

GOVERNMENT BY CONSENT: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13

Congressional Elections

Video Synopsis: As the camera slips behind the scenes of a carefully orchestrated three-month campaign, students get a good look at the reality behind the baby-kissing, hand-shaking, and 30-second sound bites made for public consumption. Focusing close up on congressional campaigning brings together for your students all the elements of the political process—interest groups, PACs, political parties, media influence, and grass roots politics.

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Overview: Before deciding to seek a seat in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives, individuals must answer many personal questions. They also must determine if they have a chance to win: Is there an incumbent? How strong is my base of support? How will I finance a campaign? Will I accept PAC contributions, rely on my personal wealth, or apply for personal loans? How might possible redistricting and reapportionment, as a result of the census, dilute my support or mean I suddenly have to face a more formidable opponent?

This lesson examines elections to the Congress of the United States. It surveys campaigns of candidates running for the first time and the re-election campaigns of incumbents. It is one of a series dealing with elections: nominating a president, electing a president, and selecting U.S. senators and representatives. Elements from other lessons on interest groups, PACs, and political parties help your students see how each component interacts within the political process and within the structure of government itself.

Those of us who choose not to become candidates still play two important roles in congressional elections: 1) the backbone of most campaigns is the volunteers who carry out the campaign strategies designed by the professionals. 2) Each of us needs to be well informed about the candidates for congressional office and about the election process, so that we can cast our votes wisely.

Learning Objectives: After watching the video program, your students should be able to:

- Discuss what influences a person to run for Congress.
- Look critically at campaign strategies and campaign financing.
- Know how to become informed well enough to cast their votes wisely.

Key Words:

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| Incumbent | PAC |
| Public campaign financing congressional campaign committee | |
| House of Representatives | Senate |
| Direct mail | Political consultants |

Focus Questions: Before viewing the program, have students read over the following questions to help focus their thoughts. After the presentation, have them write out their responses to help them remember these important points and/or discuss their answers with the class. Some of the focus questions make good topics for classroom debate.

1. What factors influence a person's decision to run for the House or the Senate?
2. What are the advantages of being an incumbent?
3. What are the primary financial sources for a congressional candidate?
4. How is television used in a congressional campaign?
5. How is direct mail used in a congressional campaign?
6. How is polling used in a congressional campaign?
7. How are political consultants used in a congressional campaign?
8. How are volunteers used in a congressional campaign?
9. What reforms have occurred, and what reforms are still needed, in congressional campaigns?

Getting Involved: After the 1996 presidential elections, both parties called for campaign finance reform. Give your students a chance to debate the pros and cons of some of the proposed reforms. One proposal is to publicly finance all presidential and congressional campaigns, thus eliminating the influence of wealthy individuals and large interest groups. Another proposal is to outlaw contributions from PACs. A third approach is to have all candidates disclose to the public where every dollar of their campaign funds comes from. Students may want to share ideas of their own about ways to reform political campaigns.

Government by Consent is a series of twenty-two 30-minute video programs. Title of the programs: 1. Government and You; 2. The Living Constitution; 3. The Constitution Crisis; 4. Federalism; 5. Local Government; 6. Political Participation; 7. Interest Groups; 8. The Power of PACs; 9. Government and the Media; 10. Political Parties; 11. Nominating a President; 12. Presidential Campaigning; 13. Congressional Elections; 14. Congress; 15. The Legislative Process; 16. The Presidency; 17. The President and Congress; 18. The Bureaucracy; 19. Domestic Policy; 20. Foreign Policy; 21. The Judiciary; 22. The Judicial Selection Process.

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