

UNIT

1

Political Engagement: Getting Informed and Involved

◆ **OBJECTIVES**

- 1) Define and discuss nature of political engagement
- 2) Survey the student interest in local matters
- 3) Outline five steps of community engagement

◆ **TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED**

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ **ACTIVITIES**

- 1) Group activity 1: “Knowing Where We Belong”
- 2) Group activity 2: “The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.”
- 3) Group activity 3: “Youth and the Political Process”
- 4) Group activity 4: “Our Political Participation”
- 5) Group activity 5: “Top Three Problems and Solutions”

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson surveys the students' interest in local community issues and provides a framework for engaging them in civic life. Democracy thrives when individuals are engaged in local matters and participate in public life. Students need to understand the dynamics of policies, politics, and individual interests in shaping the world around us. The building blocks of daily life—schools, workplaces, houses of worship, businesses, roads, places of entertainment and relaxation—result from and are maintained by fellow citizens. It is important to appreciate where these resources come from and how they are sustained. Students will learn to appreciate how individuals can relate to the complexities of public life and begin to see their role in it.

This unit outlines the necessary steps for participation in public life and encourages students to see themselves as responsible for the public good. This unit may be used by the instructor to lead youth through a process of local action. Becoming a citizen does not just happen but results from the actions, habits, and beliefs of individuals committed to public life. It means more than voting. It means being the kind of person who finds out about public issues, makes his or her opinion heard, and listens to others respectfully. It means getting involved.

Political Engagement

Implementation Outline

- 1. Introduction: What does it mean to participate in public life? Why does participation matter in a democracy?**
- 2. How can citizens participate in public life?**
- 3. What does it take for someone to get involved in public life? What factors lead to political engagement?**
- 4. Why do citizens not get involved? What factors prevent them from participating in the political process?**
- 5. What discourages youth from participating in the political process?**
- 6. What would make it easier for you to get involved in the political process?**
- 7. Wrapping up: Five steps of engaged citizenship**

TEACHER'S GUIDE to CLASS DISCUSSION

UNIT 1: Political Engagement

Teacher's Note!

Use the following text and questions to spark a discussion with your students about political life and how they understand their role in it. You may wish to divide the students up into small discussion groups with some or all of the questions first before you discuss matters before the whole class.

1. Introduction: The importance of public life and its relevance in a democracy

- What does it mean to participate in something? To participate is *to take part*, to be engaged in something. Few of us consider ourselves to be political agents. We do not usually run for office, do not contact our political representatives directly, and do not express our views in the media as policy experts. So how can we get involved in public life even if we do not want to run for office?
- Democracy means—in general—rule of the many. It invites all members of the community to participate in the decisions that affect them. It does not mean that everyone gets what they want or that everyone agrees about what should be done. A healthy democracy allows for debate and invites everyone into the process of reaching conclusions about policies and investments. Democracy gives people a voice in public matters, if they take advantage of it. Citizens must be willing to do the hard work of democracy: *to get involved and be informed about public matters*.

2. How can people participate in public life? (Ask the students for suggestions):

☀ They may say:

- Voting
- Reading the newspaper
- Volunteering in local projects (e.g., block clean-up campaign, blood drive)
- Sending letters or emails to public officials, organizations or media sources
- Participating in demonstrations or local school council meetings
- Visiting the local alderman's office
- Going to church, synagogue, or mosque
- Talking to your neighbor
- Donating resources (money, connections, time, and advice).



Group Activity 1: *Knowing Where We Belong*. List on the board all the organizations, clubs or teams students are involved in.

3. What does it take for someone to get involved in public life? What factors lead to political engagement?

Teacher's Note!

Begin by surveying the students for their opinions about what leads someone into getting involved. What you are looking for are personal skills, experiences and personal characteristics that prepare someone to participate.



Further information

For more information about what motivates people to get involved see *Unit 2: Political Cynicism and Citizenship* and *Unit 8: Political Parties*.

