

Civic Participation

“How can students apply the knowledge and skills they’ve gained through this curriculum in the real world?”

Unit Seven





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Introduction to Civic Participation

What is Civic Participation?

Civic participation includes various mandatory and voluntary responsibilities to stay actively involved in one's city, state, and nation as a United States citizen.

All United States citizens engage in civic participation by...

1. **Obeying the Law:** If citizens do not obey the law, they are subject to consequences and penalties when the law is broken. Obeying the law brings order to society and ensures that citizens can live in a safe community.
2. **Paying Taxes:** All citizens must pay federal, state, local, Social Security, property, and/or sales taxes. Without the support of taxes, the United States would not have funding for schools, roads, Medicare, and national defense.
3. **Serving on the Jury When Summoned:** All defendants have the right to a jury in a court of law. Citizens are called into court based on their jurisdiction randomly and are required to serve in court and testify under oath to provide truthful information relevant to the case.
4. **Registering with the **Selective Service**:** All United States male citizens and immigrant men from 18-25 are required to register for the selective service or face penalties (up to a \$250,000 fine and/or up to 5 years in prison). If a national crisis were to occur and more military personnel were needed, the executive branch of government would enforce a draft created by the selective service.

Why is Civic Participation Important?

Civic participation is necessary to create happier and stronger communities. Civic participation can affect not only individuals, but entire communities and governments. In communities with high civic participation, there is a greater sense of community. Through civic participation, citizens can affect local policies and governmental priorities. Civic participation promotes a diversity of opinions to ensure that policies are relevant to all groups in a community. Mandatory civic activities are essential to remaining order and strength within society.



Who Can Participate in Civic Participation?

All citizens, regardless of age, must be civically involved to some extent. However, depending on age, some mandatory civic activities can vary. Voluntary civic activities are highly recommended for all, whether that be voting, staying informed, or completing with community service. For youth, it is especially important to instill community values, such as keeping up to date about issues plaguing the community, learning how government works, and respecting diversity and the opinions of others.

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Government Functions, Legislative Processes and Special Elements of Politics

Objective: Students will learn about the processes by which the federal government develops a law and passes it through Congress, how it is implemented at the executive level, and the factors that play a role in how the law is developed. Students will also learn about the election process and how several factors play a role in political campaigns.

How a Law is Made:

Article I, Section I of the Constitution designates the power of drafting legislation unto a national **bicameral** Congress, consisting of the House of Representatives, which acts as the “lower house,” and the Senate, which acts as the “upper house.”

In total, 535 elected representatives and senators draft, introduce, and deliberate on bills their colleagues introduce and send through the body; however, more often than not, these bills end up “dead” before they hit the floor. Even if they do make it to the floor, there are still avenues for stalling the bill. Nevertheless, the legislative process does provide insight into the priorities of the representatives that are engrossed in it, and knowledge of this process can help to understand why laws turn out the way they do.

General Legislative Process Overview:

Step I: Having An Idea To Solve A Problem

The lawmaking process begins with ideas, opinions, and observations. Lawmakers will communicate with their constituents and draft legislation that will help resolve the issues they observe in their communities. Any elected official in either the House or Senate may introduce a piece of legislation. Where it starts makes a slight difference in the procedures the bill will traverse through: if a bill starts in the House and passes through it, it must go to the Senate thereafter, and vice versa. Aside from that, the processes within each chamber remain the same and will be discussed further below.



Typically, the ideas that result in legislation stem from problems that the Representative/Senator noticed and campaigned to alleviate. Though these problems may align with the ideological/political agenda that they operate on whilst in Congress, it will also take into consideration the needs of specific cohorts within the American populace.

For example, say Senator Smith noticed that insulin prices were too high for average Americans to pay for; as such, he would draft a bill that aimed to bring down insulin prices by giving domestic insulin-producing companies subsidies to expand their production of the drug.

The initiative may receive support from like-minded Congressmen and Congresswomen to the point where they may aid in writing the bill or supporting it once it is complete. Support can come from within the same chamber or without, as Senators and House members have worked jointly on legislation in the past.

The Representative(s)/Senator(s) will work to draft a “bill,” effectively the working framework for their legislative idea. These bills can be as vague or thorough as the introducer would like. Representatives and Senators will work with their staff and any parties that have an interest in the idea to provide the relevant statistics and other information necessary to the bill.

When drafting a bill, there are two primary roles: if a Senator or Representative were to introduce the bill initially and be the principal author of the legislation, they are known as the “Sponsor;” if there are other Senators who did not have as direct an influence on the legislation’s writing but wanted to support it regardless, they can sign on as a “Cosponsor.” Cosponsors would be able to add their names after the bill is introduced.

Once the bill has been completed, it is submitted to either the House Clerk (by simply dropping it into a bill hopper) or the Senate Parliamentarian. It is at the discretion of the Majority Leaders of each chamber to decide whether to introduce a bill or not, as they are the ones who set the policy agenda for the Session.



Upon being introduced, the bill is given either the title “H.R.” (House of Representatives) or S. (Senate) followed by a number, which is indicative of the order they were introduced.

All bills introduced in the current Congress can be read on the official Congressional website.

Step II: Committee Referral

Upon being introduced, the bill will be “remanded” to at least one of the standing committees within either the Senate or House, depending on where the bill is in Congress.

Committees:

The Senate and House each have similar, but not identical, committees, and this is indicative of their nuanced power-sharing agreements.

For example, only the House of Representatives has the Ways and Means Committee, which handles matters relating to revenue collection, reflecting the House’s “power of the purse,” wherein only the House can introduce bills that raise taxes or in some way manipulate our methods of revenue collection and how that revenue is allocated.

The committees also show how the Senate and House developed procedurally, as both are governed by very different rule sets. This is manifested in the House Rules Committee, which plays a role in the debate and amendment procedures, which will be discussed later on.

Here is a thorough breakdown of the Standing Committee Structure of each Chamber:

Senate Committees	House Committees
Agriculture, Nutrition, Forestry	Agriculture
Appropriations	Appropriations
Armed Services	Armed Services
Banking, Housing, Urban Affairs	Budget



Budget	Education, Labor
Commerce, Science, Transportation	Energy, Commerce
Energy, Natural Resources	Ethics
Ethics (Select)	Financial Services
Environment, Public Works	Foreign Affairs
Finance	Homeland Security
Foreign Relations	House Administration
Health, Education, Labor, Pensions	Intelligence (Permanent Select)
Homeland Security and Gov't Affairs	Judiciary
Indian Affairs	Natural Resources
Intelligence (Select)	Oversight, Government Reform
Judiciary	Rules
Rules, Administration	Science, Space, Technology
Small Business, Entrepreneurship	Small Business
Veterans' Affairs	Transportation, Infrastructure
	Veterans' Affairs
	Ways and Means

The Senate has a fixed number of seats per committee (due to its comparatively smaller composition of only 100 Senators) while the House allows for a fluctuating number of members per committee every Congress.



Each committee is specialized in one to three general policy areas, and it is this specialization that grants them the ability to review legislation that pertains to their relevant specialization. For example, a bill introduced in the House that focuses on education reform would go through the House Education and Labor Committee. This is determined by the associated leader of the majority party of each chamber as well as their respective **parliamentarian**. In the House, those would be the House Speaker and Clerk; in the Senate, they would be the Majority Leader and the Senate Parliamentarian.

There are several subcommittees that act under each standing committee, specializing in areas that are more specific than the general policy areas the full committee would deal with. For example, under the Senate Armed Services Committee, which focuses on defense policy and military operations, there is a Personnel Subcommittee, which is concerned with how the active and reserve personnel of the US Armed Forces are treated and paid.

The Committee Process:

When a committee takes up a bill, it is said that the bill is undergoing its “first reading,” as it is the first time members of Congress outside the original introducers are seeing the bill.

Should a committee be assigned a bill, it is typically assigned first to an associated subcommittee. There are two main ways a subcommittee can approach and engage with the nature and content of legislation. Subcommittees, and by extension full committees, can schedule hearings with the relevant experts on the specified field associated with legislation to explain the benefits, drawbacks, and general information surrounding the legislation. So if the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee took up a bill that would aim to expand the nuclear energy infrastructure in the United States, they would call in nuclear energy experts to explain the benefits of nuclear energy and economists to explain the potential costs.

A subcommittee can “markup” a bill, which accounts for the bulk of the committee’s actions with the bill directly. Whereas hearings provide testimony and expert opinions on the bill, markups allow for the committee members to directly deliberate and amend the bill to eventually



vote on the bill itself. Amendments to a bill can be added to the bill during the subcommittee phase, but it will take full committee action to adopt or reject them. Ultimately, if the subcommittee votes to approve the bill, it is sent off to the full committee.

In the full committee, the amendments added in the subcommittee are deliberated and voted on, with those achieving a majority vote being adopted. The full committee will debate further on the bill and, at the discretion of the committee chair, will vote to either approve the bill and send it to the floor or reject the bill, killing it.

After the bill is seen in committee, the staff of the committee chair draft a committee report on it; outlining the purpose of the bill, its potential impacts should it be implemented into law, and how the majority saw the bill, which can reflect a partisan bent in the committee.

This phase of the legislative process acts as the true test for any legislative idea, as this is the phase where the *vast* majority of bills are “killed,” or rejected, by the committee. Roughly 97% of bills are killed in committee, leaving three percent of bills to be seen on the floor for full debate and voting. This can occur due to a variety of reasons, although the largest lies in the fact that each representative and senator represents different states, and thus different interests; it is this competition that forces those officials to engage in negotiations to make everyone happy. However, since bills cannot contain everything, or the sponsors would otherwise not agree with those measures, the bill would end up being rejected.

Step III: The Floor

Should a bill pass the committee stage, it will make its way to the floor of the chamber it is traversing, though it is at the discretion of the leader of the Chamber (the House Speaker or the Senate Majority Leader) to decide whether the bill will even meet the floor, and, if so, when. They make this known by scheduling the bill’s “second reading,” though this is the first time the entire body sees the legislation.

The rules for debate and amendment processes vary in each chamber.

The House of Representatives:



Beginning in the House, due to the number of Representatives in the chamber, some more rules and regulations must be abided by to ensure debate and amendments are as efficient as possible. As a result, *House members are subjected to time limits to deliberate on the bill*. These time limits are often controlled by the Chair of the first committee the bill came from and its ranking member. When it comes to the amendments process, these amendments must pass through a special standing Rules Committee within the House, which will determine whether the amendment is sensible and relevant to the bill it is amending, or to put it another way, *germane*. It takes a simple majority (51%) of the House to pass a bill (218 of 435) to send it to the Senate (if the bill had been introduced in the House) or the President (if it already passed the Senate).

The Senate

The Senate has far more leeway when it comes to deliberating on legislation and amending it, as the Founding Fathers contended that since the Senate is deemed the “upper house,” meaning it has more experienced members, it is capable of making rational decisions without the need of rules impeding their progress. As such, there is no time limit on a Senator’s debate or speech-making, provided they are recognized by the Senate President (be it the Vice President or the Pro Tempore). Senators’ speeches can be about anything, even items that are not relevant to the bill in itself (i.e. Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) reading *Green Eggs and Ham* while debating repealing the Affordable Care Act). Senators may introduce amendments at will provided these amendments are germane to the bill.

The Senate’s unique rules stipulate that there are no set time limits for a Senator to debate, meaning they can debate for as long as they wish. This is manifested in a procedure known as a filibuster; since the 1970s, a filibuster requires a cloture vote to limit debate to vote on the bill properly. That cloture vote requires 60 votes, so the Senate, to pass the legislation, will need to effectively hold two votes: one to bypass the filibuster and another to pass a bill proper, which requires a simple majority of 51 votes out of 100.

