

Grab 'em while They're Young

(Before They Become Disillusioned and Cynical)!

Sally Broughton

It was like a starter's gun had fired: When the first students called the Voter's Research Hotline around 3:30PM, all the Hotline researchers hit the phones and, for what seemed like hours, helped students across the country with their civics homework.

In the pre-Internet world of 1992, a new organization called Project Vote Smart used the highest technology available—a toll-free Voter's Research Hotline—to help voters get the facts about candidates and elected officials. Designed to give voters the tools they needed to “Vote Smart,” (the backgrounds, issue positions, voting records, campaign contributions, and special interest group ratings of their own candidates for president, Congress and governor), the Hotline connected voters with questions to 50 student interns and volunteers at Oregon State University who could give them answers almost 24 hours a day.

They took calls from elementary students wanting to know Bill Clinton's position on “eggs” (AIDS), and from high school students who were assigned to research the backgrounds and positions of all the presidential candidates on offshore oil drilling (yes, even back then)! When it was clear that the calls were clogging the Hotline, Vote Smart asked teachers to appoint a class representative to make one call per class so voters could get their calls through. Since that time, teachers and students increasingly have valued and used Vote Smart's enormous databases on federal and state candidates and elected officials over the Hotline and the Vote Smart website (www.votesmart.org).

National leaders and former politi-

cal opponents like Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, Barry Goldwater and George McGovern, and thousands of other leaders and citizens from all sides of the political spectrum banded together to provide a spin-free zone for learning about government, candidates, and elections. Funded entirely by foundation grants and individual contributions, Vote Smart takes no position on any issue and doesn't support or oppose any party or candidates.

But not until now, after 18 years of award-winning programs to help citizens vote smart, has Project Vote Smart been able to focus on catching the attention of future smart voters, before they become cynical, frustrated and fed up with civic and political life, and disillusioned by the actions of political leaders and government.

Through a collaboration between Vote Smart, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, and award-winning civics teachers—such as the author of this article (2008 American Civics Education Teacher Award and Montana 2009 Teacher of the Year), Deanna Collins, and Erica Schnee—curriculum materials for 4th–12th grade teachers and students are now available. What wonderful teaching opportunities in the 2010 election and the 2011–2012 presidential election cycle—a clear “teachable moment” just ahead.

How do you actively engage students in the election process by using the somewhat overwhelming resources of the Vote Smart website? Are the resources of Vote Smart only useful to teachers of government on a high school level? To dispel any doubts about the versatility and adaptability of the Vote Smart website, and to facilitate the efforts of the classroom teachers, Vote Smart has developed sets of four lessons for each of the following levels: elementary school with an emphasis on grades 4 and 5, middle school grades 6, 7, and 8, and high school.

One of the lessons on each level is designed to first introduce the students to the availability of the vast store of information on www.votesmart.org. Additional lessons challenge the students to move through the information on the site to answer essential questions such as: *Who represents you in the legislative branch of the state government? How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation? What are my political rights? Are there implications for the American political system when interest groups donate large sums of money to candidates' campaigns? Does a relationship with a special interest group impact how a member of Congress votes on legislation?*

Each lesson plan begins with *Essential Questions* followed by *Learning Objectives*. Correlations have been made

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Project Vote Smart: Special Interest Group Lesson

Grade Level: 9-12

Essential Question: Does a relationship with a special interest group impact how a member of Congress votes on legislation?

Objective: Students will understand how a politician's connection to special interest groups may or may not impact the way he or she votes.

National Standards Addressed: This lesson addresses the following National Standards for Civics and Government, 9-12 Content Standards:

- II.B. *What are the distinctive characteristics of American society?*
- II.C. *What is American political culture?*
- III.E. *How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?*
- IV.C. *How has the United States influenced other nations, and how have other nations influenced American politics and society?*
- V.D. *What civic dispositions or traits of private and public character are important to the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy?*
- V.E. *How can citizens take part in civic life?*

Essential Background:

Prior to this lesson students should have a good understanding of the Vote Smart website and be able to navigate through it relatively easily. If you have not used this website in class very much, your students may need more guidance on finding the information for this lesson. An introductory lesson that allows students to learn about the website is available.