☀ Some of the factors or characteristics contributing to one's political engagement are:

- Motivation: Energy to get involved and see a personal interest in an issue
 - Information: Research for understanding of public issues
 - Courage: Willingness to take risks and suffer for a just cause
 - Justice: A commitment to providing equal opportunity and protection for your fellow citizens
 - Compromise: Willingness to negotiate the differences between different needs and goals
 - Forgiveness: Recognition of human differences and willingness to overcome past injustice in the interests of the future
 - Hope: People need to believe that they can make a difference, that change is possible
 - Patience: The ability to wait for change (Encourage students to add to the list)
- Ideally, citizens committed to democracy are prompted to uphold the values that benefit the common good. Citizens are motivated by principles of fairness and equity, and they believe in equal opportunity for people regardless of economic, racial, or social status. They recognize that the political process, imperfect as it is, provides the most proven system of government where minority viewpoints are protected.
 - Democracy is dependent upon the willingness of citizens to get involved in and informed about public matters. The political history of the United States has many examples of individual men and women who take stands to defend the principles of an ideal democratic society. One such person was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a man whose views and actions led to enormous changes in this country. As a powerful model citizen, Dr. King and the civil rights movement he led altered the way African Americans are treated in our society, as well as how African Americans view themselves. The vision and actions of a few changed the way our country functions and the way we act toward one another.



Group Activity 2: The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. Identify in Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" some of the characteristics discussed in this unit (see Handout 1).

4. Why do people not get involved? What factors prevent citizens from participating in the political process?

- Although we already recognized that there are factors and characteristics underlying one's participation in the political process, this question deals with the kind of experiences or interests that keeps someone away from politics or local community involvement.
- ☀ Some of the factors or characteristics contributing to one's lack of political engagement are:
 - Lack of Expectations: No one expects someone to get involved or asks them to help out
 - Apathy: Lack of interest or concern
 - Ignorance: Lack of knowledge or comprehension of something specific
 - Cynicism: Questions the motives of others and doubts the effectiveness of action
 - Other responsibilities: Too busy with work, school or family to volunteer time
 - Lack of opportunity: Lack of time, resources to get involved
 - Fear: Lack of courage to challenge the political system (Let the students add to the list)
- Public issues are complicated. Sometimes it is hard to know where to go for good information. Everybody seems to have different agendas and it is hard to trust others. Many people do not have the time or interest to pursue these questions. Most of us have jobs, schooling, families and other interests that consume our time. Others would rather play the cynic and pretend to be above the messy world of politics.
- When a majority of citizens do not participate, they allow small numbers of committed individuals to affect public policy. There is nothing wrong with being skeptical about politics and politicians. However, when it is not balanced by respect for the political process, then democracy loses. Political history is full of examples of courage, sacrifice and progress.

Teacher's Note!

Acknowledge the reality of public scandals, but ask the students if they can name admirable political figures. Encourage students to be skeptical, but not cynical about public life. Skeptics challenge others to defend their position and to see things from a different perspective; cynics question everything and doubt that others can be trusted. This leads to apathy because there seems to be no point to getting involved when no one can be trusted nor any difference made. For further reference, see Unit 2: *Political Cynicism and Citizenship*.

5. What discourages young adults from participating in the political process?

Teacher's Note

Before you mention some of the barriers to participation among young people, it would be helpful to find out what your students have to say about why they are not more involved in the political process.

- There are many barriers to their participation. Because of their age, they cannot vote, cannot run for public office, and do not enjoy many freedoms that adults take for granted (e.g., driving a car until age 16). Most youth are under the authority of parents, guardians and teachers. They are not expected to exercise complete autonomy and do not enjoy the same privileges (or responsibilities) as adults.
- Most young adults do not expect to have their opinions considered by adults and it should not surprise us that they do not develop the habits of informed, involved citizens. Are there, however, any exceptions to this situation?



Group Activity 3: Youth and the political process. Search the Internet to learn what other young students are doing to become engaged in the political process. This will challenge the assumption that young people are not able or interested in taking part in the political process (see Handout 2).

6. What would make it easier for you to get involved in the political process?

Teacher's Note

Ask the students for their own input on this question. Find out which barriers exist and brainstorm with them for solutions to these problems.



Group Activity 4: Our Political Participation. Fill out with your students the survey on “Our Political Participation” to find out the concerns they have about their local community (see Handout 3).

7. Wrapping up: The five steps of engaged citizenship

There are five basic steps to political engagement and five related questions.

- ✚ **Motivation:** “*What’s in it for me?*” It is a natural question. Unless someone is motivated to do something, it will not happen. Politically engaged people take a personal stake in a public matter

and want to be a part of the solution. People often get involved because a law, policy or practice has directly affected them. They might be motivated out of a sense of justice for others or anger about their own treatment. Remind students that nobody does anything without wanting to do it. When we listen to the alarm in the morning, part of us listens and decides to get up and start the day, even if another part of us would rather stay in bed. If youth are going to face the challenge of political engagement, they must be willing to commit themselves to work that can be difficult and frustrating, but rewarding.

