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# Your Ideas Count!

## Representative Democracy and You



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William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place  
Denver, Colorado 80230  
(303) 364-7700  
[www.ncsl.org/trust](http://www.ncsl.org/trust)

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# Sample Question

## Take America's Democracy Challenge

Throughout this booklet, you will find questions that challenge you to think about how you feel about our system of government and how representative democracy relates to you. The booklet talks about what is right with our system, but ultimately you will make your own decisions. Circle the answer that best represents your opinion, and use the scorecard at the end of this brochure to calculate your answers and determine whether America's system of democracy meets your expectations.

Say you read the first question on the survey and circled the number 3 because you don't have strong feelings about the statement. However, if you agreed strongly that representative democracy works, you would have circled the number 1, and similarly, if you felt strongly that our form of government no longer works, you would have circled the number 5.

Circle the number that most closely matches how you feel about the statement.

QUESTION 1 America's Democracy Challenge				
Representative democracy works well; it's the best form of government.				
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

# Challenging Times

## Challenging Times

Have you ever really stopped to wonder how our system of government works?

In light of recent events and threats to our democracy both at home and abroad, this question is more important than ever.



More than 200 years ago, the Founding Fathers designed a democratic government that still endures today and is the model for freedom-loving people worldwide. The basis for this system of self-governance is the people, who elect individuals to represent their views at local, state and national levels of government. We call it "representative democracy."

However effective and durable this seemingly simple but powerful concept of governance has proved to be, it is currently under assault.

Americans love their country and like the idea of representative democracy, but they have little time or apparent appreciation for the practices, institutions and politicians that make representative democracy work. Political campaigns are viewed as too partisan and negative, and cynicism and mistrust are terms commonly used to describe the public mood. Oftentimes people view debate as bickering, compromise as selling out, conflict as posturing and stalemates as obstructionism.



# Government and You

If we all agreed on the issues, there certainly would be no need to elect representatives. Instead, we could rely on a monarch or dictator to run things. We know that a completely consensual society is unrealistic, and disagreements are natural. Since most people don't have the time or the patience to work out their disagreements, nor sufficient knowledge of the issues involved, political or otherwise, representative democracy is necessary.

QUESTION	1	America's Democracy Challenge			
Representative democracy works well; it's the best form of government.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	

## Government and You

Cynics and doubters will find plenty of evidence to support their view that legislatures do not do everything they should do. Amid all the conflict and confrontation in politics there is also ongoing cooperation and consensus. These are not as well-publicized as the disagreements, but they have led to many extraordinary legislative achievements over the years.

The next time you take a trip downtown in your community, think about some of the following ways in which your federal and state governments affect your everyday life.

- If you travel on the highway or take the bus, federal and state funds help support transportation.
- When you go to the bank to withdraw money, you can rely on your money still being there because the federal government regulates financial institutions.
- You stop by the dry cleaners and notice the business license posted on the wall, which is provided by the state government.



# Government and You

When our state and federal legislatures take up issues like the education of our children, or the quality of the water we drink, or government's responses to emergencies and natural disasters, they are doing their best to improve the quality of our lives as individuals and to strengthen our nation as a whole.

What is hard for many people to understand is that in order for representative democracy to work, people must participate. You may share the common belief that a lack of participation has no impact. But, in this case, not doing anything does do something. It saps the energy from a democracy and, even worse, allows the views of the few to affect the lives of many.



Public distrust and cynicism toward representative democracy have an erosive effect, making the challenge of self-government more difficult. Distrust and cynicism demoralize those who make a commitment to public service, weaken our legislative institutions and undermine our system of government. Cynical citizens who are alienated from their government energize our nation's enemies.

Keeping America strong requires much more than feeling moved during the singing of our national anthem or displaying the flag on the window of our car or home.

For representative democracy to succeed and continue to solve the problems we face—while preserving our personal freedoms—everyone must actively participate. Some ways to support our democracy are easy and require little effort:

- 1. Vote.** Know who represents you.
- 2. Stay Informed.** Educate yourself about the issues.
- 3. Discuss Politics.** Show interest in solutions as well as problems.
- 4. Don't Go It Alone.** Join with groups who share your point of view.
- 5. Be Heard.** Stay in touch with your elected officials.