Should a filibuster be overcome and the filibustered bill is passed, it will be sent to the President’s desk to be signed into law.



If amendments are made in the second chamber (i.e. passed in House, amended in Senate, or vice versa), then the bill will be returned to the originating chamber where they will be voted on before they are sent to the President.

Step IV: The President's Desk

Once the bill has made it to the Oval Office, one of three things may occur:

1. The President signs the bill into law, whereby it will be codified into the US legal codex and the executive bureaucracy will move to draft rules and regulations around that law.
2. The President will veto the law, whereby it will be sent back to Congress to revise it. The president is also able to send back objections to the law, essentially advising Congress on possible reforms to the bill that the President deems necessary. Vetoes are rare, yet they still do happen. Congress can override Presidential vetoes with a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority in both the Senate and the House.
3. If Congress is in recess(i.e. out of session), the President may choose to not sign the bill for 10 days. If this 10-day period elapses and Congress is not called back into session, it is dead. This is known as a “pocket veto.”
 - a. If Congress *is* in session and the President fails to sign the bill after 10 days, it still becomes law.

The Special Quirks of the Senate And The Legislative Process: Filibusters and Reconciliation:

There are a few unique functions that are confined within the legislative process, functions that have either expedited or hindered the ability of the body to pass a bill. These functions in particular are found mainly within the Senate, as they have far more latitude in their deliberations than the House, which is controlled far more tightly than their upper chamber counterpart.

Two of the most relevant in today's political landscape are the filibuster and the budget reconciliation process, which have been invoked by both parties in the past few years since the Obama administration.



Filibusters

The Filibuster is perhaps the most notorious tactic invoked by both parties in recent decades, especially after Obama took office in 2008, yet it has existed as an implied power since the 19th century after the vote needed to end debate was increased beyond the simple majority threshold. The filibuster is a procedure that can be invoked by any Senator to effectively kill a bill without ever taking a vote on it by extending debate virtually forever. More often than not, the minority party will invoke the filibuster to block the majority's political agenda and any legislation that would go toward it. Historically speaking, this has taken the form of what is known as the "talking filibuster," which implies what it sounds like: a Senator may take the floor and talk for hours on end on a topic that may or may not be germane whatsoever to the topic currently on the floor. These talking filibusters have been made infamous in two specific cases, one historical and one fictional: the former embodied in Strom Thurmond, a Dixiecrat (southern Democrat who favored segregation) who filibustered the Civil Rights Act of 1957 for 24 hours 18 minutes. The other one, the fictional account, is from *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, which engrained the idea of filibustering in the public conscience as it was a key plot point at the climax of the movie.

There were attempts at reform throughout the 20th century. The introduction of cloture occurred earliest in the 20th century (1917), which limits debate to a proportion of the Senate, set initially at 2/3 of those present. There was also a change that no longer required Senators to hold the floor (i.e. speak) to invoke a filibuster in the mid-20th century. However, the majority of reforms came in the 1970s, such as implementing a two-track system that, in short, allowed for two different motions on legislation or nominations to be seen on the floor, though this allowed for filibusters to be used at a greater rate. Another reform was the establishment of the 60-vote threshold to invoke cloture. While it defined the number of Senators needed to invoke cloture, it also defined the number of Senators needed to *kill* a vote to cloture, that being 41 Senators. This, in turn, created the routine filibuster, where now the Senate effectively had to take two votes: aside from the traditional simple majority vote needed to pass a bill, now there was a 60-vote threshold needed to even *debate* on said bill, slowing the already deliberative process to a crawl. Starting in 2005, the Senate had invoked the "nuclear option," carving out exceptions to the filibuster initially for judiciary nominations before moving up to executive cabinet appointees, before finally nixing the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations.



Budget Reconciliation

The Budget Reconciliation process is relatively more recent, introduced in the 1970s as a part of a slate of reforms meant to counteract the increasing fears of deficits and presidential overreach in the budget process. This procedure, as is implied, refers *specifically* to budgetary legislation, or any bills that set spending targets for specific budget lines (i.e. government funds are to be invested in Medicare). However, there are additional rules that govern this process to provide a slate of checks that would prevent the majority from abusing the process. The most famous is **the Byrd Rule**, so named after Senator Robert Byrd, which provides definitions to what cannot be included in a reconciliation bill:

1. Provisions that do not change revenue streams
2. Provisions that increase expenditures or decreases revenue in an instance when a committee implementing these changes disobeys instructions
3. Provisions that recommend changes that are outside the jurisdiction of the committees assigned to it
4. Provisions that produce a change in expenditure/revenue that is negligible to non-budgetary aspects
5. Provisions that increase the deficit beyond those covered by measure
6. Provisions that recommend an amendment to Social Security

The Byrd Rule is interpreted by the Senate Parliamentarian, who will determine what is and isn't in compliance with the Byrd Rule.

However, the most important reason why the reconciliation process is so high profile in today's world is due to how prolific the routine filibuster has become in the Senate. The reconciliation process only requires a simple majority to pass a budget reconciliation bill, bypassing the filibuster since the debate on such bills is limited only to 20 hours. However, before the debate and voting procedures, there is what is known as a "vote-a-Rama," where an unlimited slate of amendments can be introduced, debated, and voted on. The opposing party will typically use the vast majority of them to make political statements on controversial policy issues and get Senators



to vote on record whether to include the provision or not, which may impact the bill's chances of passing, especially if the majority's numbers are so tight they cannot afford to lose even one vote. This was the case with the Inflation Reduction Act, which had passed the Senate through reconciliation. The IRA was subjected to a Vote-a-Rama that lasted nearly 24 hours, where Republican lawmakers introduced 18 amendments to get Democrats on the record that they opposed such measures; one included the re-implementation of the infamous Title 42 or the "Remain in Mexico" policy implemented by former President Donald Trump during the early stages of the COVID pandemic. Yet Democrats could not risk voting for any amendments as they had to have all 50 Democratic Senators vote in favor of the bill to pass (the Senate was split exactly 50-50). As a result, all Democrats voted against *every single amendment*, even if it concerned matters that would've otherwise been supported by Democrats, such as Bernie Sanders's amendment to expand Medicare to include dental and eye care, which had to be voted down to secure the votes of moderate Democrats. The IRA did ultimately pass 51-50, with Vice President Kamala Harris casting the final vote.

Step V: The Executive Bureaucracy

After a bill is signed into law, the executive agency responsible for the policy area the law now has purview over is tasked with drafting rules and regulations designed to ensure that individuals, businesses, local and state governments, and other parties adhere to the new law.

Typically, Congressional bills that are signed into law are vague, a product of the compromises that had to be made on the Hill for them to pass. The goal of specifying how a law will be carried out on the ground is delegated to an executive agency through legislation that empowers that agency to do such a job. The process by which a rule/regulation is made is outlined in Unit II.

Special Interests In the Law-Making Process

Legislatures are, inherently, a body chosen by the people of a country, which means they, the legislator, are tasked with representing the interests of those who put them in office. These



interests are vast and varied, yet they can all be consolidated and represented in an ‘interest group.’

Interest Groups range from organized policy think tanks to corporations to small, unorganized groups of average American citizens. Yet despite their levels of expertise on policy, their wealth of connections and resources, or their passion for advocacy, they all share one thing in common: they have an interest in something the government is doing (or thinking of doing), and they want that something to be at the top of the agenda and done in a way that would benefit them.

There are three broad categories of interest groups, each with their own initiatives, methods of advocacy, and levels of organization:

1. Economic Advocacy Interest Groups
2. Institutional Interest Groups
3. Public Interest Groups

Economic Advocacy Interest Groups are groups that are tied to advocating for policies that benefit businesses and, most especially, corporations. To put it simply, any corporation or business can act as its own interest group, yet they are also able to work with other firms to address certain issues (mostly in the realm of economics and finance) before the US government. They can be an umbrella for different business entities, and indeed there are different umbrellas for different industries (coal, oil, rubber, sugar, pharmaceuticals, etc.) This is a rather controversial group since an EAIG’s objective is to push for policies that would support their constituent businesses at the expense of the general public. More often than not, this would include deregulation, subsidies, and lower taxation. Their level of organization and resources are, not surprisingly, very high. These resources have typically been the backbone for many politicians’ accounts for re-election, and as such, they’ve been keen to listen to them and their demands. This has led many Americans to decry the supposed corruption within the US government, with many progressives claiming that the federal government serves corporate interests more than they do the general public.



Institutional Interest Groups are groups that support the private, or public, interests of a specific institution. These can be better described as think tanks and policy research organizations, wherein these bodies draft and advocate for certain policies across various areas. Think Tanks are spread out across the political spectrum, from the liberal Center for American Progress to the centrist-moderate liberal Brookings Institute to the libertarian Cato Institute to the conservative Heritage Foundation. These bodies operate distinctly from government bodies, acting as nonprofit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), yet they do work with government bodies in policy research and analysis capacities, which provides ample room for influence within the government's policy-making capacity. They can also serve Congress in a similar capacity, providing research for policies and analyzing their effects. However, criticism has been drawn upon think tanks from both sides of the aisle, to the point where legislation was drawn up against them in the 117th Congress via the Think Tank and Nonprofit Foreign Influence Disclosure Act (HR 1970), which would require think tanks (among other organizations) to disclose funds they received from foreign governments and agents.

Public Interest Groups are generally organizations that were established not to profit directly from the policy changes they advocate for, but rather to ensure that the policies they do support go on to aid the wider public, hence the name. The umbrella for the public interest is quite large, which means there will be conflicting views over whether a certain policy will be within the public interest or not, which ultimately can result in disagreements over policy decisions and fracture advocacy attempts. Nevertheless, these organizations do advocate for initiatives that would broadly benefit the wider American public and may advocate for specific cohorts of Americans, such as the American Association of People with Disabilities.

Elections Overview

The process by which the American population elects their representatives is unique in the democratic world, and it is one Americans themselves have derided as being undemocratic. Faith in the electoral process is dropping, with about 20% of the populace fully confident in the elections process, down 17 points from 2021 (ABC). This is due to a myriad of reasons, one of them being that Americans believe the system needs dire reform. As of 5 August 2022, Pew recorded that 63% of Americans believe the system should be changed to a popular vote and not



rely on the Electoral College. Another reason stems from misinformation spread by various political officials, including former President Donald Trump, over how the 2020 election was “rigged” to drive him out of office, which culminated in the infamous January 6th riots at the Capitol in 2021.

The riots, though an objective black spot on America’s history as a democracy, represent a symptom of how much there is to know regarding the American elections system and how much room there is for misinformation to distort an accurate representation of the system we use to elect our leaders. In this section, a comprehensive breakdown will be provided into how officials are elected during a primary, midterm, and general election, preliminary information will be provided on the different types of voting in this country and how special interests can influence elections through campaign financing, especially after the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling from 2010.

Voting Basics: Types of Voting Systems and Ballots

There are different types of voting systems and ballot equipment used across the United States. The reason for this is that the Constitution stipulates that it is the responsibility of the states to determine the systems they use for voting in elections, although the federal government can step in if deemed necessary.

Begin with the types of voting methods used, there are a handful of different types. However, the most prolific/high-profile are

- First-Past-The-Post (Single Member District Voting)
- Two-Round Runoff System
- Instant-Runoff System
- Ranked-Choice Voting

By far, the most common system used in the United States is what is known as “first-past-the-post,” or single-member district voting. This involves two candidates (or three if a third-party candidate is in the running) seeking to gain a *plurality* of votes out of the electorate.



