

Tracking Congress: Issues, Interests, and Democracy in Action

Ralph Nader

You can't really learn to play football just by reading about the game in a book; and you can't really learn about civics that way either. Civic skills need to be practiced to keep our democracy strong, and civic training materials should be exciting and linked to real-world activities. Today, teaching government and social studies can be, must be, about students' real lives.¹ Now, with the power of the Internet literally in the palm of our hands, doing this has never been easier—or more vital to America's future. In the words of educational philosopher John Dewey, teachers can educate for social transformation.

A unit of study on “Tracking Congress” would offer an opportunity to connect civics and government to students' real lives. As they track their members of Congress and any issues that interest them, students would become creatively engaged with their government, while at the same time practicing civic responsibilities beyond the single civic duty stated in the Constitution: serving on a jury, if called. Following the four-step Inquiry Arc of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards,² here's how such a course can work:

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

Begin by establishing a baseline in class, with an assessment of students' knowledge of the government and how it works.

Include questions about whether and/or how students have interacted with a government agency or elected official. Determine if students ever joined a march, wrote a letter, or petitioned in any way, and ask students if they have participated in a service learning project sponsored by a government office.

Knowing what public issues students are interested in, and why, will help teachers connect study with civic action. Students might voice concern about women's rights, immigration reform, animal rights, student loan debt, citizen-police relations, global warming, marijuana laws, the minimum wage, consumer protection, or any number of controversial topics. It doesn't matter how many issues students say they care about, or where on the political spectrum their opinions cluster. What matters is that students care about an important issue. This course will grow student awareness and demonstrate that they live within a society shaped by mores and formal laws, a society that is constantly evolving, and one in which they will have a crucial and powerful role to play.

The next step would be to have students describe their concerns in writing and in small-group and whole-class discussions. Teachers should challenge students by asking a deep inquiry question, “How does your chosen concern echo one or more of the historic citizen debates?” For example, every generation struggles to find a balance between

liberty and personal responsibility; between freedom and security; between private profit and the common good; between preservation and innovation; between economic growth and resource exploitation; between loyalty and dissent—to name a few.

This inquiry will not produce simple answers. But students will find the exercise challenging. Teachers can describe social struggles that students have covered in other courses: abolition, women's suffrage, safe workplaces and fair wages, or ending Jim Crow. Students may not initially see any connection between past struggles and their own dilemmas, but revisiting this question again and again throughout the course will provide students a broader base of ideas and experiences to inform their thinking.³

Ask students whether their concerns are adequately covered in the media. If so, in which media does this happen? (Include social media as a source of information for study.) What is the students' evaluation of the media? Do students know whether their local, state, or federal legislators are working to resolve community concerns? Are reforms in the works, or new laws being planned? How would a person find out about what policymakers are doing?

Tell students that they are about to learn and practice how they can impact the issues that are important to them. In fact, by discussing and writing about their chosen topic, they have already begun.



Eighth graders at Southview Middle School in Ankeny, Iowa, met with U.S. Congressman David Young (R-Iowa) on April 28, 2016. The congressman reached out to the students and visited the school after hearing of their interest in current events.

2. Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts

Students can then begin tracking the activities of three federal legislators: the two senators and one congressman representing the school or college's neighborhood. Or each student might focus on his or her own congressional district. Students would investigate what these members of the U.S. Senate and House are doing, or not doing, and their interrelationships with other members of Congress, staff, committees, and floor actions.

Students could help each other learn the vocabulary—the terms, the titles, and the procedures needed to work in the

“laboratory of democracy,” where new laws are hammered out and old ones reformed or discarded.

Students would learn whom their representatives relate to outside of Congress, the various constituencies and funders that petition, lobby, suggest draft legislation, and provide the resources for election campaigns.

Different aspects of Congress's work could be assigned to different students who could, for example, follow the actual journey of a legislator's sponsored bill as it struggles through the oft-charted 10 or 15 steps toward becoming a law.

With regard to laws already on the books, students would learn how and

to what degree congressional oversight of the executive branch is conducted. They would begin to evaluate for themselves whether oversight of federal agencies is adequate. “What hearings do your legislators attend? Do they ask ‘the tough questions?’ How do they measure and evaluate the performance of other public servants—including political appointees, and career professionals, as well as contractors and vendors doing business with the government?”

3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

There are several excellent, nonpartisan online sources for tracking the who, what,

when, and how of congressional action. (See the sidebar below). The teacher should tender an invitation to elected officials to respond to requests for information and to participate in interviews with the class.⁴ A member of Congress might assign an aide to speak with students (e.g., visiting in person or Skyping with the class). Much could be indelibly learned from these exchanges.⁵

Students could also investigate the major players outside of Congress. For example, regarding health care policy,

students could research current and historical actions of insurers, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, health care unions, vendors, employer and business groups, patient advocacy groups, regulatory agencies, and others. Students could also compare the outcomes of different health care systems in different nations.

As they become more knowledgeable of the field, students would be able to refine their own opinions and clarify their values. Which problems in America become the topics of debate in

Congress? Which do not? What causes delays and gridlock? In which areas does Congress provide funding, and is it adequate? How does government interact with various groups, including individuals, businesses, and lobbyists? What are the congressional priorities? What actions do our members of Congress take to make things better on issues that you care about?

