

# UNIT



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## *Political Cynicism and Citizenship*

### ◆ **OBJECTIVES**

- 1) Address contemporary cynicism about public life
- 2) Understand the importance of role models in shaping public life
- 3) Encourage a healthy skepticism about politics but challenge cynicism
- 4) Develop an appreciation for the complexity of public life

### ◆ **TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED**

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

### ◆ **ACTIVITIES**

- 1) Group Activity 1: Student Survey: “Politics and My Future”
- 2) Group Activity 2: Politicians and Public Officers in Disgrace

### **SUMMARY of the LESSON**

This lesson begins with a class conversation about student impressions of politics and politicians. Many question the relevance of politics to their lives and hold negative attitudes about politicians. Where does all this cynicism come from and is it healthy? What do we expect of politics and our leaders? What expectations do we have of different kinds of people, parents, teachers, public officials? All of these topics raise questions about role models and where students see themselves in public life. The goal of this discussion is to challenge student cynicism and encourage students to see the relevance of politics in their daily life.

# *Political Cynicism and Citizenship*

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## *Implementation Outline*

1. **Student Survey**
2. **Introduction: What kinds of persons should we expect our political leaders to be?**
3. **Which political figures students respect?**
4. **Where does the cynicism about public life come from? Is it healthy?**

# ***TEACHER'S GUIDE to CLASS DISCUSSION***

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## ***UNIT 2: Political Cynicism and Citizenship***

### **1. Student Survey**



***Student Survey, Group Activity 1: Politics and my future.*** Use the survey included in Handout 1 to find out what are the political interest of your students. See the attached teacher's guide to complete the survey.

#### ***Teacher's Note!***

Use these questions to spark a discussion with your students about political cynicism and its relationship with citizenship. 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.

### **2. Introduction: What kinds of persons should we expect our political leaders to be?**

- Tie this question to the earlier discussion about what students expect of themselves and those they admire (see Unit 1). Ask students for a list of all the expectations they have of someone they respect. What kinds of characteristics are we looking for in others? Do we have different expectations of public figures than of people we live and work with everyday? Keep track of the different characteristics students expect of others and themselves.
- Do they expect different things of different people? Should everyone exhibit the same kinds of qualities? Must they all be consistent? That is, must someone be completely righteous for us to respect him or her? Think about a competitive athlete who fails in other areas of his life or a politician who commits adultery but remains in office.
- Is it right to call someone courageous when he performs an act of terrorism? Is it possible to respect the courage of an enemy in wartime even if we disagree with his political goals? There are a number of interesting questions to consider about the relationship between individual characteristics and public life. See what your students think.



***Group Activity 2: Politicians and public officers in disgrace.*** In this activity, name at least two politicians or public officers convicted of corruption or caught lying about public matters (see Handout 2).

### 3. Group Discussion: What political figures do you respect?

- Although many political figures have disappointed us in the past, encourage your students to see that many public figures do fulfill their obligations and honor their office. History is full of examples of people who perform the quiet work of democracy: they negotiate with others, respect differences of opinions, and deliberate about the public good. It is easy to remember the bad examples because usually they are exceptions.



#### **Knowing the Facts!**

In Handout 3, we have included some facts about the structure of the American political system. This information is intended to challenge some of the negative attitudes that people have about public life. Check it out!

### 4. Group Discussion: Where does the cynicism about public life come from? Is it healthy?

- Citizens have a right to be disappointed when officials betray the public trust. But when we assume that everyone is corrupt and out to serve their own interests, we ignore the reality of honest, fair work. If every politician ignored the public good and every citizen failed to support public life, we would live in a very different world.
- There are many countries where corruption is the rule and not the exception. If you could not trust that the majority of citizens will obey the law think about how difficult ordinary life would be. Would you feel safe in your car if nobody obeyed the traffic rules? Would you want to eat in a restaurant if health regulations were ignored? We can take many things for granted because we live in a world that obeys the rule of law and sets high standards for politicians.
- Skepticism encourages people to ask questions, to find out what is wrong and how things can be changed. Cynicism, on the other hand, discourages people from pursuing the truth or making a difference. Asking tough questions keeps public officials honest.

#### **Internet Resources**



If you wish to check how each country ranks in terms of **Index of Perceived Corruption**, check this website:

<http://www.worldaudit.org/corruption.htm>

# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

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- ❖ Cynicism about public life is pervasive, but it may not be merited.
- ❖ The clear majority of public servants work hard and are honorable.
- ❖ Politics impact all of us, regardless of our attitudes.
- ❖ Skepticism is healthy and necessary in a democracy.
- ❖ Cynicism undermines democracy because it discourages people from thinking they can make a difference or that things can be changed for the better.

## KEY TERMS or CONCEPTS

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

- ❖ **Corruption:** Impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle; inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means (as bribery); a departure from the original or from what is pure or correct.
- ❖ **Cynicism:** Having or showing the attitude or temper of a cynic; especially, contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives.
- ❖ **Ethics:** The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation; a set of moral principles or values; a theory or system of moral values; the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group; a guiding philosophy.
- ❖ **Principles:** A set of comprehensive and fundamental laws, doctrines, or assumptions; rules or codes of conduct; the laws or facts of nature underlying the working of an artificial device.
- ❖ **Private:** Intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person, group, or class; belonging to or concerning an individual person, company, or interest; restricted to the individual or arising independently of others.
- ❖ **Public:** Of, relating to, or affecting all the people or the whole area of a nation or state; of or relating to a government; of, relating to, or being in the service of the community or nation; of or relating to people in general; of or relating to business or community interests as opposed to private affairs; accessible to or shared by all members of the community; capitalized in shares that can be freely traded on the open market.
- ❖ **Skepticism:** An attitude of doubt or a disposition to incredulity either in general or toward a particular object; the doctrine that true knowledge or knowledge in a particular area is uncertain; the method of suspended judgment, systematic doubt, or criticism characteristic of skeptics; doubt concerning basic religious principles.



## 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:

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

# ***DICTIONARY and INFORMATION LINKS***

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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](http://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 CYNICISM AND CITIZENSHIP***

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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.

## **⊕ *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/>

## **⊕ *Character Education Partnership (CEP)***

The CEP is a coalition of organizations and individuals working together to develop moral character and civic qualities in the nation's youth to create a more compassionate and responsible society. The members of this partnership believe in the implementation of character education throughout the learning process.

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

## **⊕ *Activism 2000 Project***

The goal of this web site is to encourage the participation of the young in local public matters. The site provides advice for and models of civic participation by the young. As the program members claim, Activism 2000 project seeks to prove that MINORS can play a MAJOR ROLE. There is also information for parents, mentors, teachers, principals, policy-makers and all those interested in collaborating with youth in order to achieve positive community change.

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

## **⊕ *Character Counts***

Character Counts is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian coalition of schools, communities and nonprofit organizations working to advance character education by teaching the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

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

# ***CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT***

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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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