A plurality here means having more votes relative to your opponents, yet falling short of 51% of the votes, whereby it is a majority. In practice, there are elections where candidates receive well more than 51% of votes, yet the threshold is not to receive a majority of the votes, it is to receive more votes than the opposing candidate. Although simple in comparison to other voting methods, first-past-the-post has been derided for being a key reason for political gridlock and political apathy, as the system, by its very design, siphons out candidates with differing views from established parties, leaving the major party candidates in the running. This forces smaller party voters (i.e. libertarians) to vote, not for a party they believe in, but *against* a party they do not (i.e. Democrats, generally), which results in increased political partisanship and gridlock. Candidates, recognizing this behavior, often take more radical approaches to campaigning, as they would need to only swing those voters whose initial party was siphoned out from the race to their side, and would do so through extreme rhetoric that castigates the opposing side and paint them as a party that, if they were to take control, would take the country in a wrong direction. This leaves little room for discussions on policy and what the candidate would do should they win the election. Another criticism levied against FPTP is that it leaves room for negligible (or wasted) votes, whereby voters would vote for candidates that were going to lose their election and for candidates that were going to win to the point where the additional votes would not have mattered. Additionally, there is the possibility that even if a party gets the majority of votes in an election, it may end up in the minority. In the United States, this has occurred on more than one occasion due to gerrymandering, which will be discussed later on.

There are other types of voting methods in the US, though they are vastly outnumbered by FPTP. However, one of the most high-profile alternative voting methods in the US is what is known as “ranked-choice voting.” Adopted in Maine in 2016, RCV allows voters to rank the candidates from most preferred to least preferred. When the votes are tabulated, if there is a candidate that wins more than 50% of the vote, they win outright. However, if no one wins an outright majority, a new count is initiated, with the candidate who received the lowest percentage of votes being eliminated. However, the voter’s choice is thus moved to their second preferred candidate, and this repeats until someone receives at least 50% of the vote. The RCV system is relatively new, and it is currently being experimented with in four states, one of whom, Alaska, used it in their special election in August 2022 for the first time. Proponents argue that RCV will be key to



reducing partisanship, since now candidates would have to campaign on a wider scope, moderating their message and policy ideas, while also introducing more diverse candidates to the political stage since it means the voter would have more choices they can choose from on a ballot. Opponents, however, argue that the system takes far too long to process ballots, and it can confuse voters who may not fully comprehend the mechanics of RCV.

Different Election Types

There are four key types of elections Americans vote in every two or four years, depending on the campaign. They are:

- Primary Elections
- General Presidential Elections
- General Midterm Elections
- Special Elections

For the sake of this outline, general elections are divided into General Midterm and General Presidential as there are concepts under the latter that are not present in the former.

At the federal level, candidates undergo two rounds of elections every time an election cycle kicks off, and they must win both to win their desired office. This is true for the President of the United States, Senator, and House Representative, yet who votes for who depends on the office that is contested, and how Americans vote depends largely on the state they reside in, which is a product of the federal system this nation adopted. For the sake of this outline, only federal elections will be outlined thoroughly, as state elections vary from state to state, yet follow a roughly similar structure to the federal system of elections.

Primary Elections



The primaries act as the first round of voting Americans partake in. In these primaries, voters will choose the candidates that will run on the general ballot in November, as well as the party’s leaders and convention delegates, who will end up choosing the nominee for the general election.

There are three types of primaries in the United States:

- “Open” Primaries
- “Closed” Primaries
- Caucuses

Open Primaries

Open Primaries are also known as nonpartisan primaries, as a voter may be able to vote for any two candidates on one, regardless of their party affiliation. Voters who are typically nonaligned may be able to declare their party affiliation right before they vote. In practice, open primaries would allow a Democrat to vote for a Republican candidate as well as a Democratic candidate and vice versa on the same ballot. Open primaries would also allow a nonpartisan candidate may be able to vote for Democrats and/or Republicans. Twenty-one (21) states use an open primary system to some extent.

PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Generates moderate candidates because they can’t just cater to one party- Refrain from partisan rhetoric- Hold their candidates accountable to their promises because they are asking for the entire electorate’s support- A way to engage more voters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Infringes on a party’s right to the association- Allows voters who don’t support the party to sabotage by voting for a weak candidate (both sides engage in this practice)

Closed Primaries



Closed Primaries, meanwhile, are more limited, in that they require voters who vote in them to be affiliated with one of the two major political parties. This, in practice, means that the voter is unable to vote for candidates of the opposing party. This means that Democrats can only vote for Democratic candidates, Republicans can only vote for Republican candidates, and independents/non-partisans are unable to vote in these primaries outright. Fourteen (14) states and DC have closed primary systems.

PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Better representation of whom the party would like to nominate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- More partisan, only cater to one ideology and doesn't reach outside people who already support the party- More extreme rhetoric

Caucuses

Caucuses are a unique form of a primary election format, where in voters congregate in public areas at a specified time and publicly pick and acclaim their preferred candidate. Caucuses are unique in that this format is particularly dynamic as candidates can be eliminated over the course of the event. A caucus, which will allow voters and their supporters to back another candidate, which is a cycle that will repeat until either the caucus time has elapsed or there is one candidate left. Alternatively, caucuses can be called to elect delegates who will vote in a political convention.

Caucuses have been lauded as being a manifestation of ranked-choice voting, a type of voting that is being gradually implemented in elections. However, caucuses have been seen to inaccurately represent the voter groups present. Due to scheduling challenges, and more predominantly, the financial burden of travel and taking time off work, caucuses are sparsely populated, leading to skewed representation. In fact, a Fordham University study details that caucuses are not only closed off to unaffiliated voters (i.e. Republican caucuses can only be attended by Republicans), but also favor males and those with higher degrees of education.

PROS	CONS
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<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Incorporates ranked choice voting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Not representative of all voter groups due to financial challenges stemming from travel or work-related burdensSome people are unable to attend because they cannot get time off work or travel to gather for a caucus- As a result, favors participation is skewed, and wealthier, better-educated people and, as well as malens, are favored according to a Fordham University study
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Open pPrimaries do have theirits benefits. According to Ballotpedia, open primaries typically generate moderate candidates, as they would have to cater to Democrats, Republicans, and independents to win the nomination, disincentivizing the use of which means they would generally refrain from partisan rhetoric, which in itself can serve to break partisan gridlock. This also establishes a need to hold candidates to their word; because they would be campaigning on a platform withthat encompasses policies that encompassspan the entire spectrum of political views, the entire electorate would have a stake in ensuring that their candidate, should they win, implements those words into legislative action. Moreover, open primaries are typically seen as a way to engage more voters since they allow for nonpartisan and independent voters to cast their ballots, whereas in closed systems, like traditional primaries or caucuses in the US, these votersy would be unable to do so.

Open pPrimaries, however, also come with their unique set of have their detractors and drawbacks. Per Ballotpedia, oOne argument posits that goes that open primaries infringe on result in the infringement of political parties' right to association; that is, the right to collectively associate with a particular group is impeded once individuals who do not identify with that party still make their decision on behalf of the party. Another argument states that open primaries



allow for what amounts to sabotage by allowing opposing voters to vote for weaker candidates so their party would have the upper hand in the general election, a practice that both Republicans and Democrats have been found to engage in.. However, it should be noted that, while it is true this does happen, both sides, Republican and Democratic, engage in such practices.

Like open primaries, closed primaries have their own set of pros and cons, which are though they are more or less the direct opposite vice versa of an open primary's arguments. While Whereas open primaries allow for all voters, regardless of party affiliation, to vote for a candidate, closed primaries allow for a better representation of whom the party would like to nominate. However, this also makes them more partisan, since they do not need to cater to different ideologies and perspectives to be nominated. Instead, candidates are more likely to espouse more extreme ideas and rhetoric. Rather, they would give them the chance to be even more extreme to garner more voters, since the voter base is more attuned to partisan strategies than those that account for different perspectives.

There is an offshoot of these two primaries known as the hybrid/semi-closed primary, which allows for unaffiliated/nonpartisan voters to vote either in a Democratic or Republican primary, while affiliated voters will be required to vote in their associated primary. This combines the open primary's characteristic of allowing non-partisans to vote in primaries while retaining the closed primary structure of keeping Democrats and Republicans in their primaries. Fifteen (15) states have implemented this system.

Caucuses have been lauded as being a manifestation of ranked-choice voting, a type of voting that is being gradually implemented in elections; yet, there are several issues with the use of caucuses. For one, they are not very populated, which can be associated with when they can be scheduled, which can conflict with a person's other responsibilities. They can also skew representation; a Fordham University study details that caucuses are not only closed off to unaffiliated voters (i.e. Republican caucuses can only be attended by Republicans), but they also favor males and those with higher degrees of education.

General Elections



General eElections are the elections that fill a public office, and on a federal level, include in the case of federal elections, there are two different types of general elections: Presidential General Elections and Midterm General Elections.

Presidential General Elections are exactly as they sound: these are the elections that primarily serve to elect a new President of the United States and can include, along with other offices such as House seats, Senate seats, and state/local officials on the ballot. The nominees are chosen through primaries that typically begin a year before the proper election and are nominated through “conventions,” where the candidate that won the most votes in the primary accepts the nomination and outlines their proposed agenda should they win the presidency.

Presidential eElections, per the Constitution of the United States, occur every 4 years and must always happen on the first Tuesday, after the first Monday, of November. To put it another way, presidential elections occur every year that is divisible by 4 (1996, 2000, 2016, etc.) and happens on the first Tuesday that is immediately preceded by the first Monday of the month (for example, a Monday could land on October 31st, which would disqualify November 1st from being Election Day).

Presidential eElections in are not unique within the election system of the United States, but they are also unique in the wider democratic world, as the American people do not directly elect their president via popular vote. Instead, when voters bubble in a candidate for President, they are selecting which cohort of people, known as “electors,” will vote for the President in the Electoral College. The Electoral College itself will be discussed later, but for right now, when people vote for the President, they instead vote for the slate that will ultimately decide who gets to occupy the Oval Office.

In practice, candidates must receive 271 of the 538 electors to win the Presidency. This means they must achieve a *plurality* of votes in enough states to win the slate of electors, which is determined by the regulations of the individual states, not the federal government. A plurality, unlike a majority, is where a candidate receives the most votes relative to their opponents, but doesn’t necessarily never receives a majority vote. For example, Candidates A, B, and C are in an



election with first-past-the-post voting. Candidate A received 47% of the vote, Candidate B received 22% and Candidate C received 31%. Although Candidate A did not receive a majority (> 50%), they did receive a plurality, but not the majority of the vote, since they received a greater share than Candidates B and C, thereby winning the state's slate of electors.

Similarly, the Vice President is similarly elected through the Electoral College, but they are always tied to their Presidential running mate when the electors do make the final votes.

There is much controversy surrounding how the President is elected, predominantly much of that is being aimed squarely at the Electoral College and whether it is a truly democratic institution.

Midterm elections are elections that occur every two years, always in the middle of the tenure of the incumbent president, hence the moniker. Unlike presidential elections, midterm elections are focused on electing candidates to the House and Senate, as well as major state elections, such as the Governor, State Legislatures, Attorney Generals, and other high-profile officials. Midterms, like presidential elections, are held on the first Tuesday that follows the first Monday of November (i.e. if October 31st falls on a Monday, that will not make Tuesday, November 1st Election Day).