- ✦ **Information/Training:** “*What can I do?*” The first step in making a difference is understanding all the factors involved in a public issue. Who is affected? What is the history of this problem in my neighborhood, town, city, state? Who has experience on this topic? Citizens need to find out all relevant information on a topic in order to know what to do and how to convince others that they should support the plan. One must develop various skills of research, team-building, and organization to see a solution emerge out of complex challenges.
- ✦ **Partnership/Cooperation:** “*Who can help me?*” Political matters involve everyone. It is important to engage others for advice, support, and consensus. Nobody can expect to do everything by themselves without support for a project. Democracy invites everyone to participate in public life and requires that people affected are involved in the decision-making process. Learning to work with others involves patience, compromise, and a sense of humor.
- ✦ **Organization:** “*What are we going to do?*” Once you have come up with a project, have researched it, found partners, you need a plan to convert your energy, ideas, and ideals into action. Find out how different people have different resources to contribute: money, time, experience, influence. Realize that projects require different skills and talents and find the best place for all of them.
- ✦ **Reflection:** “*What have we learned from our experience?*” What can we do better next time? Thought without action will not change anything but actions without thought often make things worse. Experience teaches one how to learn from mistakes and avoid them in the future.



Group Activity 5: Top Three Problems and Solutions. Work in groups of 3 to 5 students on the three most important issues or problems in society or in their communities to find solutions as a group (see Handout 4).

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

- ❖ **Politics is a part of everyday life.**
- ❖ **Young adults have a role to play in public life.**
- ❖ **Students/youth should be able to give some examples of people who have served the public good.**
- ❖ **Public life has rewards and frustrations, but ignoring its challenges undermines our democracy.**
- ❖ **Becoming a citizen does not just happen. Citizenship results from the actions, habits and beliefs of individuals committed to public life. It means being the kind of person who finds out about public issues, makes his or her opinion heard and listens to others respectfully. It means getting involved. It means being part of the solution to the challenges of public life.**

KEY TERMS or CONCEPTS

*Unless otherwise noted, all definitions are taken from Webster Dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com>

- ❖ ***Apathy:*** Lack of feeling or emotion; lack of interest or concern.
- ❖ ***Constituent:*** A person who is a member of a unit of government from which an official is elected.
- ❖ ***Compromise:*** Settlement of differences by arbitration or by consent reached by mutual concessions; something intermediate between or blending qualities of two different things.
- ❖ ***Cooperation:*** The action of cooperating; common effort association of persons for common benefit.
- ❖ ***Courage:*** Mental or moral strength to resist opposition, danger, or hardship; implies firmness of mind and will in the face of danger or extreme difficulty.
- ❖ ***Cynicism:*** Having or showing the attitude or temper of a cynic; especially, contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives.
- ❖ ***Engagement:*** emotional involvement or commitment.
- ❖ ***Justice:*** The maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments; the administration of law; especially, the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity; the quality of being just, impartial, or fair; the principle or ideal of just dealing or right action.



ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS INDEX

The Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science were developed using the 1985 Illinois State Goals for Social Science, the National Standards for World History, the National Standards for United States History, the National Geography Standards, and National Standards for Civics and Government, other various state and national work, and local standards contributed by team members.

Online Resource:

Information regarding the Illinois State Board of Education Learning Standards can be found online at:

<http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/default0.html>

Illinois Learning Standards Alignment

| | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|--|
| State Goal | 14 | Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States. |
| Learning Standards | A, B, C, D | |
| Major Emphasis | 14.C.3, 14.C.4, 14.C.5 | |
| State Goal | 16 | Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations. |
| Learning Standards | A, B | |



NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

The Curriculum Standards for Social Studies were developed by a Task Force of the National Council for the Social Studies and approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in April 1994. Its

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies focuses on ten thematic strands in social studies considered essential for educators and students. More information can be found at their website: <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/>

This unit addresses the following thematic standards:

- ❑ Individual Development and Identity
- ❑ Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- ❑ Power, Authority, and Governance
- ❑ Civic Ideals and Practices

DICTIONARY and INFORMATION LINKS

There are many helpful resources online for you and your students. Those below will just get you started.

LibrarySpot.com

This is one of the best places to begin any kind of information search. It provides direct links to encyclopedias, dictionaries, curriculum ideas and library resources.

<http://www.libraryspot.com/>

Dictionary.com

Free online English dictionary, thesaurus and reference guide, crossword puzzles and other word games, online translator and Word of the Day.