Your ideas are welcome and they count. The process of reaching agreements and passing laws in our system of government takes time. It requires patience, tolerance for differences and disagreements, plus a willingness to compromise. Once you understand how the democratic process works and how to ensure that your voice is heard, then you will be effective in making a difference.

QUESTION		2	America's Democracy Challenge		
Government affects my everyday life, so I need to pay attention.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	



# We The People

## We The People

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

State and national legislators are everyday people—our neighbors and friends who answer a calling to public service.

What motivates people to run for elected office? There are a variety of reasons.

Most people run for public office because they have a commitment to public service—they want to do what they feel is good for others. “After almost 20 years of being a police officer, I wanted to make some of our laws better, especially the laws that affect kids,” says Washington State Representative Jerome Delvin. “Now I help make laws and I’m still a police officer. Sometimes I even get to enforce the laws I helped make.”

Although some come from political families like the Kennedys and Bushs or subscribe to a specific political philosophy about how they believe their community, state and country should operate, most are regular folks committed to public service. Some may be moved by a triggering issue, such as civil rights, inspiring them to work within the system for change. Before he was elected, Congressman John Lewis, the son of a sharecropper, had devoted much of his life to the civil rights movement. He had organized lunch counter sit-ins, and marched, protested and was imprisoned, all in the name of equal rights. Others may be drawn to public service through a seminal event in their lives. Before she was elected, Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy endured the murder of her husband and critical wounding of her son on a subway, due to an assault by a cheap handgun. She has now centered her political career on handgun control.

Beyond self-fulfillment and possibly the glare of a sometimes-unwelcome public spotlight, there are few rewards. In fact, in the large majority of cases, state legislators sacrifice income by serving in the legislature. In 10 states, legislators earn less than \$15,000 annually for their service, and only four states pay their legislators annual incomes of \$60,000 or more for full-time work.

Although we often hear the term “career politician,” in fact the job of state legislator is a full-time position in just nine states, including most of our highly-populated states like California, New York and Pennsylvania. At the opposite extreme, it’s less than a half-time job in states with small populations like Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming. No matter what the state, though, demands on legislators’ time are increasing, not diminishing.

# We The People

Members of Congress, in 2003, earn \$154,700 per year for a complex and demanding job that requires them to maintain two homes, one in Washington, D.C., and one in their district.

It's a popular belief that legislators are simply out for themselves, lack integrity and act unethically. America loves dressing down its elected officials and, at times, with good reason. Sometimes there are scandals and often the media focuses on them.



Whatever their motivation for seeking public office, a good legislator takes into account all constituent comments and then seeks to help the most number of people or helps the people who need help the most. "One of the greatest challenges is deciding which to do first," said one senior U.S. senator.

The truth is that the overwhelming majority of legislators are out to promote the public good, as they and their constituencies see it. Moreover, they are generally ethical, although not everyone agrees on just what is and is not ethical in public life.

## QUESTION

3

## America's Democracy Challenge

Most elected officials are everyday people who commit themselves to public service.