Midterm elections exist because, at the federal level, the Constitution mandates that representatives to the House of Representatives be elected every two years, which places one of their two election cycles in the middle of each 4-year presidential tenure. Senate elections are more complicated, as only a third of the chamber is up for election every two years, per the Constitution. A Senator's term is officially 6 years, yet there is a catch: all 100 Senators are divided into three classes, with no two Senators from the same state being allocated to the same class. Every two years, one of those classes will be up for election, leaving the remaining two to await their turn another two or four years down the line. This was the product of the Seventeenth (17th) Amendment, ratified in 1913, which replaced state legislatures as the principal body that elected Senators to the upper chamber.



In addition to the federal officials that are up for election, governors in 36 states are up for election during a midterm election (34 states have governors that have four-year terms that are elected during midterms, while two states have governors that are elected to two-year terms). The remaining 16 states have elections either during presidential general elections or during by-years when no elections are occurring at the federal level.

Special elections are held during midterm and presidential elections and result from an unexpected vacancy in a seat during their term. Simply put, that is to say, if an incumbent resigns, dies, or cannot continue their duties in any way, the seat is filled in a special election. Special elections in the United States can occur for either Senators or House members who have vacated their seats, such as the latter seeing a recent election in Alaska following the death of Representative. Don Young. Candidates are chosen through a primary system, much like candidates who seek full terms during midterm and presidential cycles. However, if a candidate wins the vacated seat, they will only hold that seat for the remainder of their predecessor's term. For example, if a Representative vacates their seat in July 2022, their successor will hold their seat for five months, as they will have to be re-elected in November 2022, which is five months away.

Debate over the US Election System

There is significant controversy surrounding various aspects of the US electoral system, some rather recent, others as old as the nation itself. Here is a breakdown of four of the biggest issues that plague the US electoral system.

The Electoral College And First Past The Post

The Electoral College has long been the subject of heated arguments and debates over whether it is a truly democratic institution, and whether it ought to be used. As a general overview, the Electoral College is the body that truly elects the President of the United States, allocating 538 electors across the 50 states of the US (538 deriving from the combined number of Representatives and Senators) based on the voting patterns of each state (i.e. if a state votes for



the blue candidate, then the state will send electors that will vote blue.) It takes 270 electors to win the Presidency.

Detractors of the EC have argued that the body gives more power to the minority party and smaller states. This is because smaller states (typically more rural, mid-Western states) have smaller populations, which means that the electors they tend to vote for the president are far more powerful than those electors from larger blue states. Take Wyoming, which has 4 electors out of a population of nearly 700,000. Compare that state to Florida, which has a population of nearly 21 million with 35 electors. Wyoming's electors would each represent more people per head than Florida's, making their electors more powerful. Moreover, the Electoral College, indirectly, generates "safe states," states that are so blue or red there's no point in campaigning in those states if a candidate is a part of the opposing party, and "swing states," states that are thinly divided between Democratic and Republican voters to such a point that they can determine the outcome of the election, vastly increasing their significance in the election and to the candidates in particular. Some examples of safe states include "ruby red" Alabama and Wyoming and "deep blue" California and New York. Swing states are more difficult to determine since their status is determined by populations consolidated in key districts; however, more recent swing states include Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Arizona as of the 2020 election. In effect, the EC creates a race that, instead of equally accounting for everyone's vote matters, allows for it is only a handful of states that truly determine the race, which can dissuade people in safe states from voting outright. Even after the election is called after a candidate reaches the 270-elector threshold, there is always the chance of a "faithless elector," whereby an elector chosen by a legislature who was intent on voting for the candidate a plurality of their state voted for votes for any other candidate. This is mainly due to a lack of regulations that require electors to vote based on the popular vote. These faithless electors are few and far between, yet they do present the potential issue of swinging an election away from the individual who won the popular vote.

As such, opponents have called for reform or outright abolition. In the latter case, efforts have been made to abolish the Electoral College going back to the 91st Congress via the Bayh-Celler Amendment. This had failed, but today, there is renewed effort to abolish the EC and instead replace it with a national popular vote via the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact of



1993, which requires 38 state legislatures to sign on to ratify it and abolish the EC. Other voices have called for reform, keeping the EC yet changing it to reflect populations more accurately, such as implementing a District-by-District plan, where districts within a state would vote for one elector, which would allow for the state to generate different electors for different candidates, thereby increasing competition within states. Then there is also the Lodge-Gossett amendment, which would've instituted proportional elector allocation, whereby the number of electors would be allocated based on the proportion of votes garnered by candidates (a candidate receiving 52% of the vote would receive 52% of the electors).

Proponents, however, argue that the Electoral College is doing exactly what the Founding Fathers had intended by ensuring bigger states do not overpower smaller states by giving them more representative electors. If the country were to switch to a popular vote, the states with larger populations (which happen to lean Democratic), would end up outweighing the states with much smaller populations (which happen to lean Republican), so having a system like the EC allows for those smaller states to keep pace with the larger states and keep them relevant. The Electoral College, arguably, also makes it easier for a presidential candidate to campaign, since it narrows the target states candidates would need to campaign in. Campaigning costs money that goes towards advertising and organizing events, among other campaigning strategies. If a candidate who leans Democratic had a limited budget of \$2 million, they would spend more time campaigning in states that are more competitive, such as Georgia, than a safe blue state like Virginia. Moreover, proponents would argue that, even if the Electoral College needed reform, it would take a constitutional amendment to change it, since the EC is constitutionally mandated. Seeing as it would take $\frac{2}{3}$ of each chamber to approve of the measure and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the states to ratify it or a constitutional convention to change the document, proponents could argue that it simply wouldn't be worth changing a system that has been used for the entire nation's history, especially considering the point of the College was to create a fine balance between big and small states.

Gerrymandering

Another electoral procedure that has caused controversy in the American political system revolves around the use of maps, specifically congressional districting. Per the Uniform Congressional District Act, representatives are to be elected from single-member districts,



whereby one official represents a segmented portion of a state containing a portion of that state's population. Every ten years, the United States Census is executed, which determines the population of the country as a whole, and more importantly in this section, the populations of each district in each of the 50 states and territories. The population of each state determines the number of representatives they send to the House, wherein they send, at minimum, 1 for every 30,000 citizens. Each Representative represents a district within a state, and they fluctuate depending on population movements over the course of ten years, which is what the Census intends on measuring. In effect, the Census helps determine how many representatives a state will have for the next ten years.

After the Census is tabulated and the data is returned, Congressional redistricting is put into motion based on that data. Redistricting involves the redrawing of each district (if there is more than one representative from that state), provided they retain the same population as the last district, are representative of the state population, and are contiguous. This is to ensure fairness in every citizen's vote and abide by federal statutes, namely the Voting Rights Act of 1965. There will be instances where states either gain or lose House seats because of population increases or decreases over the span of ten years, and this can empower or weaken states ability to influence the legislative process, though this is a natural course that occurs to various states.

What makes redistricting controversial is not the act in itself, but rather when it is used to gain a political advantage against an opposing party. This is known as *gerrymandering*.

Gerrymandering is a political tool that has its roots in the 1820s, when Eldridge Gerry (pronounced "Gary") redrew a district that looked like, to a colleague of his, a salamander. Another colleague clarified that it was a "gerrymander," (pronounced "Jerry-mander") hence the current use of the term. The rather silly origins of the phrase don't reflect the multifold implications gerrymandering has on the democratic process, of which there are many.

Districts are gerrymandered practically every time there is a redistricting opportunity (that is, every ten years); , however differentiating which districts are gerrymandered or not is difficult, as district drawing attempts to accomplish several objectives, such as keeping together certain communities to making the district as consolidated as possible. A notable example would be



Illinois's "Headphones" District, a moniker given to the state's 4th Congressional District in 2016 that has the appearance of headphones; this district aims to keep an African American community together with a Latin American community for the sake of consolidating a Democratic Bloc. One of the key reasons why gerrymandering is so prevalent is because state legislatures in a majority of states are charged with redrawing the districts after every census, both for Congressional districts and for state legislative districts, and in light of their partisan nature considering that these bodies are partisan, will do what it takes to aid their party in taking political power.

The objectives of gerrymandering are rather blunt: they are intent on giving the party drawing the lines an advantage in the state races and , perhaps even federal races, like on a higher profile case, in the House of Representatives, as gerrymandering a cCongressional dDistrict can sway the vote significantly in a state to the point where it can guarantee the results, giving the party additional seats from competitive districts and safeguarding other seats from challengers. State legislatures can also control the district drawing for their own state legislative districts as well, which can produce the same consequences as their control of congressional districts.

How gerrymandering can impact these votes derives from two distinct methods. One method is known as "packing," whereby the portions of the population that are more likely to oppose the party drawing the lines are consolidated into one or two districts. This will guarantee the safety of other candidates in other districts by separating those voters of the opposing party into a district that, while providing one representative for that party, will be outnumbered by representatives from the opposing party.

The other form of gerrymandering is known as "cracking," which is the diametric opposite of packing. Cracking splits voters of the opposing party among several districts. This, in practice, dilutes the power of numbers the opposing party may have in a district, thereby making districts on a broader scale more safe for incumbents or members of the allied party.



Then there is racial gerrymandering, wherein districts are redrawn to put a certain racial minority at a disadvantage. Under the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racial gerrymandering is illegal, as it is unlawful to implement district lines that would discriminate by race.

The implications of gerrymandering extend to how unrepresentative the final votes can be in a gerrymandered state, and how it may result in a slate of Representatives that did not reflect the actual vote. As is discerned from the effects of packing and cracking, gerrymandering can minimize the voting power of citizens in the state. A greater consequence lies in the translation of the votes into who is elected, as gerrymandering can result in lopsided election results that heavily favor one party over another. An example would be in 2014, where 40% of voters voted for Democratic candidates, yet when the election results were tabulated, nearly 75% (12/16) of the districts in Ohio at the time sent Republicans to the House (PBS).

Although it is argued one party may gerrymander more than the other, the fact of the matter is both parties gerrymander in the states that they control, and there have been calls to reform how redistricting is carried out, with the most common being the establishment of an independent commission to oversee the redrawing process. In 2022, seven⁷ states used independent, apolitical commissions for congressional districts, while 14 states use independent commissions for legislative districts, with five of these being staffed by politicians five⁵ of which were staffed by politicians. Arguments for the increased use of independent commissions revolve around how they are able to increase competitiveness and thus increase the value of the individual vote in legislative races at the state and federal levels.; In effect, they make elections fairer. However, opponents say that the use of non-partisan commissions to redistrict is unconstitutional as it precludes the state legislature from retaining a “substantive role” in this part of the elections process as is outlined in the Elections Clause of the Constitution. Opponents argue that using independent groups, not politicians, to draw voting districts is against the Constitution. They say it stops state legislatures from having a “substantive role” in the process, which they believe the Constitution's Elections Clause guarantees. However, in 2015, a Supreme Court ruling 5-4 overruled this argument in 2015 in the case *Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission*. A stronger argument against independent commissions is that they are not as open about their work as state legislatures. This is because commission members are



appointed, not elected, so it is harder for citizens to know what they are thinking compared to elected officials who are directly accountable to the voters. Another, likely more potent, argument is that independent commissions are not as transparent as state legislatures in their redistricting since they are headed by individuals who were not elected by the people but instead appointed, and thereby citizens would not know the intentions of these civil servants than the elected representatives that adhere directly to the people.

Campaign Finance: Citizens United, PACs, Super PACs and Lobbyists

According to voters, another issue with the American elections process that voters decry is the process by which politicians finance their campaigns for election (or re-election).

