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Intro to Government

“Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.”

- Thomas Paine

Introduction

In order to be a successful member of society, one must be able to understand the way that our government functions. It is the civic duty of citizens to vote, and to do so in an informed way; it is also beneficial to understand how elected officials actually do their jobs. This module is meant to serve as a very quick breakdown of how the major components and levels of our government work so that students can approach policy in an informed manner.

Objectives

1. Students will be able to understand the basic structure of the United States government and the purpose of having multiple levels.

Agenda

1. Separation of Power
2. Federalism
3. 3 Levels
4. Elections
5. Congress 101
6. Inherency
7. Activities

Content

Separation of Powers

Purpose:

To explain the basic system of checks and balances that the United States operates on.

Sources:

1. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/separation-of-powers-an-overview.aspx>

Lecture Notes:

- The US government uses checks and balances so one group can't be solely responsible in government. For example, even if a bill passes through the legislative branch, the executive branch (the president) can veto it and send it back to be changed before it is passed into law.
- The 3 branches are the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches. Executive is the office of the president and the white house. Legislative is Congress. Judicial is the system of courts. The Executive branch appoints Court justices, but Legislative has to approve them. The legislative branch has the power to impeach the president, who represents the executive branch.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the 1970s, the US went to war with Vietnam without congressional approval, even though congress has to issue any declarations of war. In this situation, the separation of power seemed to not have an effect. Based on this event, does separation of power even really matter?
2. Why not just give all power to Congress since members are all elected by smaller portions of the population?
3. What is the benefit of the President being able to veto a bill passed by congress? If congress is representative of the peoples' voices, why should 1 person have the power to negate them?

Federalism

Purpose:

To explain the federalist system.

Sources:

1. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/american-government/chapter/introduction-3/>

Lecture Notes:

- **Federalism** - Federalism is a type of government in which the power is divided between the national government and other governmental units. It contrasts with a unitary government, in which a central authority holds the power, and a confederation, in which states, for example, are clearly dominant.
- Federalism is intended to both safeguard state interests while creating a strong union led by an effective centralized national government. Federalism divides power between multiple vertical layers or levels of government—national, state, county, parish, local, special district—allowing for multiple access points for citizens.
- **Dual federalism** is a political arrangement in which power is divided between the federal and state governments in clearly defined terms
- The Great Depression marked an abrupt end to dual federalism and a dramatic shift to a strong national government.
- Under the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, **all powers not granted to the federal government are reserved for the states and the people**. All state governments are modeled after the federal government and consist of three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial.
- In contrast, a **unitary** system involved a highly centralized authority with little power to the people. (This was the rule under the British king).

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the pros and cons of having an extremely centralized or decentralized government in a federal system?

2. Nullification is a right for the state to nullify any law from the federal government that they deem unconstitutional. Doesn't this defeat the purpose of federalism?

3 Levels

Purpose:

Explain how each level of government functions: local, state, federal

Sources:

1. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/state-local-government/>
2. <https://www.biblemoneymatters.com/what-factors-have-an-affect-your-property-taxes-and-how-much-you-pay/>

Lecture Notes:

- Local
 - Whereas the federal government and state governments share power in countless ways, a local government must be granted power by the state. In general, mayors, city councils, and other governing bodies, even school boards are directly elected by the people.
 - **Local government** is responsible for a range of vital services for people and businesses in defined areas. Among them are well known functions such as social care, schools, housing and planning and waste collection, but also lesser known ones such as licensing, business support, registrar services and pest control.
 - Property taxes are directly influenced by your local government and are dependent on the needs of the city, township, county, school district, etc.
- State
 - Modeled after federal government and has the 3 branches
 - **Executive:**
 - governor, elected officials, secretary of state
 - **Legislative:**
 - general assembly aka mini congress
 - approves state budgets and taxes
 - **Judicial:**
 - state supreme court
 - no trials because it focuses on correcting mistakes of lower level courts
 - They plan and pay for most roads, run public schools, provide water, organize police and fire services, establish zoning regulations, license professions, and arrange elections for their citizens.
- Federal
 - Declares War
 - Regulates commerce
 - Manage foreign relations
 - Oversees Trade
 - Creates laws necessary for carrying out these tasks
 - Manages Immigration Law

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think it is necessary to have multiple levels of government?

Elections

Purpose:

To explain different systems of electing officials.

Sources:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48EZKXweGDo>
2. <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/about.html>

Lecture Notes:

Electoral College

- The Electoral College is a body of electors established by the United States Constitution, constituted every four years for the sole purpose of electing the president and vice president of the United States.
- Each state's number of electors is equal to the combined total of the state's membership in the Senate and House of Representatives; currently there are 100 senators and 435 representatives.
- Supporters of the Electoral College argue that it is fundamental to American federalism, that it requires candidates to appeal to voters outside large cities, increases the political influence of small states, discourages the excessive growth of political parties and preserves the two-party system, and makes the electoral outcome appear more legitimate than that of a nationwide popular vote
- Opponents of the Electoral College argue that it can result in a person becoming president even though an opponent got more votes, that it causes candidates to focus their campaigning disproportionately in a few "swing states" while ignoring most areas of the country; and that its allocation of Electoral College votes gives citizens in less populated states (e.g. Wyoming) as much as four times the voting power as those in more populous states
- The electoral college has a total of 538 and a presidential candidate needs a majority of 270 to win

Plurality System

- An electoral process in which the candidate who polls more votes than any other candidate is elected.