STRONGLY AGREE

AGREE

NEUTRAL

DISAGREE

STRONGLY DISAGREE

1

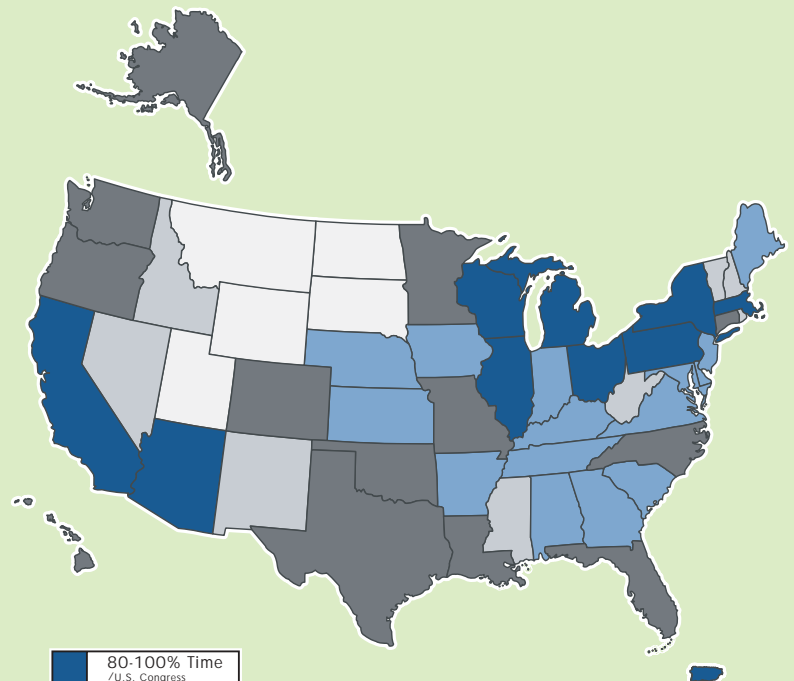
2

3

4

5

## Time Demands of Legislative Work



Note: Estimated proportion of a full-time job spent on legislative work includes legislative sessions, interim committee work, constituent service and election campaigns.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2002



# Don't We All Agree?

## Don't We All Agree?

Throughout life we find comfort in associating with people who share our likes, dislikes and interests. There are times when certain issues arise in politics that seem to have such obvious answers but your views don't win out. How is that possible, you might ask, when most of us agree?

### What some people think:

The public mostly agrees on what is right so legislators should pass the laws that the people want.

### How it really works:

There are many different opinions in our society and very little agreement except at a very general level. It is the job of Congress and the state legislatures to help find common ground among the various points of view so they can pass laws that work well and benefit the largest number of people possible.

### Have you ever wondered:

Why do we think there is more disagreement in the legislature than there is in most families, friendships and workplaces?

## Consider this:

You are president of your local neighborhood association and more and more neighbors are raising concerns about the increased speed of the traffic driving down your residential streets. Many children ride their bicycles after school; you want to be sure something is done to slow down the cars before someone gets hurt.

You call a special meeting of the association to rally support to go before the city council to request that speed bumps be put in. You're surprised when several people in the neighborhood show up and raise objections to speed bumps. They are angered you have made the assumption that speed bumps are what everyone in the neighborhood wants. They say speed bumps will damage their cars, needlessly slow down fire trucks and ambulances, and devalue their homes. But there are others who agree with you. You are surprised that not everyone in your neighborhood agrees with your point of view.

## It's the same with representative democracy:

If there were no disagreement in our society, there would be no need for a legislature. Instead, a chief executive officer could merely administer our country. America is strengthened by the many different kinds of people within it. But this also means that you, as an individual citizen, won't always see your views prevail because others have different desires and goals than yours. It is important to build relationships of trust with our elected representatives to work out our differing points of view.





### Think About This:

Surveys have shown that many people assume there is agreement on the most important issues facing the country. The truth is that there is very little agreement about what the most serious issues are and how best to address them.

Problems can be complex and difficult, so even experts disagree on various issues and priorities—like what is the best method for financing health care for all citizens, for instance. Or take the case of education: We can all agree that we want better schools. But when it comes to the details of how to improve education, we can't agree on how to do it.

People may believe that there is a lot of agreement in society because they're used to being around people who think the same way they do. Being part of a close circle of friends may also encourage someone to go along with the crowd rather than develop his or her own point of view. This makes it appear we agree more often than we actually do.

If we do not recognize the wide differences in beliefs and opinions that people hold, we will not understand the difficulties facing a democratic government as it tries to bring together the many different views and needs with limited resources.

## Americans Disagree on the Issues

When the public is asked questions like these, poll results show people sharply divided.

### Question

Do you favor or oppose school voucher programs?

Some people have suggested placing limits on foreign imports in order to protect American jobs. Others say that such limits would raise consumer prices and hurt American imports. Do you favor or oppose placing new limits on imports?

Should there be a government insurance plan or should individuals pay medical expenses through private insurance?

Should companies that have discriminated against blacks have to have an affirmative action program or should they not?

Should gay or lesbian couples be legally permitted to adopt children?

Should current gun control laws be more stringently enforced or do we need new gun laws?

On abortion, would you say that you are more pro-choice or pro-life?