American elections at the federal level can reach millions of dollars, and politicians, especially Congressional incumbents, spend each day campaigning while they represent their constituents. As a result, **challengers** and **incumbents** alike must contend with each other to raise, and ultimately outraise, each other in order to win.

The process for financing campaigns is overseen by the Federal Elections Commission (**FEC**), whose stated mission is to “promote confidence and participation in the democratic process.” They oversee the process by tabulating how much candidates and **political action committees (PACs)** gross from donors, whom they receive funds from, how they spend it, and setting limits on that income and expenditure. They receive and publish this information as a result of government regulations requiring candidates and PACs to disclose their incoming funds from contributors. The FEC defines contributions as “anything of value given, loaned or advanced to influence a federal election,” and these include money (transacted in cash, check, etc), loans, in-kind contributions (products offered at lower than market value), cryptocurrencies, earmarked contributions, and other types. Each of these is limited in value per federal statutes and FEC regulations.



Political campaigns are financed mainly through private connections, meaning that candidates raise funds on their own time, using personally organized events and fundraisers to finance their ventures for office. They may also rely on private donors to raise funds or other contributions as well. Finally Additionally, candidates may approach political action committees (PACs) to receive funds.

Political Action Committees are organizations that, at the core of their operations, fund campaigns that align with their policy and/or ideological goals. PACs operate by consolidating contributions from campaigns and allocating them based on the significance of the race. There are two different types of PACs: Separate Segregated Funds, which are official committees organized by official parties, such as unions or corporations, who are limited to grossing funds from specifically associated parties; the other type is the nonconnected committee, which are unsponsored, unofficial action committees that can gross funds from the wider public. There are two kinds of PACs, or Political Action Committees. One type, called Separate Segregated Funds, are official groups set up by organizations like unions or businesses, and they can only raise money from people connected to that organization. The other type, nonconnected committees, are unofficial groups that are not sponsored by anyone, and they can raise money from anyone.

PACs, like private candidates, are limited in how much they are able to accumulate and allocate. These can be found on the FEC's official website.

There is a special kind of PAC that developed after 2010, known as **Super PACs**, which have no such limits to individual contributions. Super PACs, in effect, are able to accumulate as much money as they wish, yet are prohibited from donating directly to candidates or campaigns. Instead, they may fund independent actions in support of a candidate or campaign.

Super PACs, and indeed the wider criticism of the current campaign finance debate, were born as a result of the landmark Supreme Court case *Citizens United vs. The Federal Elections Commission*, which argued whether corporations had a right to donate to political campaigns on the basis of free speech. In a 5-4 majority, the Supreme Court concurred with Citizens United,



the conservative non-profit organization that brought the case, in saying that the prohibitions on corporate donations brought by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act were unconstitutional.

Arguments for and against campaign finance reform have since developed from the Citizens United case, with mostly conservative voices supporting the continued allowance of corporations, unions, and other special interest entities to donate to political campaigns. Their arguments are based on the idea that corporations should have the same free speech rights as individuals. Their arguments stem from the liberalization of the freedom of speech to include corporations. In general, however, detractors of campaign finance reform believe that reforms would be ineffective or counterproductive. They would be ineffective since the vast majority of Americans would not be able to contribute enough to hit the limits wealthier, more resourceful entities would, making it easier for the latter to influence elections without competition from grassroots organizations.; They would be counterproductive in that increasing or abolishing limits would give wealthier candidates more leeway and influence since they would be able to spend more money.; It might give challengers the ability to use the same avenues as incumbents when raising money, and it might not even stop independent spending outright if the donor is wealthy enough.

Proponents of campaign finance reform usually fall to the left of the spectrum, with progressives being the most prolific cohort that is calling for reform. They claim that because of Citizens United, the United States' democratic process has effectively been co-opted by corporations and other special interests, resulting in more policies that benefit them than the average American, with some even calling the process "oligarchical." They have've heralded different forms of reforms, with the most common being a transition to public funding of campaigns, whereby elections at all levels of government would be funded by matching small donor donations. A federal piece of legislation, the For The People Act, included a clause that includes small-dollar donations for Congressional elections in direct response to the Citizens United ruling. On the whole, proponents of reform claim that changing the campaign finance process would be able to give the average American more of a say when they are able to donate more to campaigns as they would be worth a greater stake to their candidate and as a result would be better represented.



Current Events and Strategies for Staying Up-To-Date

Importance of Being Informed

A knowledgeable general public contributes to a better society. Those who are uninformed are more susceptible to lies and manipulation when unable to think for themselves. Every day Americans are granted the right and responsibility to play a major role within our country through voting, activism, and public engagement. To effectively carry out these tasks, citizens must be well-informed on current events. The world is constantly changing, and people need to be able to keep up with what is happening.

How to be Informed

Thanks to the development of new technologies and forms of communication, people have many various opportunities of receiving information. The traditional forms of media like radio, newspapers, and television are slowly losing their dominance over the news. Online forms of publication like blogs, podcasts, and video-sharing platforms are gaining popularity with younger generations. Regardless of where you choose to receive your information, you must figure out how to best recognize and decipher between biases. A company or individual's personal bias can purposely and or unintentionally skew or portray information to fit a narrative or goal. Aspects of someone's background like identity, race, orientation, political affiliation, and occupation can influence how they deliver information.

For example, you find an article online about a candidate's shady past and how they are not fit for the role. The author could favor another candidate or another political party. The author intends to convince the reader that this candidate should not be voted for. A reader should recognize that the author is trying to our opinions and in doing so will portray the candidate in a bad light using the given information. The reader should be diligent in accessing the article and cross-checking all information by looking for another source to support the claims.

Steps for Accessing News for Bias

1. Read the article through once



2. Note the author, source of the news (company, platform), and date of publication
3. Read the article and find these key pieces of information
 - a. Who
 - b. What
 - c. Where
 - d. When
 - e. How
4. Consider the purpose of the author in writing article
5. Cross-check all the information with additional sources

Guided Activity: Accessing Media

Objective: Students will be able to utilize the information provided above to fill out a worksheet and discuss bias in media with their classmates.

Research

Using the steps and information provided above, students will now access three forms of media on a chosen topic. The class should all decide on a relevant topic that is timely and appropriate. Students have the choice between online articles, podcasts, videos, television, or radio.

After selecting their three forms of media, students should record the author, company, date and key pieces of information such as Who, What, Where, When, How?

Once the students have recorded this information, students must also record down the author's purpose. They need to propose possible reasons for bias among the information presented.

Students must provide at least three reasons why an author or company may be biased regarding the topic.

Example of Worksheet Layout

Topic:

1st Media:

Type:



Author:

Company:

Who, What, Where, When, How:

Author's Purpose:

1. Bias:
2. Bias:
3. Bias:

2nd Media

Type:

Author:

Company:

Who, What, Where, When, How:

Author's Purpose:

4. Bias:
5. Bias:
6. Bias:

3rd Media

Type:

Author:

Company:

Who, What, Where, When, How:

Author's Purpose:

7. Bias:
8. Bias:
9. Bias:

Discussion

After finishing research and filling out the sheet, students should conduct a class wide discussion about their findings. Every student should be encouraged to share as the teacher goes through the



worksheet asking every question of the students. The bias portion of the discussion should use the most time.

Civic Engagement Principles and How To Get Involved

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement is individual or collective action to identify, address, and solve issues in the community. This includes a range of different activities, like voter registration and online activism through social media, and can encompass both political and apolitical activities.

Civic engagement 101

Know the ecosystem. To be active in the community and make a difference through civic participation, you must understand how the system works. There is a network of organizations, institutions, industry experts, and stakeholders already in place— knowing how different entities work and collaborate will help you decide how you can contribute to the ecosystem. Whether it is by joining an existing community to bolster an urgent issue or establishing a new organization for an underfunded cause, one should always consider how one can enhance the current ecosystem.

Plan and prepare thoroughly. Although civic engagement can be light-hearted and personally motivating, it should be carefully planned and prepared for. Activities like contacting government officials or founding a local club require careful consideration of available resources including time and effort, responsibilities, and potential for impact.

Collaborate with a shared purpose. To move the community forward, one cannot do it alone. To build a community that we all can live in harmoniously and solve issues that affect the whole society, you should adopt a collaborative mindset and work with others towards a shared purpose. You should share your ideas and build upon other ideas through civil discourse and cooperation, encouraging diversity of opinions and ideas.



Champion diversity and inclusion. When you are in the civic sphere and working towards a particular goal, it is easy to believe that there is only one way of solving a problem or making a positive impact in the community. There are various ways to help the community, as there are different intensities or time commitments of engagement. For example, you can make sustained contributions to a community by joining a local organization, yet still, help the community by voting for a bill that impacts your State. The key is to be open to new ideas and pathways. Also, civic engagement should encourage demographic, racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender diversity, not merely by acknowledging them, but by working towards the representation of all peoples. When deciding how to engage in civic action, making diversity and inclusion a priority or at least a consideration is crucial to making a positive impact on everyone.

Evaluate impact and potential. Although civic engagement cannot always be quantified or measured, any activity you do should yield or have the potential to make an impact. You should also consider if the civic activity is causing any harm or has unintended consequences, or whether the resources and efforts could be used elsewhere more effectively. Evaluating the process and outcome of your actions can help improve the quality of your civic engagement. This also translates into learning and growing in the process.

How to Get Involved: A few examples

Participating in the Electoral Process

There are many ways to participate in the electoral process, such as making the electoral process more effective or influencing other people's votes or decisions. This can include registering to vote, eliminating or minimizing barriers to participation including structural obstacles or cynicism through campaigning, and sending letters or emails to local/state representatives.

Volunteering for Campaigns/Local Offices

One of the ways you can be active in advocacy or political work is by volunteering for campaigns, local offices, or political organizations that support a cause you care about. By



volunteering, you can get hands-on experience in working with advocates and making policy decisions for a particular cause.

Getting Involved with Student Government

College campuses are great places to start voicing your opinions and building solutions as a team. It is also an opportunity to learn more about how your school operates and how you can help enhance student learning experiences, school participation, and other aspects of the school and beyond into the local, state, national, and even global community in collaboration with other student governments and education stakeholders.

Starting/Participating in Clubs

Civic engagement does not need to be big. It can be organized on a smaller scale in a school or local context and still generate social impact for the community. Clubs and societies can cover a wide range of topics including environmental activism, public discourse, and domestic violence. Founding and participating in a club for a particular cause simply starts with a common interest, particularly how it intersects with social impact. After defining the club's purpose and goals, the club can hold meetings, assign roles and responsibilities, plan events, or contribute to the larger community in any other creative way.

Online/Physical Activism

You may have seen protests on the streets or social media posts advocating for a certain cause before. These are a few examples of how you can engage in online or physical activism in your local/national community. Internet activism includes using social media to express your thoughts and call for action, sending emails to key stakeholders like government officials and industry representatives, or even creating a podcast to spread awareness and educate the public. You can also be an activist in the physical space by leading or participating in demonstrations and protests, but also boycotting certain products or businesses engaging in exploitative practices, joining labor strikes in support of safer conditions for workers, and writing letters and petitions to pressure “public officials, corporations, and other power-holders”.



Being on the Local Education Board

If you see any specific problems in your community that you want to address and fix, becoming a member of the school board in your district may be a good opportunity. A school district is governed by a school board, and these members represent their community and try to meet the community's educational needs. School/education board members are elected by their community and have responsibilities like improving student achievement and opportunities.

