

# If I Only Could—Fred’s Civics

C. Frederick Risinger

A conference I attended recently, as well as current domestic and international events, have caused me to reflect long and hard about both the content and methodology of contemporary civic instruction in the United States today. The recommended websites and suggestions in this month’s column are selected based on how I would be teaching if I were in the classroom today—if I had the flexibility that I had when I was teaching in the 1960s and early ’70s. That was a time before “common core” and national standards existed and when the movement called “the New Social Studies” began. I was fortunate to be teaching in a suburban Chicago high school that was innovative, implemented team teaching, and encouraged teachers to try new methodologies and materials. I taught history, sociology, and the required 12th grade U.S. government class. John Kennedy, and then, Lyndon Johnson, was drawn into the Vietnam War, the civil rights era began, the Beatles came to the U.S., Americans went into space and landed on the moon, and hippies were everywhere. I could try out teaching methods and all kinds of materials and was supported by the administration. One year, I used a daily newspaper instead of a textbook for two classes and compared the student test results with those in regular classes. (The newspaper classes did as well or better.) I took all government students to see Robert Redford’s film *The Candidate* because I thought it accurately portrayed U.S. politics. I had my students work in teams to follow major political campaigns throughout the nation and make predictions on who would win. Then, on election night, the students brought sleeping

bags to school. We put several television sets around the cafeteria, ordered pizzas, and watched election returns all night long to see which student team’s predictions were accurate. It was a great time to be teaching social studies!

Today, with the Common Core and both state and local standards, it’s impossible to have the flexibility and freedom that I was fortunate enough to experience. Yet, I believe that the U.S. and the world are experiencing and being confronted by issues that are so significant and alarming that, without major decisions and actions—nationally and internationally—the world of the future will be frightening and perilous.

So, as I say in this column’s title, “If I Could,” I’m going to tell you what topics and issues I would be teaching in my U.S. government/civics class today. These are issues that I believe U.S. students should learn about in order to meet the challenges facing our nation and the world. In methodology, I would be using a great deal of group work and I would be requiring students to search for, discuss, and understand all sides of issues and world problems. Therefore, I recommend my first website, ProCon ([www.procon.org/](http://www.procon.org/)). I want students to understand all sides of the issues associated with the topics I believe should be taught in today’s civics classes. I know I’ve recommended this site before, but I don’t know of any other resource that does what this one does. I’m not going to list as many sites as I usually do. Just type “Teaching about...” and insert the topic, and you’ll find plenty of information and resources. Now, here are the topics I would teach.

## Topic #1: Global Warming

Global warming is the most serious problem facing the world and its people. Its consequences could be catastrophic, and we honestly don’t have much time. Those who contend that it doesn’t exist or isn’t that important are terribly wrong and are putting human life as we know it in jeopardy. Here are some sites to help you bring this topic into the classroom.

### National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

<http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>  
This NASA site provides a variety of ways to present all the proof one needs to know that global warming not only exists, but is already causing damage to major cities, food production areas, and important ocean resources.

### Climate Change Education

[www.climatechangeeducation.org/k-12/index.html](http://www.climatechangeeducation.org/k-12/index.html)

This is just one site that provides a variety of teaching tools, lesson plans, and other teaching resources.

## Topic #2: Growing Income Inequality in the United States

This issue is obviously a topic in this year’s national elections, but I believe that it’s more than just an election issue—it’s a threat to our national economy and the lifestyles of millions of U.S. citizens. It began to exacerbate in the late 1970s in the post-recession era and has continued to the point where the “Top 1 Percent” now controls more than 25 percent of America’s wealth, and the number of people in the economic middle class is growing. It is similar to the situation in the Roaring 20s era just before the

Great Depression. Many economists and sociologists are warning that not only is a major economic downturn likely, but social unrest will rise to dangerous levels. Students in our schools today, while being affected by this economic trend, know little about it or ways to bring about positive change. Here are some sites that could help you bring this issue to your classroom.

### Washington Center for Equitable Growth

<http://equitablegrowth.org/research-analysis/>

Click on the first study listed, “U.S. top one percent of income earners hit new high in 2015 amid strong economic growth” for a chart and data.

### PBS Newshour

[www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons\\_plans/lesson-plan-income-inequality-in-the-united-states/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/lesson-plan-income-inequality-in-the-united-states/)

This is an excellent lesson plan for grades 9-12 about an important issue that could be adapted for lower grades with some modifications. There are also some links to other sources that could help in teaching this somewhat touchy topic. They even show how the lesson is linked to Common Core standards.

### Topic #3: Campaign Finance Reform

I believe that the massive influx of corporate money, especially through Political Action Committees (PACS) and 527 organizations (which are tax exempt and considered “educational” groups) is corrupting U.S. politics and threatening true democracy in America. Yet, the topic is almost never discussed in American classrooms, even in civics/government classes. Further, I contend that most U.S. citizens don’t understand how campaign finance has changed and how dangerous it is to our way of government and our way of life. Here are a few sites that may help you understand the issue and bring this crucial topic into the classroom.

### PBS Newshour

[www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/2016/06/understanding-campaign-finance-law/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/2016/06/understanding-campaign-finance-law/)

This will help you understand the topic. I believe that this is a readable, relatively concise, source to give you, the teacher, a historical and contemporary understanding of the growth of 527 organizations and the *Citizens United* Supreme Court Case, which extended freedom of speech to corporations and allowed them to spend unlimited amounts of money on campaign issues.

### Northeastern University: U.S. Conventions and Campaigns

<http://conventions.cps.neu.edu/campaign-finance/lesson-plans/>

Northeastern University has a great site for studying U.S. elections, and they have an excellent article for this difficult topic. It has several videos that may help students. Click on “Lesson Plans” at the top right to see a very good lesson plan that is aligned with Common Core standards.

### The Connecticut State Network

[www.ctn.state.ct.us/civics/campaign\\_finance.asp](http://www.ctn.state.ct.us/civics/campaign_finance.asp)

Connecticut has an interesting website with resources for teachers. While some of the proposed activities are Connecticut-oriented, most are not. It’s for both middle and high school students and provides another good resource for this topic.

There are additional critical topics that I believe should be taught in today’s civics and government classes, but I’ve just about reached my word limit for this column. Other issues I would teach about include immigration reform, extending public support for education at least through junior college, and review of 2nd Amendment/gun control issues. These are important topics and, for the most part, play little or no role in the civics/government curriculum today. How can we expect our citizens to intelligently and thoughtfully make decisions at the polls (if they even go to the polls) without effective citizenship education in the public schools? 🌐



*C. FREDERICK RISINGER is retired from the School of Education at Indiana University. He welcomes input and suggestions for both column topics and websites that would be helpful for teachers. He believes that social studies/citizenship teachers need to work together to help all Americans realize how important social studies is to this nation.*