Which of the following do you think is the bigger risk to the Social Security Trust Fund: continuing the current method of funding Social Security or allowing stock market investment of Social Security funds?

Source: National Election Studies, 1998 and 2000.

don't we all agree?

QUESTION		4	America's Democracy Challenge		
People disagree on most issues except at a general level, and legislators must resolve the clash of values and interests.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	

americans disagree on the issues



# Where's My Voice

## Where's My Voice

It is likely that you have been in conversations where the topic turns to politics and the question arises, "How did that law ever pass?" Such a conversation usually turns to suspicion that everyday, ordinary people do not matter when it comes to politics.

### What some people think:

Legislators do not care what common people think.



### How it really works:

Legislators are very concerned about what the people in their district want and need. Everybody's opinions are invited and welcomed by Congress and state legislatures.

But big organized groups or major employers in their districts may have more influence than individuals alone.

### Have you ever wondered:

"How can I get my elected representatives to pay attention to my ideas and suggestions?"

### Consider this:

You are watching television with your children, and as you flip through the channels, you notice the cable provider in your town has placed a free movie channel that contains adult content next to a station popular with families. You call the cable company to ask them to move the location of the adult channel, but you're told there's nothing that can be done. You mention the exchange to your neighbor, who is president of the local parent-teacher association. When she brings it up at a meeting, she learns many other parents share a similar concern. A group of parents decides to bring the issue up at a city council meeting, and the mayor pledges to raise the concerns of the community with your local cable company when its franchise extension is up in the coming month.

### It's the same with representative democracy:

Your community groups and city council members need to hear from you to understand the issues you care about. When they add your voice to the many different individual voices expressing the same opinion to them, a clear pattern begins to emerge and makes an impression on them. The same is true of members of the state legislature and Congress. Your point of view is especially important—and so are your efforts to bring about changes you would like to see in your town, state and nation—when it is combined with the voices and efforts of other citizens.



# Whose Special Interests?

## ! Think About This:

Legislators communicate with the people in their district in many different ways. Some send out letters and welcome return correspondence. Some have local field offices and encourage people to come in to meet and talk with the legislator or their staff members. Most have Web pages and e-mail addresses to encourage and simplify communications with the voters.

Very few people think about the kinds of laws they'd like to have passed. And those who do give thought to it very rarely convey their ideas to their representatives. As a result, the best way legislators have of knowing what people care about is by checking with the interest groups that focus on the various sides of these issues and are in touch with the views of their membership.

Despite people's accusations that lawmakers listen only to special interest groups and to the people who make big contributions to their election campaigns, every issue that comes before a legislature is discussed on its merits by people representing many different points of view.

If a large majority of the people in a representative's district agreed about a particular issue, their representatives would probably support that issue in the legislature rather than the views of a differing group. However, such a mandate rarely arises from the voters.

## Whose Special Interests?

When it comes to a discussion among most Americans about special interests having too much influence with elected officials, you usually feel like you are in an echo chamber. Seems everyone believes the other side is better represented and many people feel that there is a clear public consensus that special interests undermine.

### What some people think:

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

### How it really works:

There is an organized group for almost every conceivable policy interest that anyone might have. The number and diversity of organized interests ensure that all sides of an issue are heard and not that any one group comes out ahead.

### Have you ever wondered:

If I join a group that fights for what I believe in, will I have a better chance of persuading my legislator to vote for what I want?

QUESTION		5	America's Democracy Challenge		
Legislators care about what people in their districts think and try to reflect those opinions in their policy decisions.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	

# Whose Special Interests?

## Consider this:

In your local newspaper, you read about an upcoming community meeting seeking input about a new flag to represent your community. As an outdoor enthusiast, you want to ensure the flag incorporates something about the natural environment that is such an attractive part of your community. Apparently, many other people read the same newspaper article and also have some strong opinions about what images represent your community. The downtown association lobbies for images of your town's historic Main Street, arguing the quaint nature of the town will do more to draw tourism than an image of a tree or flower. A representative from the Italian-American Society lobbies for a miniature version of the Italian flag to represent the homeland of the town's founding fathers, while a member of the school board suggests creating a contest, so local school children—the future of the town—can create the new flag. You want to be sure your comments are not overlooked, so you join with fellow outdoor enthusiasts in the Mountain Club, and gather a group of its members to attend the next community meeting about the flag design. The differences of opinion are clear, and it's obvious that special interests represent many sides of the issue.

