also check in with various interest groups representing different sides of issues. If you don't speak up, you will be ruled by those who do. Think of the colonists; how a small group banded together, spoke up in common belief, acted on those beliefs, and changed the world. Not every issue can have such historic significance, but you can help resolve concerns big or small by speaking up.



"We have become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic—different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different dreams."

Jimmy Carter
35TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES



"Democracy is not some fragile flower; still it needs cultivating."

Ronald Reagan
40TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

INSPIRED

They're All Ears

If you don't think legislators listen to you, now **HEAR** this: they do. Legislators are elected to learn about the key issues that affect us, and to represent our views at local, state and national levels. Legislators find out how people feel about issues in their district in many ways. Some send out letters. Some have local offices where anyone can stop by and talk to the lawmaker, or his or her staff. And most have web sites and email addresses. This is what we meant when we said earlier that "you have a voice"—because your legislator wants to hear what you think.





Power to the People, as in, You

It's simple math: There's power in numbers. Which is why organizations have power. People who join with others to influence representatives to pass laws they want are likely to have more sway. However, there are many people with strong views different from yours attempting to get laws passed, too. And that means while your position may be represented and heard, it may not win. The larger, more active and more involved your group is, the more attention it's likely to get from representatives.

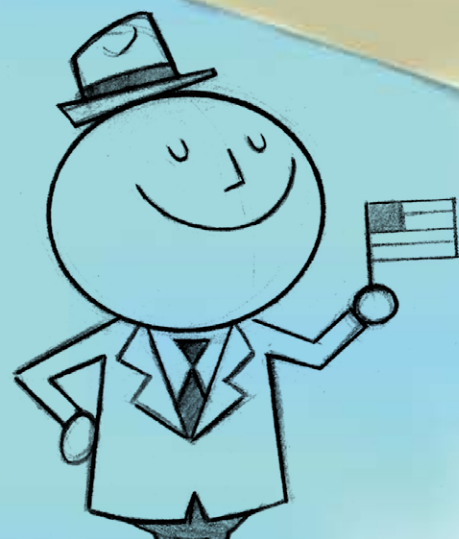


Illustration Credit: Scott Brooks

READING THIS

could change your mind, if not your life.

WHAT EVER

Myth

Reality

Special interest groups don't represent the values and interests of regular people, like me.

Nearly eight in 10 Americans belong to an organized group with a policy agenda. About 40 percent are members of two or more groups. You don't even have to formally join to identify with a certain group, like parents who do not belong to the PTA or older adults who don't belong to AARP.

Most of us think our own interests represent the public will; that ours is the best approach for everyone. And it's usually the "other guy's desires" that we view as "special interests."

Many people are members of organized interest groups; more than likely, your parents are. And legislators depend on the goodwill and votes of individuals associated with these various groups. **So, ordinary Americans are actually well-represented by interest groups and legislators.**

SMART

LEGISLATION IN MY WORLD.

Legislators have helped create hundreds of laws. Don't think they affect your life? Read this story of a typical 14-year-old, and you might be surprised:

STANDARD TIME SET BY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

I woke up to my stupid alarm. As I made my bed, I laughed at the tag attached to my mattress: "Do not remove under penalty of law."

PRODUCT SAFETY STANDARDS MONITORED BY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT REGULATIONS (MUST CONFORM TO STATE LAWS)

CLOTHING FABRICS TESTED FOR SAFETY BY FEDERAL PROGRAM

I couldn't decide what to wear, remembering my class was taking a science field trip to take water samples at a nearby river. After phoning a friend and reading an email from another, I decided to wear my grub sneakers.

SAFE DRINKING WATER REGULATED BY STATE & FEDERAL STANDARDS

FEDERAL AND STATE LAWS GOVERN SCHOOL BUS SAFETY

INTERNET INITIALLY DEVELOPED THROUGH FEDERAL FUNDING

HANDLING MAIL WAS ONE OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S FIRST SERVICES

I gulped down a bowl of Wheaties. I still had time before the school bus, so I took the mutt for a walk to the mailbox to mail some letters.

