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We the People

THE CITIZEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

Directed by the Center for Civic Education

Strengthening Democracy in America Project

This document is intended for the teachers in the JMLP summer institutes. It describes the two possible projects that can be done in the classroom. It is still in “draft form” and will be changed when provided to the general public. All comments will be appreciated, whether about the projects or the videos themselves. Please send these comments to Charles Quigley at quigley@civiced.org

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Strengthening Democracy in America

Goal—Competent and responsible citizen engagement in the preservation and improvement of the American political system.

Objectives—Students should be able to develop and advocate means of

- (1) enhancing the strengths of the American constitutional system, and
- (2) diminishing the weaknesses of the system.

Projects—The following are suggested ways of engaging students in an exploration of the content and issues raised in Videos 1–4 of the online Strengthening Democracy in America Series.

- Videos 1 and 2 provide an overview of the establishment and history of the American political system and introduce several topics regarding its strengths and weaknesses.
- Videos 3 and 4 focus on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the system and those of the national government in particular.

1) Strategy for dealing with the content in Videos 1 and 2

a) Steps

- Create working teams of two to five students.
- Ask each team to select one of the following topics to explore (or assign topics to each group).
- Ask teams to research their topics and prepare written reports on their findings and conclusions. Their reports may include images illustrating their findings. All materials produced by each group should be displayed on a poster board.
- Ask each team to develop a prepared ten-minute oral statement on its findings, be prepared to present its statement to the entire class and to respond to questions about their presentation. They may use the visuals displayed on their poster and each member of the group should take part in the oral presentation and following question and answer period.
- When all groups have finished their assignments, use one or more class periods to have them present their findings to the rest of the class and take part in the question and answer periods on their presentations.

b) Topics from Videos 1 and 2 (The following is a suggested list of topics related to content presented in Videos 1 and 2. Teachers should feel free to add more or alternative topics from the Videos.)

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- Select one of the thirteen British colonies in America and trace the evolution of its government from its founding until the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1775.
- Select one of the newly independent states and trace the foundation of its government from 1775 to 1789 when our current government was established under the U.S. Constitution.
- Research and report on the strengths and weaknesses of the national government under the Articles of Confederation.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Virginia and New Jersey Plans.
- Identify the criteria (i.e., the principles, values, and interests) that should be taken into account in the allocation of powers among national, state, and local governments. (This can be done for today's perspective.)
- Identify what evidence supports or undermines the argument/claims in Federalist 10.
- Identify the criteria (i.e., the principles, values, and interests) that should be taken into account when deciding that federal laws should prevail over state and local laws.
- Identify when slavery was legally abolished in the United States and two other advanced democracies. Describe how the former slaves attained the full rights of other citizenship in each country.
- Identify three incidents in American history in which civil society has prevailed in the decision-making processes of the national government.

2) Strategy for dealing with the content and issues in Videos 2–4

a) Steps

Have students use the following modification of the procedure used to develop and present portfolios from the Project Citizen program. Introduce students to the program by informing them that they will be asked to work in small teams to identify ways to improve our political system and learn how to present their proposed improvements to gain support for their approval.

This exercise involves students working on one or more topics on which issues are raised, such as the Electoral College. Students may work as an entire class or in teams of eight or more on whatever topic they have chosen or been assigned.

1. Select a topic from among those listed below under “Issue Briefs for Topics in Videos 1 -4.”
2. Identify alternative responses to the issue selected and identify their benefits and costs.
3. Develop a proposed public policy to address the issue.

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4. Develop a political action plan to implement in advocating the public policy.
5. Implement the action plan if the students wish to do so.
6. Students present their work at a public hearing in a class, school, or community.
7. Reflect upon the experience.

b) Portfolio Organization

After choosing an issue from those provided in the videos (or list), students should develop a portfolio based on the instructions below. (The teacher should determine how many groups and issues will be covered in the class. Each group should have a minimum of eight students, with two per panel.)

- **Four Panel Presentation Board**

- i. *Panel One—The Issue.* In this panel, this group is responsible for developing a detailed explanation of the issue chosen. This explanation should state why the issue is important and which levels and branches of government should deal with it.
- ii. *Panel Two—Alternative Policies.* In the second panel, this group is responsible for explaining current and/or proposed alternative policies designed to deal with the issue. (It is recommended that students choose two or three alternative policies to evaluate and illustrate.)
- iii. *Panel Three—Developing a Public Policy.* This group is responsible for developing and justifying a specific public policy that the entire group is proposing and agrees to support. The group must also make the case that its proposed public policy serves the purposes of government set forth in the U.S. Constitution and does not violate the limits it places upon the powers of government. (Students may also refer to their state constitutions that typically state similar purposes.)
- iv. *Panel Four—Developing an Action Plan.* This group is responsible for developing an action plan showing how the class can influence their government to adopt the policy that it is proposing.

- **The Documentation Binder**

- i. A three-ring binder should be divided into five sections and have a table of contents at the beginning.
- ii. Sections one through four will be the documentation segment of the portfolio. Each section corresponds to one of the four panels described above. Each of the four task groups should select additional information

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from those gathered that best documents their work and place it in the appropriate section.

- iii. Section five, Reflecting on Your Experience, is where students reflect on what has been learned, both in content and process.

Issue Briefs for Topics in Videos 1–4

Issue Briefs have been developed for the following topics found in Videos 1–4. The briefs are intended for teacher use; however, they can be shared with students in their entirety or in parts, as teachers see fit.

1. Balance of powers (Available)
2. Campaign finance/money in politics
3. Constitutional system
4. Democratic norms
5. Electoral College
6. Gerrymandering
7. Majority rule/minority rights/veto points (Available)
8. Participation
9. Polarization
10. Political equality (Available)
11. Popular sovereignty
12. Regular order
13. Representative democracy
14. Senate
15. Supreme Court
16. War powers (Available)

Video Topics

All videos are divided into short segments, followed by questions to check for understanding and discussion questions.

Part 1—An overview of the political system created by the Framers of the Constitution

Video 1*—What did the Framers have in mind when they created the Constitution?

Video 2*—What is the history of the development of our democratic institutions and norms?

Part 2—Evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the American political system and proposed remedies

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Video 3*—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the American political system?

Video 4*—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of our national government?

*Videos 1–4 have been filmed and are currently found on the PLC.

Currently under production:

Video 5—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of our political party and electoral systems?

Future production:

Video 6—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of our bureaucracy, interest groups, and the media?

Video 7—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of our federal system?

Video 8—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the American political culture?

Video 9—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the American economic system?

Video 10—What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of American foreign policy and procedures?