<http://www.Dictionary.com>

Webster Dictionary at www.m-w.com

Online version of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. Simply enter keywords for a comprehensive definition, with thesaurus option.

<http://www.m-w.com>

AllWords.com - Dictionary, Guide, Community and More

allwords.com provides English definitions plus a multi-lingual search. Search in German, Dutch, French, Italian, Spanish and English. They provide a helpful pronunciation guide and gives students a chance to see how words often share cultural roots with geographic, and cultural neighbors.

<http://www.allwords.com/>

AskJeeves.com

One of the best search engines on the web. Web users simply put questions to AJeeves@the butler, who then searches the web for relevant information and web sites.

<http://www.askjeeves.com/>

INTERNET RESOURCES on POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT



Visit the following web sites for more information on how to connect your students to public life. Some of these sites provide information while others outline opportunities for getting students connected to their communities. Unless otherwise noticed, all quoted material is taken directly from the listed web sites.

⊕ The Junior Statesmen of America

The Junior Statesmen of America is the largest student-run high school organization in America. It is filled with members that are interested in politics, government, debate, the law, and education. In JSA, students organize every aspect of the organization, from the school chapter level to national administration. JSA members can take part in 3 overnight conventions: Spring State, Congress, and Fall State. Find out how you and your students can be part of this interesting organization.

At <http://www.jsa.org>

⊕ The American Political Science Association Online (APSANET)

APSA has compiled a helpful list of more than 60 organizations working on civic education. The organizations listed by APSANET are actively fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life. The organizations listed focused on a citizenry committed to the fundamental values of the American constitutional democracy.

At <http://www.apsanet.org/CENnet/organizations/index.cfm>

⊕ AMERICORPS

The Corporation for National Service website will help you find out more about Americorps and other volunteer opportunities.

At <http://www.nationalservice.org/>

⊕ America's Promise: Alliance for Youth

America's Promise was run by Colin Powell before he became the Secretary of State. This site can link students to volunteer opportunities in their community. The mission of America's Promise is to mobilize Americans to build the character and competence of the nation's youth.

At <http://www.americaspromise.org/>

⊕ The American Promise

This website supplements the PBS series of the same name. Its goal is to bring democracy alive by providing videos and teaching guides for grades K-12. The new Service Learning Guide targets social studies teachers and is free. Teachers can also use an on-line idea exchange.

At <http://www.americanpromise.com/>

⊕ ***Active Citizenship: Empowering America's Youth***

This site offers a high school curriculum, which seeks to develop the intellectual and moral skills necessary to preserve democracy. The curriculum offered by Active Citizenship, Empowering America's Youth, addresses underlying rights, responsibilities, and civic values of U.S. citizenship. As part of the curriculum, students can find a service learning group project to get their hands on a real problem in their community.

At <http://www.activecitizenship.org/index.html>

⊕ **For Chicago-based users: Chicago Volunteer**

This site is maintained by United Way and provides numerous links to volunteer organizations in the Chicago Area. Opportunities are organized by interest, experience and region.

At <http://www.chicagovolunteer.net/>

⊕ ***First Amendment Cyber Tribune (FACT)***

To find out more about civil disobedience and the freedom of expression, visit the First Amendment Cyber Tribune (FACT). This website seeks to be a resource for those wanting to learn about the First Amendment. FACT provides information on all the liberties guaranteed by the amendment. Find useful links to other sites that have relevant material.

At <http://w3.trib.com/FACT/index.html>

⊕ ***You The People***

You The People constitutes a participatory, interactive civics and citizenship study program implemented in schools and communities. The program's goal is to promote active citizenry, regardless of one's political views, in a civil and skilled manner. As such, this program does not rely on any ideology or belief, but also on the ideals of the U.S. Constitution and the American history of civil democratic discourse. Schools and community groups in the U.S.A. are using this program. Find out more about it.

At <http://www.youthepeople.com/>

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

This curriculum was developed with the support of a grant to the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), Loyola University Chicago, from the Technology Innovation Challenge Grant Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The project team consisted of:

- ✦ Brian C. Shea, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, coordinator and principal author;
- ✦ Alan Gitelson, Ph.D., Department of Political Science, faculty consultant;
- ✦ Nelson Portillo, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Psychology, evaluation, editing, and web design;
- ✦ Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, evaluation supervision;
- ✦ Linda Von Dreele, Associate Director of CURL, oversight and editing.

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