FOOD PURITY & QUALITY MUST MEET GOVERNMENT STANDARDS

49 STATES REQUIRE DRIVERS TO WEAR SEAT BELTS

STATE REQUIRES WRITTEN EXAM & DRIVER TEST TO GET LICENSE

LOCAL LEASH LAWS & DOG LICENSING ORDINANCES

STATE LAWS REQUIRE MINIMUM AGE OF 16 TO GET LICENSE

Somehow, duh, I missed the bus. I asked my brother to drive me on his way to high school. As I fastened my seat belt, I glanced at the gas gauge—the dude never does—and told him we needed some. I can't wait until I get my license—just 2 more years. Sweet.

STATE CHECKS TO MAKE SURE GAS PUMP DISPENSES FULL GALLON

STANDARDIZED COMPETENCY TESTS FOR KEY SUBJECTS REQUIRED BY STATE

FUNDS FOR TEACHER SALARIES COME FROM LOCAL & STATE GOVERNMENT

I got to my first class on time. Social studies. We were on the chapter about federalism and the teacher asked to what extent we think law affects our lives. I raised my hand and said, "Not much, unless I rip the tag off my mattress!"



"Our voice can be heard, even if we're not old enough to vote."

Middle School Student



PROUD



Understanding is the First Step

Since debating issues and making laws is such a long and complicated process, you're probably wondering why you should even bother to pay attention, let alone get involved. What's important to understand is that for representative democracy to work, it takes people getting involved. However, this doesn't mean everyone needs to participate.

The fact is, some people are simply not interested in politics and that's absolutely cool. Even if you do decide not to participate, you can at least gain an appreciation for how our system of government works.

And that's our goal: To clearly explain representative democracy, the important role our state legislatures and Congress play and to open your mind to the possibility of getting involved. Our hope is that you'll want to find out more and, when you're ready, to take an active role. It doesn't have to be anything big. Perhaps you can start by participating in your school council and go from there. If you decide to give it a try, you might be pleasantly surprised at how fun it is to help make a difference, such as getting better food served at your school.



Before you say **NO** Get in the **KNOW**

Keeping democracy alive requires much more than feeling good during the singing of our national anthem or just displaying a flag in the window of your car or home. For representative democracy to succeed—and preserve our personal freedoms—it requires that we help make it work. Some ways to support our democracy are easy and require little effort:

- **STAY INFORMED** Educate yourself about the issues.
- **DISCUSS POLITICS** show interest in solutions as well as problems.
- **DON'T GO IT ALONE** Join groups who share your point of view.
- **VOTE** Know who represents you.
- **BE HEARD** stay in touch with your elected officials.
- **APPRECIATE** Understand that the process may be messy, but it's good.

If you want to be more informed,
here's a quick list of web sites and
groups you can contact:

LEARN MORE ABOUT CONGRESS AND STATE LEGISLATURES

National Conference of State Legislatures
www.ncsl.org

Center on Congress at Indiana University
www.centeroncongress.org

Center for Civic Education
www.civiced.org

GET CONNECTED

www.declareyourself.com

www.rockthevote.com

www.youthnoise.com

www.generationengage.org

www.mobilize.org

www.kidsvotingusa.org

FIND OUT WHO REPRESENTS YOU

Project Vote Smart
www.vote-smart.org

BRING CIVICS TO LIFE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

America's Legislators Back to School Program
www.ncsl.org/backtoschool



"If you have a plan, we want to hear it. Believe me, your ideas count. An individual can make a difference."

George H. W. Bush
41ST PRESIDENT OF
THE UNITED STATES



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
of STATE LEGISLATURES
The Forum for America's Ideas

DENVER

7700 East First Place • Denver, CO 80230 • 303.364.7700

WASHINGTON

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515 • Washington, D.C. 20001 • 202.624.5400

www.ncsl.org/trust

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the
Education for Democracy Act approved by the U.S. Congress.

Copyright 2008 National Conference of State Legislatures.



TRUST
for REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY



Representative
DEMOCRACY
in America
Voices of the People