## It's the same with representative democracy:

There is power in numbers and organization. People who join with others to get their representative to pass laws they want are likely to have more influence. It is important to keep in mind that there are many people with strong views that are different from yours, and they are also attempting to get laws passed. While your position will be represented and heard, it may not prevail. But the larger, more active and involved your group is the more attention it is likely to get from your representatives.



## Think About This:

Most of us think of our own interests as representing the public will and as the best approach for everyone. It's usually the other people's desires that we view as "special interests."

Nearly eight in 10 Americans belong to an organized group with a policy agenda, and about 40 percent of adults are members of two or more groups. Even without formally joining an organization, many individuals identify with that group, such as spouses of small business owners or African Americans who don't belong to the NAACP.

Paid lobbyists do have a lot of influence. Most of them are good and honest representatives of their organizations' beliefs and interests.

Even though some big groups have a lot of money and can get a lot of attention, legislators also hear other points of view from smaller interest groups, executive agencies, legislative staff, the media and concerned individuals. And they must represent the majority view among the voters in their district if they are to get re-elected.

Because special interest groups often disagree, representatives must closely consider the policies each group supports, discuss them with their constituents and other legislators, and then use their judgment when casting a vote in the legislature.

QUESTION		6	America's Democracy Challenge		
The number and diversity of special interest groups ensure that all sides of an issue are heard.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	





# Compromise or Cop Out?

## The Ten Most Influential Interests

Rank	Influential Interests in the States	Influential Interests in Washington, D.C.
1	School teachers' organizations (NEA)	American Association of Retired Persons(AARP)
2	General business organizations (chambers of commerce, etc.)	National Rifle Association of America
3	Utility companies and associations (electric, gas, water, etc.)	National Federation of Independent Business
4	Lawyers (state bar associations and trial lawyers)	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
5	Traditional labor groups (AFL-CIO)	AFL-CIO
6	Physicians and state medical associations	Association of Trial Lawyers of America
7	Insurance: general and medical	Chamber of Commerce
8	Manufacturers (companies and associations)	National Right to Life Committee
9	Health care organizations (hospital associations)	National Education Association
10	Bankers' associations	National Restaurant Association

Sources: Fortune, December 1999; Ronald Hrehbenar, Interest Group Politics, 1997

## Compromise or Cop Out?

Perhaps one of the biggest occupational hazards for an elected official is compromising on an issue. Watchful constituents remember the strong stands taken by a candidate during an election and become wary when after his or her election, they feel that the official appears to be making deals or compromising on important issues. The natural question of how important values could give way to compromise becomes a hot topic.

### What some people think:

The lawmaking process doesn't work well because of politics and needless conflict.

### How it really works:

Legislating is a contentious process because it encompasses different and competing values, interests and constituencies, all of which are making claims on government or one another. Some differences are fought out, but most are negotiated, compromised and settled—at least to a degree and for a while.

### Have you ever wondered:

How do legislators ever get any laws passed when each one of them must deal with the different demands of so many various groups of people?

# Compromise or Cop Out?



## Consider this:

You recently took over the post as chairman of your community's Oktoberfest celebration, and, along with it, a giant headache. Neighborhood groups are protesting your committee's request for a permit to close the street for the two-day event unless there is a prohibition on all alcohol sales. They are still angered by the late night crowds, noise and drunk driving that spilled over into neighborhoods last year. The business community—which provides the financial backing for the festival—objects. They say there will be no Oktoberfest without bratwurst and beer. Community leaders ask your committee to work on a compromise everyone can live with. After meeting with local businesses and residents, you discover everyone is willing to give in a little. In the end, your compromise results in a beer-only festival with all alcohol sales cut off by 10 p.m. and a two-beer limit for those who attend. You also agree to additional security in the surrounding neighborhood. Local businesses will set up a hotline for neighbors to report any disturbances.