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Capstone Project

Student Handout: Capstone Project

Introduction



America is more polarized than ever before. On Capitol Hill, party loyalty takes precedence, preventing compromise and hindering legislative progress. In order to solve today's policy issues, the divides separating political ideologies must be broken down.; Rreaching a complete agreement is unrealistic, but it is feasible to achieve a consensus on the facts and capitalize on common ground. Essentially, that is the goal of YIP's civics education curriculum, and this capstone project will provide the platform to apply the skills and knowledge gained throughout this course to directly challenge today's polarization.

Requirements

Project Theme: Breaking Barriers

Aligning with this theme, students will develop a capstone project that will either:

- 1) Address a societal topic they're passionate about, preferably relating to the extent of civil liberties, and mitigate the polarization surrounding that topic OR
- 2) Address a root cause for today's polarization and offer a potential solution

Students will have the freedom to present their project in a medium of their choice. Appropriate mediums include, but are not limited to:

Fine Art:

- *Political Cartoon/Comic:* Political cartoons are often used to comedic a situation or poke fun at another side with opposing views. This medium, however, will challenge students to create political cartoons that would bring people together. Students are required to include a minimum of six panels in their comics.
- *Animation:* Students will create a two minute (or longer) animated film on their topic.

Written:

- *Blog:* Students will write a minimum of four potential blog posts on their topic.
- *Research Paper:* Students will develop a thesis, collect information or data to support (or refute their thesis), analyze their findings and present their insights in a research paper (minimum of five pages).

Media:

- *Podcast:* Students will record a minimum of two podcast episodes on their topic.
- *Short Film:* Students will develop a three minute (or longer) film on their topic.



- *Website:* Design (or code!) a website centered around your topic. The website can include information, a social media account, and other interactive components.
- *Social Media Campaign:* Students will develop a social media page using either of the following platforms: Instagram, Twitter or TikTok. Students are required to create a minimum of either seven Instagram posts, seven threads on Twitter, or five TikTok videos. In a two-page paper, they will provide an overview of their toolkit, outline its potential in engaging people, and describe its effectiveness in political advocacy and mitigating polarization.

If you wish to pursue a different medium, please discuss other options with your teacher.

In addition to the completed capstone project, students will submit a short reflection (unless you choose to write a research paper, in which case no additional reflection is required). The reflection should address the following:

- A description of the project and its purpose
- Skills learned and challenges faced in the execution of the project
- Future steps for implementing or continuing the project

Timeframe

It is suggested that the capstone project be completed in a period of five weeks. If time permits, classroom time can be provided to complete the project; however, it is expected that students work on the project outside of class.

To assist in pacing, multiple project phases with checkpoints are provided, allowing students to receive feedback from the teacher throughout the process..

Phase 1: Project Planning

Time: Three Days

This phase encompasses selecting a topic, selecting a medium, and developing a project plan.

Addressing a Societal Issue



If pursuing this option, students should first **identify a unique, thorough topic they are passionate about**. This topic should relate to the idea of civil liberties, or rights that the government cannot suppress. While the topic does not have to be a civil liberty itself, it should attempt to make a claim regarding the government’s proper role in the issue. For example, a project exploring the Affordable Care Act could ask the following questions: What is the government’s role in ensuring access to healthcare? Should healthcare be considered a civil liberty? Additionally, see the table below for assistance in choosing a specific topic.

Identifying a Topic	Too Broad?	Too Specific?	Just Right!
Can I form a personal connection with this topic? Is this topic interesting? Am I motivated to learn more about it? Does it align with other areas I’m passionate about?	“Too Broad” topics include Environment Policy, Social Reform, etc. These are wide, umbrella topics that can hold a variety of subcategories.	“Too Specific” topics include Paris Climate Agreement, SNAP program, etc. These are specific programs that may not be able to sustain an entire project.	Examples include Climate Change, United States Hunger Programs, etc.

Addressing a Cause for Polarization

Here, students will be **hypothesizing a cause for polarization** (i.e. party loyalty) and **suggest potential solutions** (i.e. open discussion) to mitigate that polarization. This path is suitable for a research paper, as surveys and literary research can be conducted to either validate or refute the hypothesis.

Next, students should select a medium for their project – a selection based on individual skills. After, a simple project plan will be developed (for teacher review) encompassing the following items:

- Statement describing project
- Medium
- Potential Topics for Discussion (Subtopics)
- New Skills to Learn
- Steps Needed to Complete Project



An additional day can be taken for teacher feedback, if needed.

Phase 2: Research & Rough Draft

Time: Two Weeks

Conducting Research

Students will conduct research in preparation for their project. Sources will be compiled into a bibliography, with sources cited in MLA format. When reading articles or gaining background information, it is important to consider biases present in the source (as outlined in previous guided activities).

Rough Draft

This part will vary depending on the project medium. The aim is not to have a fully-fledged product, but rather a framework for the final project (or, a collection of thoughts and ideas that can be revised later).

The following table can help solidify rough draft expectations:

Content	Evidence	Engagement	Relation to Prompt
Project includes a variety of ideas.	Project backs up claims using facts and cited sources in MLA format.	Project attracts the viewer's attention using visual, written or auditory elements.	Project answers selected prompt.
Goes beyond portraying known facts by incorporating original insight and commentary.	Presented evidence is non-biased and non-partisan.	Project connects to real-world subject matter, making readers care about the topic at hand.	Project attempts to mitigate polarization either by covering a specific topic or proposing a remedy for the polarized political climate.
	Trustworthy sources are used.	Project employs pathos, logos and/or ethos.	



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After, the teacher will provide feedback on rough drafts.

Phase 3: Revisions

Time: One Week

Students will incorporate the feedback they have received to improve their project. The final product should begin to come together. Questions to consider when revising:

- Are my points clear and understandable?
- Do I have enough detail?
- Is my project engaging? (Is it visually appealing?)

The teacher will provide any further feedback, as needed or as requested by the student.

Phase 4: Presentation

Time: One Week

Students will make any final changes to their project before submitting. They will also write their reflection (outlined in requirements) and prepare a works cited page. A tutorial on how to cite sources can be accessed [here](#).

OPTIONAL: Teachers can have students sharepresent their projects to the class, in which a class period would be reserved for student presentations.



Capstone Project: Medium Resources

Blog

This resource, accessible [here](#), serves as a crash course on how to start a blog. It includes a variety of tips and information, ranging from how to write a blog post to launching a full-fledged blog on the Internet. Blogs are an excellent platform to express thoughts, influence opinions, and connect with an audience.

Podcast

This resource, accessible [here](#), provides helpful tips on how to record a podcast and share it with the world.

Website Development

- Platforms to develop a website (no code)
- Resources on developing a website with code
- Tips for creating a website
- Helpful tutorials and videos

Research Paper

- Format of a research paper
- Conducting surveys and collecting data
- Drawing conclusions

Capstone Project Resources: Starting a Blog

Blogs are a special work of art; in an informal way, they convey what the writer is feeling to a large audience in a conversational tone. Indeed, blogs are a meaningful way to form connections with readers and can be used to influence perspectives as a result. The YIP capstone project hence challenges you to leverage the power of a blog to change readers' views regarding the



current landscape of political polarization – this resource page will give you the toolkit needed in order to do just that!

Writing a Blog Post

The Gist: Unlike traditional pieces of academic writing, blogs are meant to be informal and conversational. While a blog conveys information, it also conveys the writer’s *opinions*. A blog post is a way to empty out your heart, tug at people’s heartstrings, and form connections with your audience.

Length & Structure: Blog posts vary in length, and there is no fixed rule. In terms of structure, blog posts don’t necessarily have to be structured like an essay (i.e. with an introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion). However, it is good practice to organize your ideas so that a reasonable flow and pace are maintained throughout the post. For instance, you may want to begin by engaging your readers with a thoughtful anecdote, briefly mention the forthcoming ideas that you intend to discuss, and then build upon those ideas throughout the blog. Additionally, headers and subheaders are useful to section parts of your blog post; they also provide an easy way for readers to access the information they’re looking for. In order to be successful, though, headers should be concise, convey some information and be somewhat engaging. Another important rule to remember: each sentence should connect nicely to the next!

Evidence: If you’re making a claim in your post, use evidence to back it up! If you mention a fact or statistic, hyperlink the website, book or resource associated with it. At the end of the blog, you can formally cite your sources in a bibliography. Furthermore, even though a blog is centered around individual viewpoints, keep the evidence *objective*. Don’t twist facts or words; state everything as it is and use subsequent sentences to agree with, disagree with, or position evidence in the context of your argument.

Personability: Don’t be afraid to use pronouns like I, you, we, our etc. Blogs are informal, and using pronouns can establish a conversational tone. (Take this resource as an example – doesn’t it feel like I’m talking directly *to* you, rather than *at* you?). Including images, references to



universal subjects, comedic topics, and connections to people's lives can help achieve personability and make readers *care* about your topic.

Sample Blog Post: Want to see some sample blog posts? Check out Informal Politics' [Website](#).

Here is a blog post from their website:

“Indonesia”: The case for Electoral Reform

There are many reasons to admire Indonesia for its 2019 national elections. These elections were the largest one-day elections in the world. Despite some glitches and disputes, the implementation of the elections went relatively well. These elections showed that support for democracy is strong in Indonesia. In a world where democracy seems to be in retreat, this is something to celebrate.

Yet these elections also generated a debate about whether Indonesia's electoral system need reforms. The immediate spark was the death of over 500 local election organizers. Most of them died of exhaustion, due to the complex challenge of overseeing five simultaneous elections – for president, three parliaments and the DPD. This sparked discussions about whether these elections should all be held simultaneously, and whether electronic voting should be implemented.

There is a long history of tinkering with Indonesia's electoral system. To name just a few of the most important reforms: the adoption of direct elections for president (in 2001) and district heads and governors (in 2004), the shift from an open to a closed list as a manner of allocating parliamentary seats in 2009 and the gradual raising of the threshold for a party to gain a seat in parliament to, currently, 4 percent. Regular reforms are not necessarily a bad thing: it makes sense to learn from experience, particularly for a new democracy like Indonesia's.

*Yet so far these reform attempts left an important problem off the agenda. So far these reforms have not focused on reducing the costs of election campaigns. They focused on other goals, such as curtailing the number of parties. As a result these reforms have actually increased the costs of election campaigns. Over the last six years I studied Indonesia's elections for book that I recently published together with Edward Aspinall, entitled *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism**



and the State in Indonesia. We found that these campaign costs have now reached a level that seriously affects the quality of both Indonesia's government and its democracy. The current discussions about electoral reform need to be broadened: electoral reforms should also attempt to reduce the role of money in Indonesia's democracy.

Why money is a problem

The problems posed by Indonesia's high-cost elections are becoming increasingly obvious. Not just to observers, but also to politicians themselves. I came across many politicians who, like 'Syarif' – a candidate for vice-mayor in Tangerang – complain about the contradictory challenges they face: "People tell us, you cannot be corrupt, you have to be clean. But on the other hand, they always ask us for money, without thinking about how the leader will get the money. And if the leader gets the money from forbidden areas, they will be angry."