Students should be familiar with the members of Congress from their state.

Students should have a basic understanding of what special interest groups are and their role in policymaking.

Students should be familiar with current policy issues, as well as the issues presented in Vote Smart's Political Courage Test. You may wish to use the Vote Smart website beforehand for a lesson on key issues in American politics (using either the Vote Smart list or Political Courage Test).

Check ahead of time to ensure that the members of Congress from your state have completed the Political Courage Test. Check carefully, as many have completed the test for some issues, but not all. If they have not taken the test, you may want to modify your instructions to include key members of Congress or members from a neighboring state.

Materials:

Computer access for students

Special Interest Group handouts for students

Teacher Instructions:

1. Direct students to www.votesmart.org.
2. Have students complete the handout, "Special Interest Groups and Their Impact."
3. Have students discuss the information they gathered and share their reflections either in small groups or a Socratic seminar format.

Special Interest Groups and Their Impact

Essential Question: Does a relationship with a special interest group impact how a member of Congress votes on legislation?

1. Go to www.votesmart.org.
2. Find one of the members of Congress from your home state (either by entering your zip code or selecting officials).
3. Choose "Interest Group Rankings" and find a rating where your member of Congress scores particularly high or low. Follow that interest group by clicking on it and looking at its website. What are the primary goals of that special interest group? Based on the goals, what is the primary issue that concerns the group?
4. Return to Vote Smart to see if your politician has completed the Political Courage Test with regard to the issue you selected above. If so, what is their stance on that issue?

Note: Many politicians have not completed the Political Courage Test or have not completed it in its entirety. If your politician does not take a stance on this issue, please state that below.

How does your politician's stance on that issue compare with the views of the interest group you selected in number 3?
5. To take a closer look at the stance of your politician on this issue, navigate to his or her Speeches and Public Statements. Using the key word search, try to find any speeches he or she has made regarding your issue. What kind of messages are discussed in these statements? Are the views expressed consistent with their Political Courage Test and interest group ranking?
6. Next navigate to the Campaign Finances section to find out if the interest group has donated any funds to your candidate in the most recent election cycle. If so, how much? (Project Vote Smart includes only major contributors, so you may look on other websites as well for more detailed information).
7. Your last step is to determine if the relationship with a special interest group has had an impact on the way your senator or representative has voted. Go to his or her voting record and search for your issue (you may need to use a broader topic if your issue is very specific. For example, instead of looking up adoption laws, you might have to look up social issues or family issues). What are one to three key pieces of legislation on which your politician voted and what was his or her vote?

Is this voting record consistent with his or her statements and Political Courage Test? How does his or her voting record reflect the views of the interest group you selected?

Reflection: Do you believe a relationship with a special interest group impacts how a member of Congress votes on legislation? Explain.

MIDDLE SCHOOL LESSON

Meet Your Senators www.votesmart.org

Grade Level: 5-8

Essential Questions: What are the names of the senators who represent your state? How long have they been in office? Can you discover their viewpoints on issues that are important to you?

Objectives Upon completion students will:

- Know the names and political parties of the senators who represent them in Washington.
- Know some personal information about their senators.
- Be familiar with their committee assignments, dates for reelection, and seniority.
- Know the responsibilities of senators and how to contact them on matters of interest.
- Understand how to navigate the Vote Smart website to obtain information.
- Have explored the Vote Smart website and will feel comfortable navigating the site.

Standards: *National Standards for Civics and Government, Grades 5 - 8*

I. What Are Civic Life, Politics, and Government?

III. How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?

Essential Background:

Students will be familiar with the Vote Smart website and will understand how to navigate through the information. Students will have a basic understanding of the organization and responsibilities of national government.

Materials:

Computers with access to the Internet
Worksheet—Meet Your Senators

Instructions for the Teachers

1. Conduct a class discussion to access the prior knowledge of the students about the national government.
2. Have the students access the Vote Smart website (www.votesmart.org).
3. Distribute two Meet Your Senators worksheets per student and assist the students as necessary.
4. Lead a discussion on each of the worksheet questions when all students have completed the work.