## It's the same with representative democracy:

Our country is strengthened by the many different kinds of people within it. It's not easy to come to an agreement when various people have differing opinions. In all relationships and group activities, there can be many right answers to some questions. But this also means that you can't always get your way because others have different desires and goals than yours. It is only through compromise that most agreements can be made.



## Think About This:

The U.S. Constitution resulted from a number of compromises and it has proved to be an enduring document.

Conflict is a natural part of democracy because various opinions exist among the needs and views of different groups, districts, parties and legislative houses, as well as different branches of government.

In reality, it takes time to come to an agreement, and it is often a difficult, unpleasant process. Legislators continue to discuss differing views of a problem, attempt to reach solutions, and review and alter proposals until they can get a majority.

Debate, negotiation and compromise are essential for arriving at a common ground that represents the opinions and interests of as many people as possible. In this way, consensus gets built. This is what representative democracy is all about.

QUESTION 7 America's Democracy Challenge				
Debate, disagreement and compromise are a natural part of the legislative process.				
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	2	3	4	5

# Your Ideas Count!

## Your Ideas Count!

History is full of examples of ordinary people who have had a major influence on our political system, even from its very beginning, according to historian Stephen Frantzich, author of the book *Citizen Democracy*. James Madison was an ordinary man who had never been considered a great speaker, but he was sent to represent Virginia in the Continental Congress of 1780 in his late 20s. He rose to the occasion and became a key figure at the convention and the main architect of our system of government.

Despite rampant public cynicism today, there are several modern examples of individuals who have made a difference. People like Rosa Parks, who fought racial segregation and refused to sit at the back of the bus, or Howard Jarvis, who started the Proposition 13 property tax revolt in California.

In every community and every state, there are stories of people who have worked within the system and pushed for change. People like Cindy Lightner, who helped form Mothers Against Drunk Driving after the tragic death of her 13-year-old daughter.

All of these people were ordinary citizens who made a difference. They felt passionately about a particular matter and resolved that something needed to be done. They presented their case well, were persistent, enlisted the support of others, and brought about important change.

## Get Involved

Now it's time for you to take some action and get involved. You can start by learning more about the issues that are being debated in your community. Take some time and review your local newspaper or search for Internet resources where you can read about the issues being debated and how they affect you and your family. If you feel strongly about an issue, give your opinion. Write or call your local state legislator and share your point of view.

Congress and state legislatures deal with many of the issues that affect you every day. If you would like to learn more about state legislatures, the legislative process and the issues confronting state legislatures, visit the National Conference of State Legislatures online at [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org). For more information about the U.S. Congress, visit the Center on Congress at [www.congress.indiana.edu](http://www.congress.indiana.edu).

If you need help finding out who represents you, check out these Web sites. Have your zip code ready.

Project Vote Smart [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)

National Conference of State Legislatures [www.ncsl.org/public/siteleg.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/public/siteleg.htm)

QUESTION		8	America's Democracy Challenge		
The basis of representative democracy is public involvement and participation.					
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	
1	2	3	4	5	



# What's Your Opinion?

## America's Democracy Challenge What's Your Opinion?

### Questions You Should Answer About America's Future

#### SCORECARD

Go back through the pages and add up the numbers you gave to the questions you answered. Write down your scores below and add them together for a total.

QUESTION	1	
QUESTION	2	
QUESTION	3	
QUESTION	4	
QUESTION	5	
QUESTION	6	
QUESTION	7	
QUESTION	8	
TOTAL		

KEY	
8 – 13	You appreciate and are trustful of representative democracy.
14 – 20	You have a few questions, but mostly feel the system works for you.
21 – 27	You lack confidence that elected officials act in your interest.
28 – 34	Your trust in representative democracy seems shaken.
35 – 40	You have difficulty trusting our system of representative democracy.

## Find Out More about Representative Democracy

Trust for Representative Democracy  
National Conference of State Legislatures  
[www.ncsl.org/trust](http://www.ncsl.org/trust)

Center for Civic Education  
[www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

The Center on Congress at Indiana University  
[www.congress.indiana.edu](http://www.congress.indiana.edu)

## For In-Depth Reading

Rosenthal, Alan, Burdett A. Loomis, John R. Hibbing and Karl T. Kurtz. *Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002. Call the NCSL Publications Department at (303) 364-7812 to order your copy.