*Syarif nicely summed up the impossible situation in which many politicians find themselves. On the one hand politicians need to be willing and able to hand out money and gifts. The practice of 'vote buying' of serangan fajar has become widespread, particularly in local parliamentary and district head elections. Candidates feel that, in order to be taken seriously, they need to hand out community gifts as well as envelopes of money. In a recent book *Vote Buying in Indonesia*, political scientist Burhan Muhtadi used opinion polls to estimate that about 33 percent of all Indonesian voters experienced vote buying in 2014 – a figure that ranks Indonesia among the highest in the world. He also found that this practice is rapidly intensifying. Just imagine the mindboggling amount of money involved when last month many of the 245.000 (!) candidates handed out money to 33 percent of Indonesia's 192 million voters.*

And vote buying is merely one of many campaign expenses. Politicians generally also have to pay a hefty mahar politik, the payment candidates make to political parties to get their support. And then politicians have to spend money to build a tim sukses, organize campaign events and pay for witnesses at polling booths. For our book, we asked over 500 political experts from across Indonesia to give an estimate of campaign expenditures. With considerable regional variation, they estimated that, on average, a winning district head spends about 28 billion rupiah, and an elected governor about 166 billion rupiah.



This money needs to be recovered. As Syarif implicitly acknowledged, in these circumstances it is very difficult for politicians to avoid stealing state money. The high costs of election campaigns are fueling corruption and, as a consequence, limit the budgets available for improving public services, welfare, infrastructure etc. High costs elections do not only ensure that many politicians end up in jail, they also damages the quality of life of ordinary Indonesians. A second negative effect of the high-cost of elections is that it leads to political inequality: if you do not have a lot of money or rich backers you stand little chance of winning elections. This is why Indonesia's democracy is often tainted as being oligarchic: the high costs of elections enable economic elites to dominate politics.

A third reason to worry about campaign costs is that it fuels disillusionment with democracy. Politics risks being seen as an affair for greedy, corrupt people. A vicious circle is currently at work: as people consider their politicians to be corrupt, they demand more vote buying during elections, which in turn forces politicians to become even more corrupt. Disillusionment might give rise to an Indonesian Payuth Chan-Ocha or Duterte, who scale back democracy in the name of curtailing corruption.

What can be done?

It does not have to be this way. Election campaigns do not have to be so extravagantly expensive. Yes, vote buying has its roots in cultural and economic conditions. These cannot be changed easily or quickly. But the current high-costs elections also have their roots in Indonesia's electoral system. A consensus is growing, for example, that the decision of Indonesia's constitutional court in 2009 to use an open list proportional voting system for parliamentary elections greatly intensified vote buying. Under this system, parliamentary seats are not allocated on the basis of the position of a candidate on a party list of candidates (as in a 'closed list system') but purely on the number of votes a candidate receives. While well intentioned, the effect of this reform has been that candidates of the same party are now competing among themselves. Candidates from the same party are trying to outspend each other.

A second problem with Indonesia's electoral system is that it weakens political parties in significant ways. The candidate-centered nature of the electoral system forces candidates to run



personal campaigns rather than engaging in party-led, collaborative efforts – something which could reduce campaign costs. Furthermore, the election supervision board Bawaslu is relatively powerless to catch and prosecute vote buying practices. With a stronger legal mandate Bawaslu could become more effective in deterring politicians from handing out money.

These are just three examples of how changes in the electoral system might curtail campaign costs. By addressing these issues, electoral reform could reduce the role of money in elections to more healthier proportions. I am not saying that such reforms would be easy. These issues are complex, and changing the electoral system could have all sorts of unintended consequences. It would require a careful and thoughtful process, a process that should build on a detailed understanding of the incentive structure that politicians currently face.

I am saying, however, that such an effort to reduce the role of money is well worth the effort. Achieving lower-cost elections would be a very big victory: cheaper election campaigns could lead to lower levels of corruption, higher budgets to improve public services and a healthier democracy with equal opportunities for rich and poor candidates alike. That deserves to be on the top of the agenda.”

Platforms to Get Started

Blogging is a popular hobby, which means that there are a variety of platforms to get started. For this capstone project, you'll be assessed more on the quality of your blog posts rather than on what platform you choose. However, in case you want to continue your blog later on, considering platforms can be helpful. As everyone has different preferences and skill sets, there is no one-size-fits-all platform. See this [website](#) and this [website](#) for top blogging platforms of 2022. A condensed summary is listed below:

WordPress.com

- Blogging and website development platform.
- Allows for complete control and design over the website.
- Many tutorials available; free domain hosting with Wordpress.com is available.

Wix.com

- Accessible, drag-and-drop interface (some limited functionalities)



- Free hosting

Medium.com

- No development/setup required
- Write for publications on Medium, and for Medium's in-built audience
- Extremely limited customization

Capstone Project Resources: Starting a Podcast

Podcasts combine together the auditory of a video with the long form delivery style of a common essay or presentation. Students who consider themselves to be great speakers who enjoy delivering their ideas may enjoy this medium on presentation. Those who opt to create a podcast for their capstone project are required to submit at least two six minute episodes on their topic along with a written script for each episode.

Steps to Create an Effective Podcast

1. Plan out the direction of the podcast

Each episode in your podcast should help to explain your project and how your societal issue relates to the extent of civil liberties or polarization. A student can accomplish this by connecting each episode together beforehand to ensure their final project is cohesive. Before beginning the podcast, construct an episode planning document.

An possible episode planner could look like this:

Episode Planner Ex.

Episode # ____: _____

- Main Topic(s):

-
-
-

- Secondary Topic(s)



- Connection to previous episode &/ Final Project

2. Create a script

Students will have several ideas for each episode now after planning and need to know how to best express them. After planning, before recording, create a script for the episode. The amount of detail in the script can vary depending on the students preferences. Every single word can be written down to guarantee all points are made and the time is allotted well, or quick phrases with transitions and guiding ideas can make a looser script. Regardless of which a student chooses, having a script before starting will help the process.

3. Begin Recording the Podcast

After completing the initial planning guides, a student should be equipped with the needed tools to successfully complete their podcast. Now, they may choose from any platform to begin.

Possible student friendly beginner platforms are:

- We Videos: A free to use video editing software that allows users to create and edit podcasts using their microphone and a collective of sample music, audio, and sound effects. (For creating the podcast not publishing to a platform.)
- Garageband: A more sound oriented program than the previous, garageband gives users the ability to record, edit, mix, and construct their podcast using their various sound features and audio samples. Garageband is free to use, however, is only available on IOS (Apple) devices.
- Anchor- Create and post podcasts on anchor for free using their user-friendly editing software and platform. Anchor would allow students to use one single platform for everything relating to their project rather than one to edit and another to publish.
- Podcast- An Apple based platform to publish podcasts.
- Spotify- A free platform to publish podcasts.



Following these steps will allow students to successfully create and publish a podcast for their capstone project. So, remember to speak clearly and effectively and most importantly, have fun with this creative project medium.

Capstone Project Resources: Launching a Website

Why Are Websites Effective?

Websites are an effective medium of communication and to share information. As students complete their capstone project, they can interact with their audience through the most prominent platform with 5.03 billion people – the World Wide Web. Websites are useful because they are available 24/7 to share information. There are many page layouts and structures that students can use to best display information related to their capstone project. Websites can be used as a hub to share other important links, such as social media handles, blog articles, and supplementary resources.

Steps to Create an Effective Website

With the increasing popularity of website development, it has become easier to create your own website within the last few years. Follow the below steps to create an effective website:

1. *Create a wireframe for your website.* What is your goal? Who is your audience? Why are you sharing this information? These are a few questions to consider when crafting your website. Once answering these questions, you can create a wireframe. A wireframe is a schematic of the skeleton framework of your website. They can be done on paper, using Google Slides or Powerpoint, or Figma (a free website). Create a layout for every page of your website, including different features you would like to include.
2. *Write the information for your website.* On a document, write the information you would like to include on your website based on your wireframes. This way, once you start to develop your website, you can easily copy and paste the information where it needs to be



placed. Also, attach links to this document that you would like to include on your website, as a button or as a text feature.

3. *Decide how you will create your website.* There are two ways to create a website. If a student has coding experience with HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, they can code their own website. On the other hand, there are many website builders such as Squarespace, Wix, Google, etc. Many of these websites have pre-made templates so users can easily input their data and information.
4. *Decide on a color theme and format.* If you are coding your website, you can create the website based on your specific wants and needs. However, if you are using a website builder, pick from the various options and add pages that align with your wireframes. Typically, you may adapt the pages as you see fit and change the color scheme as needed. Ensure that the color scheme appropriately matches your project and attempt to pick colors that will best appeal to your users. Color psychology can affect how viewers perceive your website. As you create your website, take a marketing approach and consider how businesses and name brands have associated themselves with certain colors.
5. *Create a navigation bar.* Based on the pages that you have chosen to have on your website, create a navigation bar that allows users to access all pages easily. It is important to make sure that your website is clean and easy to navigate.
6. *Copy and paste text into your website.* Now that you have designed your website and have a format that you are happy with, it is time to put information into your website. Place the text that you have earlier written into your website in the places aligning with your wireframe.
7. *Add interactive elements to your website.* Add buttons, quizzes, and photos to your website to make it more appealing and captivating. There are resources available to embed your own quizzes into websites that you can create surrounding your capstone project theme. Quizzes can be coded by hand or a template can be used on website builders.
8. *Show your website to a peer, mentor, or family member.* By asking someone who has never viewed your site, they can give you first hand feedback on how they think you can improve your website for the general viewer.



9. *Get a domain name & publish your website.* Choose a domain name strategically; make sure that it can be found easily by users. If you have the funds, register a domain name and publish your website. Otherwise, most website builders will allow you to share your website using their domain name and on their platform.

What to Include on the Website

There are many different pages and functions students can include on their website. All websites should have a “Home” page. This is the introductory page of your website and should capture a viewer's attention. The page should be clean and it should be easy to navigate to the other pages.

Also, a blog is an option to include on a website. A blog page should consist of a preview of various articles and there should be buttons that viewers can click on to view the entirety of the content. A portfolio page can be included with photos, links to resources, and more information. An “About Me” page can highlight your personal passion towards the topic and your credibility in regards to the topic. Depending on the type of website you create and the goals for your website, there are many other pages you can include beyond the ideas listed here.

SEO

SEO, or Search Engine Optimization, is the process of improving your website’s visibility on the World Wide Web. SEO affects where your website shows up on the list when someone searches for a particular thing. By identifying what keywords are most important to your audience, you can determine a content strategy to best appeal to your target audience. Updating and republishing content also helps improve your website’s SEO.

Resources To Get Started

Squarespace - <https://www.squarespace.com/>

Wix - <https://www.wix.com/>

Weebly - <https://www.weebly.com/>

WordPress - <https://wordpress.com/>



Capstone Project Resources: Creating a Short Film/Animation

Why are short films an effective type of media?

Short films are an inexpensive medium to share your voice with others through an informative or narrative video. Many short films have important messages and aim to enlighten or persuade people towards a certain cause. Oftentimes, filmmakers will showcase their pieces at a film festival. With the age of shortened attention spans and hustle culture, short films are more digestible to audiences. Also, short films can be more captivating to audiences versus essays and written modes of medium.

How can I get started?

The best way to learn what qualities make a good short film is to watch short films! There are many short film platforms where you can watch short films for free. Pay attention to how it's filmed, where it's filmed, the message it's trying to convey, the video editing, etc. Look for certain techniques you can apply to your film.

Steps to Create a Short Film:

1. *Make sure you have a good quality camera and editing software.* With the advanced technical age of our contemporary world, phone cameras typically work well, especially for a low-budget film. A tripod will be helpful to keep your camera steady. There are many free editing softwares such as iMovie (Apple), Openshot (Chromebook), Windows Movie Editor (Windows).
2. *Write and formulate an objective.* Before you can start working on your project, you must have a clear goal in mind! Ask yourself these questions: What is the most important concept I want watchers to obtain from watching this video? How can I portray my objective in my short film in a clear and concise way?
3. *Write a script.* If you are a novice filmmaker, make your script and storyline simple. This will prevent watchers from becoming confused or not grasping your main objective.