Majority System

- To win, a candidate must receive more votes than all other candidates combined.

Proportional Representation

- Characterizes electoral systems in which divisions in an electorate are reflected proportionately in the elected body [1] If n% of the electorate support a particular political party as their favorite, then roughly n% of seats will be won by that party.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think money should be involved in elections?
2. Is it possible for someone who came from poverty to run for office? Are there innate roadblocks that may prevent them from doing this?

Congress 101

Purpose:

Explain how congress is set up and the power it holds.

Sources:

3. <https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-congress-definition-duties-effect-on-economy-3305980>

Lecture Notes:

- 2 chambers of Congress, the Senate and the House of Representatives
 - Every state gets 2 senators, but house representatives are proportional by population of a state.
 - Currently there are 100 senators and 435 Representatives
- The House
 - 20 committees that meet on specific areas of policy
 - Commissions serve as advisory bodies for investigative or policy-related issues, or to carry out administrative, interparliamentary, or commemorative tasks. These are usually temporary
 - All members must be at least 25 years old
 - Serve in terms of 2 years
 - Speaker of the House is 3rd in line for White House succession
- The Senate
 - Also works in committees
 - 6 year terms, with rotating election years so that there are new senators every 2 years
 - Must be 30 years old

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the purpose of having both chambers of Congress? Would one be better?
 - a. Senate gives more representation to smaller states and house gives more voice to larger population ones

Inherency

Purpose:

To explain reasons why things don't get done.

Sources:

1. Last year's modules

Lecture Notes:

Structural Inherency

- A law, rule, or fact of life is the cause of harm that the discussion is focusing on.
- Gap Inherency
 - While the problem and its cause has been recognized, not enough has been done to adequately address it.
 - Advocating for change after acknowledging not enough is being done works to solve the issues presented by gap inherency.
- Attitudinal Inherency
 - The barrier to people solving the problem exists within their attitudes: their perception towards the problem is what is causing the problem to exist
 - Public perception plays a major part in change(s) made in government. Activists can utilize this by influencing attitudes that might be creating problems inhibiting solutions from being produced and put into effect.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the effects of inherency on policy and our views of politics? (i.e. There are lots of petitions online but nothing seems to come of them. Does this affect our view of our voice or representation?)

Activities

Inherency Discussion

Purpose:

Students will debate their opinions on Inherency.

Materials: None

Directions: Ask students “**Why do you think things don’t get done in society / government?**” and pitch ideas to direct conversation and debate.

Facilitator Notes:

- Encourage the students to think about multiple factors such as media, polarization, politicians, social constructs
- Facilitate conversation and moderate but do not restrict the students as these are topics critical to understanding their opinions on politics and society.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why don’t things get done in society and government?
2. Do you think protests/marches are effective? Petitions and fundraisers?
3. What effect does polarization play in inherency?
4. What effect does the media have on inherency? Is media activism beneficial or detrimental to inherency?
5. How has inherency desensitized society?

Election Formulator (15 minutes) *optional*

Purpose:

To let students come up with the most effective method of elections.

Materials:

Groups

Directions:

Place students into 2 groups. Tell them that there was an attack on their government and they are all the people that are left, and they have to decide who’s gonna be the next person in charge. Give them some time to figure out how they’re going to decide, then make them actually choose. The leaders of the groups then have to give a speech to explain why they are a legitimately chosen leader (i.e. why they deserve the position).
Virtual learning notes: Shorten the time to not lose engagement. Place the two groups into separate breakout rooms.

Discussion:

1. Was the leader chosen based on their skills/action plans? Or their traits?
2. Should the population be trusted with choosing a single leader? (tie to electoral college)

Drawing Political Lines (10 minutes) *optional*

Note:

This activity is hard to do online. It can be done using annotations and whiteboards but

this is probably an activity best to leave out during online classes.

Purpose:

Students will understand the difference between policy and politics, how they impact each other, and how they are connected.

Materials:

Dry Erase Markers

Directions:

Take two volunteers and send them to separate breakout rooms with the whiteboard feature. The pair has a goal: they have to draw a scorpion within 2 minutes, explain this to the remaining students and divide them among the breakout rooms. In the first 30 seconds, the only people who can talk and direct the volunteers are the audience members. The second 30 second interval, only the volunteers can talk. At the last minute, everyone can talk. Afterwards, lead the class in a discussion. Ask what the hardest part of the activity was. Try and get them to the idea that interacting with each other was what was hard. In theory, policy creation isn't actually that difficult. The part that is hard is the necessity of multiple influences and compromise. When a lot of people are talking at once, even the most simple of tasks can seem impossible, especially when there are multiple ways to do it. This is an analogy for policy and politics, as policies are often blocked by politics.

Facilitate the definitions of politics and policy, explaining the similarities, differences, and interactions when teaching public policy.

Discussion:

1. What is the public policy here? The politics?
2. What is the difference between policy and politics?
3. How do politics impact policy, and vice versa?
4. Are the two mutually exclusive, or are they connected to each other?
 - a. How do the two interact?
5. What is the importance of a policy education at the intersection of policy and politics?

Resources for additional activities: <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/civic-lesson-plans/>