Students work with the vast database at Project Vote Smart through the website www.votesmart.org

Credit: Project Vote Smart, 2010

Meet Your Senators Worksheet

Name: _____

Process: Go to the website (www.votesmart.org)

Go to the home page

Select your state

Find the answers to the following questions by looking at the information about your senator.

Complete one sheet for each senator.

Name of Senator _____

Political Party _____

How many children? _____

How old is he or she? _____

Hometown? _____

Education? _____

When was he or she elected? _____

What political experience has he or she had? _____

What are his or her committee assignments? _____

List two recent key votes and how he or she voted:

1. _____

2. _____

What is his or her email address? _____

What are two other ways to contact the senator to express your opinion or get help on a specific issue?

A. _____

B. _____

Go to the Data Visualization.

Are either of the senators up for re-election? _____

Explore their positions on some issues.

ELEMENTARY LESSON

State Governor

Grade Level: K-4

Essential Questions:

What is the name of the governor who represents the state you are researching? How long is his or her term? Discover one political issue on which the governor has voted.

Objectives:

After completing the activity student will:

- Be able to locate biographical information about a state governor.
- Know some political information about their assigned governor.
- Know some personal facts about their governor.

Standards: *National Standards for Civics and Government (K-4)*

- I. *What Is Government and What Should It Do?*
- III. *How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?*

Essential Background:

Students will be familiar with the Vote Smart website and will understand how to navigate through the information. Students should have a basic understanding of state and local government.

Materials:

Computers with Internet access.

Worksheet – State Governor.

Instructions for Teachers:

Have students access the Vote Smart website (www.votesmart.org).

Monitor students' ability to utilize and manipulate through the web site.

State Governor—Worksheet

Name: _____

Process: Go to www.votesmart.org – home page.

Select your state.

Find the answers to the following questions by looking up information about your state governor.

What is the name of the governor of your state? _____

With which party is he or she affiliated? _____

When was he or she elected? _____

How long is his or her term? _____

Where was he or she born? _____

Where did he or she go to school? _____

What is one political issue on which the governor has [signed into law]? _____

Add any other interesting information you found about the governor of your state. _____

What is the address for your state governor? _____

for each lesson to the *National Standards for Civics and Government*. Each individual lesson contains a listing of the background information necessary for students, teacher instructions, additional activities, usually a worksheet, a list of materials, and suggestions for classroom discussion. The lessons may be conducted in any setting that has computers and Internet access, or as a homework assignment. Students may work individually, with partners, or as a whole group.

What are the benefits to teachers, our communities, and our nation of having the students use a nationally-recognized website to make politics and government come to life in the classroom? In our efforts to develop active, engaged, and participating citizens, teachers need to provide students with the skills and tools to become informed participants in our representative democracy. How will they acquire the information needed to

demand honest, civil political campaigns by the candidates? How will they learn how to look over the shoulders of their representatives and monitor their job performance? How will they discern how a candidate will govern if elected?

As Abraham Lincoln once said,

A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting, and when you are gone, attend to those things that you think are important. You may adopt all the policies you please, but how they are carried out depends on him. He will assume control of your cities, states, and nations. He is going to move in and take over your churches, schools, universities, and corporations ... the fate of humanity is in his hands.

Vote Smart is offering tools for our young citizens to acquire the body of knowledge and the skills they need.

Vote Smart has developed a website

which is not only unbiased, it is also free and accessible to anyone. Featuring interactive, automated research tools for all ages, students and adults may obtain information on federal and state candidates and elected officials. What better antidote to the irresponsibility and loss of civility that now plagues our civic dialogue and institutions? Through exposure to the grade-specific Civics Matters lesson plans and interactive, automated research tools, our country's future leaders and voters will grow up with an ethic for civil, informed, and thoughtful participation in civic life. 🌐

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DEANNA COLLINS contributed the elementary lesson plan "State Governor."

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