

Lesson Title: Follow the Money

Subjects

U.S. History, U.S. Government, Civics

Suggested Time

One to two 50-minute class periods

Grade Level

7-12

Essential Question

How do money and lobbyists shape our legislative process?

Objective

Students understand the influence of donations and lobbyists in the legislative election system. Students trace the flow of money from individuals, industries, and organizations to legislators.

Overview

Students will view the *We The Voters* films “Disrupt Lobbying” and “I’m Just a \$100 Bill” to learn about the role and influence of money and interest groups on elections, candidates, and the lawmaking process. Students then will access OpenSecrets.org and record their findings about current donations to members of Congress by NGOs and corporations.

Materials

- *We The Voters* film “I’m Just a \$100 Bill”
- *We The Voters* film “Disrupt Lobbying”
- Copies of Student Handouts
 - Handout #1: Viewing Guide
 - Handout #2: Role of Money Investigation
 - Website: Open Secrets (opensecrets.org)

Procedure

Warm-up Activity: Let students know that they will be examining the role of money and interest groups in elections and in the lawmaking process. Ask the students: How much money do they think was spent during the last election cycle? How much in 2014? How many lobbyists do they think there were in 2000? In 2016?

Main Activity: Play the *We the Voters* film “I’m Just a \$100 Bill.” Have students complete the video questions in Handout #1: Viewing Guide as they watch. Discuss the film and Viewing Guide questions. Be sure to discuss that interest groups form Political Action Committees (PACs) and use the money to donate to political campaigns and influence lawmakers by lobbying them. Next, play the *We the Voters* film “Disrupt Lobbying,” and have students complete Handout #1: Viewing Guide as they watch. After viewing the film, discuss the answers and re-iterate the idea that all lobbyists are not “bad,” as commonly perceived. Lobbyists include organizations that work to protect the citizens, as well as advance the interests of businesses.

Role of Money Investigation: Go to the Open Secrets website (<http://www.opensecrets.org>) to the Influence & Lobbying tab and select Lobbying to see the answers from the Warm-up Activity.

Then, distribute Handout #2: Role of Money Investigation, and let the students know they are going to investigate the role of money using the website Open Secrets. Have the students complete the handout independently or in pairs. After investigating the contributions of interest groups, students will investigate industry sectors and which candidates they donate to more often. Upon completion of their investigation, conduct a discussion on their findings. What lawmakers are receiving the most money and from whom? Which industries donated more to Democrats? Republicans? How did their investigation match up to the information they learned from the *We The Voters* films? What can we do to reduce the influence of money on the lawmaking process?

Extension Activities

1. For further investigation have the students go to [Debatepedia](http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate:_Citizens_United_v._Federal_Election_Commission) ([http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate: Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission](http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate:_Citizens_United_v._Federal_Election_Commission)) and examine the pros and cons of interests groups in elections, and the *Citizens United* decision. Conduct a Socratic Seminar around the question “Should corporations be able to spend without limit in elections?” where students fuse their Debatepedia and Open Secrets findings to construct arguments with their evidence.
2. Have students read up on the *Citizens United* decision and its impact on elections and discuss campaign finance reform options. Distribute a copy of the Constitutional Rights Foundation’s Article “[Elections, Money, and the First Amendment](http://www.crf-usa.org/images/pdf/members/Elections-Money-Politics.pdf)” (<http://www.crf-usa.org/images/pdf/members/Elections-Money-Politics.pdf>) and have students read the article. Next, have students select one of the four given options in the “Activity” section of the article to complete a paragraph or essay response. Then in groups of four, have students share and discuss their choice. The students will then share out their responses and discuss the results as a class. Complete the extension by voting on the four options.

Standards

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7

Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

D2Civ.2.9-12 Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system.

D2Civ.4.9-12 Explain how the U.S. Constitution establishes a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits that have changed over time and that are still contested.

D2Civ.5.9-12 Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2Civ.9.9-12 Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education)

Standard 3: Understands the sources, purposes, and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good

Standard 9: Understands the importance of Americans sharing and supporting certain values, beliefs, and principles of American constitutional democracy.

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

Standard 20: Understands the roles of political parties, campaigns, elections, and associations and groups in American politics