Even though this is a short film, all films have a beginning, middle, and end. However, get to your point quickly. As this film will be approximately two minutes, you want to spend the bulk of the film on your main objective. Also, spend time adding visuals and symbolism to your film.

4. *Create storyboards.* Storyboards are a graphical representation of the timeline of your short film. They depict a simplified version of the story film through a roadmap. Each scene is drawn in a box. Some written notes may also be included. Storyboards are utilized to organize your thoughts, share your ideas, and identify problems early on.
5. *Determine actors and filming locations.* Based on the locations you have available and the feasibility of your project, find filming locations and recruit people to help you film or be in the video. While scouting out locations, ensure there are no potential problems, such as bad lighting and sound.
6. *Prepare for filming day.* Create a schedule for filming day. How many days will you be shooting? What time of day should your scenes be at? What is the availability of the cast (and crew)? While setting a schedule, determine what order you would like to shoot the scenes in and hold rehearsals.
7. *Film.* Today's the day that all of your hard work pays off! Follow the film plan, however it is okay to deviate from it if your plans change or problems arise. Make sure to shoot multiple of each scene, so that you have clips to choose from during the editing process.
8. *Edit the film.* Upload the scenes into a folder on your laptop and start editing using the editing software that you have selected. Place the shots in order (tip: name the file with the number scene) to see how the video will pan out. Then, add music/sound effects, transitions, and cut out parts that do not add anything to your film's message. Review the film with the cast and crew or other individuals and receive feedback on how to improve the editing.
9. *Showcase your film!* After the editing is completed, it's time to share your films with others. If you are inclined to, share your short film within film communities or at a film festival. You can find local film festivals or communities through a quick internet search!



Animation

If you would prefer to do animation instead of a live action film, many of these steps will still apply. Follow Steps #1-4 above. The steps below are specific to animation.

5. *Create the animatics.* Animatics are similar to storyboards, but are more in depth of how the film will look. Create a video of your panels to obtain a general idea of what the film would like.
6. *Create the background layout.* Depending on the field size of your scenes, create a background for each scene. You may reuse backgrounds if some scenes take place in the same location with the same field size.
7. *Develop dope sheets.* Dope sheets help with the timing of your animation and give instructions to the camera operator describing how the scene should be shot. They allow the animator to organize their thoughts.
8. *Create the animation using layers.* Draw the rough poses of the characters. Then, clean up the drawings and determine what type of line art you will use (ie normal line vs cartoon line).
9. *Add in betweens to your animation.* Inbetweens (or tweening) help to create a smooth animation. Less inbetweens can be used in action scenes. Typically, animation softwares will have resources and tools to add create in between animations.
10. *Digital ink and paint the characters and backgrounds.* This will help create additional depth and color. Toon Boom and Photoshop are helpful resources.
11. *Composite the film.* Add all of the elements into one scene using the animation software of your choice. Then, you can put your movie together!
12. Refer to Step #9 from Steps to Create a Short Film!

Works Cited

“How to Make a Short Film: Things You Should Know.” *NFI*.

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Capstone Project Resources: Launching a Social Media Campaign

In this increasingly digital age, social media is an effective tool in rapid communication and information sharing. Students who are more technologically savvy with a love for expressing their ideas through various mediums may prefer this presentation method. Those who opt for creating a social media campaign will have the choice between three platforms with specific guidelines for the number and quality of posts.

Internet Safety

While it can be a helpful tool, there are still some dangers to using social media. Students should take precautions when creating their account and be mindful of the information they provide. Unless stated otherwise by the teacher, students can make their pages private instead of public. All posts, comments, and content should be in compliance with school policy and serve as an appropriate representation of the student.

Accessibility

To ensure the pages created by students are beneficial to all, students should be mindful of accessibility. All videos posted including Tiktoks and Reels should contain closed captions in the video. Pictures should be accompanied by captions including a description of the picture for screen readers. All graphics created should use readable font styles and sizes, compatible color combinations, and at least one picture.



Twitter

Twitter is a social networking app based mainly around short form text, tweets and collection of tweets, threads. All tweets have a limit of 280 characters. Threads have no limit and a thread can be made up of several tweets. For these projects, students must have at least seven threads posted onto their page. Each thread should contain at least one visual graphic either a picture or video.

Twitter is also more interactive than other social networks, with the tweets of others appearing on your page through replies, retweets, and likes. As part of this project, students should also follow and interact with at least ten pages related to or beneficial to their topic like new pages or non-profits.

Instagram

Instagram is an app based around pictures, however has largely expanded to include various means of posting. Students will be required to use all of its possible features. All pages should have at least seven posts with at least 2 infographics, 2 videos, and 1 original student picture. Infographics should apply by the accessibility guidelines listed above. Every infographic should include at least 3 slides not including the required slide dedicated to posting all sources used. All videos should be at least 2 minutes in length and include citations in the caption. Students should try to take their own pictures to incorporate into their infographic and page. Any pictures or videos used from other sources should be credited. Instagram captions have a limit of 2,200 characters, so for all post students should make use of at least half of this limit.

Tiktok

Tiktok is a short video sharing platform. Videos can range from 15 seconds to 3 minutes using popular audios and effects. When making their tiktok page, students should post at least 5 videos a minute and a half or longer in length. Two videos should incorporate current trends or audio to present their information.



Planning

Regardless of which medium students choose to use to create their social media campaign, planning is necessary. Before beginning any page students should make outlines for each post. Depending on the type of content the outline will vary. TikTok and Instagram videos may require scripts. Infographics may require plans for formatting, information, and graphics. All captions and tweets should be outlined including main topics and details. While students are not required to submit any of these planning guides to their teacher, they should consider using them to ease the process of making their social media campaign.

Regardless of what platform students choose to make their social media campaign, they should ensure the product they create is creative, informative, and a representation of their best work.

Capstone Project Resources: Writing a Research Paper

What is a Research Paper?

A research article is an academic paper that presents the results of an experimental or theoretical research. Its main purpose is to expose the results of a study in the field of the speciality. Within the field of political research, it is necessary to establish, from the observation of the facts of political reality, explanations as accurate as possible about its functioning.

In this capstone project, the student must fulfill one of the following objectives:

1. Address a societal topic they're passionate about, preferably relating to the extent of civil liberties, and mitigate the polarization surrounding that topic.
2. Address a root cause for today's polarization and offer a potential solution.



By choosing this medium, the student will develop a thesis, collect information or data to support or refute their thesis, as well as analyze their findings and present their insights in a document with a minimum of five pages.

Steps to write a Research Paper

1. Choose a topic.

Make a loose but tentative list of possible topics of interest. Choose historically discussed and debated topics, so that you have more primary and secondary sources available.

Research your topic(s) of interest extensively before you start writing, and make sure there is enough empirical information to support your assumptions throughout the paper.

2. State your thesis.

Once you have defined your topic, you must align yourself to a specific position, preferably the one with the most information. Your thesis should present a situation that shows a relationship between two or more variables, which involves empirical evidence and the possibility of observation. It can be an interpretation, evaluation, opinion, proposition, or a cause-effect statement. It should ensure that your topic is open to discussion.

3. Outline key ideas.

Since the thesis is already established, now you must list the key topics, arguments, and evidence you want to include, preferably divided into sections with headings so you know roughly what the paper will look like before you start writing. The following structure is exclusively a suggestion, however, you are encouraged to elaborate a new one in accordance to the volume of information you are aiming to include.



Suggested structure:

- Introduction
 - Opening statement
 - Preliminary research
 - Thesis statement
- Body
 - Paragraph 1
 - Topic sentence
 - Claim 1
 - Reasoning
 - Evidence
 - Paragraph 2
 - Topic sentence
 - Claim 2
 - Reasoning
 - Evidence
 - Paragraph 3
 - Topic sentence
 - Claim 3
 - Reasoning
 - Evidence
- Conclusion
 - Thesis restatement
 - Body summary
 - Concluding sentence

4. Start drafting.

This is where most time will be invested since you will need to elaborate several drafts, and in some cases, rewrite them. Try to write down all the ideas, then you will have time to refine them. Always prioritize paying enough attention to the clear organization and



logical order of sentences. This will benefit and speed up the writing of your other drafts. Make sure you express your ideas as clearly as possible. A tip is to start where it comes most naturally to you (i.e. start with the body and progressively fill in the introduction and so on). Use the outline as a map to guide you in your writing.

5. Additional resources.

- Example of research papers: Find a useful resource [here](#)
- Where can I find a trustful database? Find a useful resource [here](#)
- How to conduct an online survey? Find a useful resource [here](#)
- How to collect data? Find a useful resource [here](#)
- Need more detailed guidance? Find a useful resource [here](#)

Capstone Project: Guide to Political Cartoon/Comic

What is a Political Cartoon/Comic?

A political cartoon is a drawing with text, intended to convey critical commentary on politics, politicians, and current events, and the interactions between them. They are usually on print or in digital form, and you can often find them in newspapers or journals. Generally, they express a political opinion in a satirical or humorous way, criticizing a politician or how a political system functions. A comic also includes a combination between drawings and text, but shows a series of events or thoughts in interrelated boxes that tell a story, often in a comical way.

In this capstone project, the political cartoon or comic will be on the topic of ‘Breaking Barriers’. Instead of poking fun at a politician or lampooning political developments, students can either (1) address a societal topic they are passionate about and attempt to deconstruct political polarization, or (2) illustrate a root cause for the political divide and propose a solution.



Creating a Political Cartoon or Comic Strip

1. Choose a topic or cause for political divide.

The first step is to find a topic that peaks your interest and calls for artistic deconstruction of political polarization. Whether you choose abortion and its complexities or stereotypes of each political party in the US, you should choose a topic that will ultimately help bring people together.

2. Create a scenario or storyline.

For a political cartoon, you are creating a multi-faceted scene that reflects your opinion or point of view. You can make various artistic choices regarding metaphors or symbols, composition, scope, and layout. You can also make use of analogies, like comparing territorial disputes to children arguing on a playground about who owns the see-saw.

3. Draft key components.

Once you have a message you want to convey and key elements that help illustrate your point, you can try to sketch out these elements on paper or on a digital canvas. Here, you should think about how to use your space carefully. Also, identify the most important elements in your cartoon/comic and emphasize them by differentiating them from other elements. You should consider the drawing's size, scope, and any other artistic choices that shape your message. The text, if any, can be in various forms like bubbles, boxes, and captions. If original ideas do not seem feasible or other ideas come up in the process, add them to the mix and remove unnecessary elements if needed. If you are creating a comic, make sure you include at least six panels.



4. Make your political cartoon/comic.

After you finish an initial draft, it is time to create the political cartoon/comic. As color, saturation, texture, and other final artistic choices are important features in shaping how the reader perceives the cartoon/comic, ensure that every element is intentional and aligns with your message. If you feel like changes could still be made, feel free to make any last minute changes before adding finishing touches.

5. (Optional) Write a supplemental description or an explanation for your political cartoon/comic.

Sometimes, the author's intended message can be unclear or perceived differently depending on the reader. Although this has value in itself, it could be helpful to write a brief explanation of what the political cartoon or comic intends to tell the reader and how the drawing and text tries to achieve this purpose. Include responses to questions that might arise when looking at the political cartoon or comic, like why the author decided to choose this topic or whether there may be other alternatives to the author's solution to political polarization.

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