A possible assignment could be to have students draft correspondence to their legislators on a bill or oversight matter.

web resources

Studying Congress Online Today

Social Education Staff

C-SPAN - www.c-span.org/congress

C-SPAN is a public service created by the American Cable Television Industry, providing live, gavel-to-gavel video coverage of House and Senate floor proceedings; access to the legislative schedule; and a directory of committees and members, bills, votes and statistics about each session of Congress. Coverage is without editing, commentary or analysis and with a balanced presentation of points of view by interviewed members of Congress.

GovTrack.us

GovTrack.us tracks the U.S. Congress and “helps Americans understand what is going on in their national legislature. GovTrack was created in 2004 by Joshua Tauberer originally as a hobby. Today it is a project of Civic Impulse, LLC, his company.” GovTrack.us publishes the status of federal legislation and information about representatives and senators in Congress. People can use GovTrack to track bills for updates or get alerts.

GovTrack.us also “goes beyond the official record with statistical analyses, bill summaries, and other tools to put information in context.”

GovTrack has “successfully lobbied Congress to make more and better legislative information available to the public.”

POPVOX - www.popvox.com

POPVOX offers a direct connection to policymakers and an up-to-date snapshot of the conversations others are having with lawmakers on the important issues. Each pending bill has its own page that gauges support and opposition in easy-to-understand graphs and pie charts.... “Individuals can weigh in and share with friends.... Comments are delivered to legislators or federal agencies and aggregated and displayed publically....”

League of Women Voters - lww.org

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The League was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920 during the convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The convention was held just six months before the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote after a 72-year struggle. From the beginning, the League has been an activist, grassroots organization whose leaders believed that citizens should play a critical role in advocacy.

Open Secrets - www.opensecrets.org

OpenSecrets.org is “the most comprehensive resource for federal campaign contributions, lobbying data and analysis available.” The Center’s exclusive data powers its online features that track money in politics, and its investigative work that won the Society of Professional Journalists’ 2013 award for Public Service in Online Journalism. The Center relies on financial support from a combination of institutional grants, individual contributions and income earned from custom research and licensing data for commercial use.

U.S. Congress Official Websites

www.house.gov/representatives

www.senate.gov/senators/contact

Directories of the House and Senate, and links to current proceedings such as “Legislative Activity” (at the House website) and “Legislation and Records” (at the Senate website).

4. Communicating and Taking Informed Action

As a final project to assess student learning, assign students to craft a well-documented evaluation of the legislator's overall performance on behalf of the citizens he or she represents. What was his or her voting record on key issues of concern? What did he or she work to promote, work to defeat, or ignore? How well does a congressperson report on his or her activities to constituents? How well do various media report on the lawmaker's action? Which organizations or interest groups help provide relevant information to citizens?

This report could include the student's appropriate recommendations for improvement of the government's performance, both substantively and procedurally, to give voice to the citizenry in a democratic society. As students grow in their ability to understand how the legislative branch works, they will be better equipped to identify and articulate the need for new reforms and policies to address society's biggest challenges.

Looking at their own civic powers, can students begin to visualize how they might make a positive impact on their three federal representatives with regard to issues that are important to them? Their answers should be part of their reports.

If students are in agreement, final reports could be shared, in print, in the school or community library. Even at the high school level, student reports might be placed online for the general populace to read and discuss (after appropriate editing by the teacher, with student and parental permission, and in coordination with the principal). Again, public expression of civic concern should be encouraged.

Creating a Curriculum

Over the years, succeeding classes would refine the course as the learn-

ing and experiential curve increases. Students and teachers would be discovering new ground together and perhaps creating a new tradition in the education and civic life of Americans. Civic participation is more than a slogan to be intoned: it is "a delight to be savored as an essential quality of life."⁶

On the final day of the course, the teacher could distribute the self-assessment that students participated in at the beginning of the course. It asks, "What can I do to solve the problem that I care about?" Now teachers can ask their students: "How has your answer changed since we began this course?"

Notes

1. Ralph Nader, "Civics for Democracy" (December 1, 1992), blog.nader.org/1992/12/01/civics-for-democracy/.
2. NCSS, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, www.socialstudies.org/c3.
3. Mark J. Green, *Who Runs Congress?* (New York: Viking, 1979, 3rd ed.), introduction by Ralph Nader.
4. Ralph Nader, "Sending Citizens Summons to Members of Congress" (July 24, 2015), blog.nader.org/2015/07/24/sending-citizens-summons-to-members-of-congress/.
5. The fastest way to get a reaction from your representative may be by making an *in personam* demand—a gesture that speaks directly to the welfare of the representative and his or her family; for example, that health care coverage be the same for members of Congress as it is for the general public, or that their able-bodied children or grandchildren would be drafted into the next war. See chapter 15, "Get Congress to have Skin in the Game," in Nader, *The Seventeen Solutions: Bold Ideas for Making America's Future* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2012).
6. Nader, 1992.

Ralph Nader, in his career as consumer advocate, founded many organizations including the Center for Study of Responsive Law, the Public Interest Research Group, the Center for Auto Safety, Public Citizen, Clean Water Action Project, the Disability Rights Center, the Pension Rights Center, the Project for Corporate Responsibility and The Multinational Monitor (a monthly magazine). In 1972, Nader had a large citizen project, with many students involved, that produced magazine-length profiles on every member of Congress running for reelection that year. He ran for president of the United States as an Independent in 2004 and 2008. He is the author of many books, the most famous of which is *Unsafe at Any Speed*. The most recent is *Breaking Through Power*. His frequent writings can be found at nader.org.

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