

**What Makes Lawmakers Tick?  
A Lesson Plan for High School  
Teachers of Civics, Government, and U.S. History**

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## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES, AND METHODS FOR TEACHERS**

This lesson on “What Makes Lawmakers Tick?” is designed for civics, American government, and history courses taught at the high school level. It follows upon two earlier lessons. The first is “Teaching Democracy Appreciation,” which deals with the fact that people have different values, interests, and priorities and that legislative bodies try to settle these differences by means of deliberation and negotiation, with compromises and majority votes as key elements. The second is “Appreciating Representation,” which shows how people elected to public office represent constituencies, while reflecting their own convictions, the positions of their political parties, interest group concerns, and the merits of the issues before them.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of this lesson is simple--to give students a sense of what lawmakers are really like. What makes them tick as elected public officials? What motivates them? How did they get where they are? What do they like and dislike about their jobs? What do students think of them? How would it be to follow in their footsteps?

### **Rationale**

The U.S. Congress and the legislatures of the 50 states are central institutions of representative democracy. They have functioned for more than 200 years, which is testimony to their durability. Nonetheless, Congress and state legislatures are not popular institutions. There are a number of reasons why Americans have become cynical.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These reasons are discussed at greater length in Alan Rosenthal, Burdett A. Loomis, John Hibbing, and Karl T. Kurtz, *Republic On Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2003), for those who wish to explore further.

One important reason is that Americans distrust the people who are elected to political office. They do not believe that members of Congress and state legislatures are motivated mainly to serve the public's interest, but rather to serve their own personal interest. They think that many politicians are crooked, perhaps even most of them. Even if those elected are essentially honest when they start out, a majority of Americans believe that it is almost impossible for individuals to stay honest after going into politics. In fact, fewer than one out of five people rate congressmen or state office-holders as "very high" or "high" on honesty and ethical standards.

At the state level, for example, New Jerseyans were asked how many politicians they thought were corrupt. Half the respondents replied that from 50 percent to 100 percent were corrupt. In most states, public assessments of their elected political officials would not differ much from the assessment in New Jersey. In low population states--like North Dakota, Wyoming and Vermont--people tend to be more positive. But just about everywhere else the distrust of elected public officials is widespread. Interestingly, when people are asked in public opinion surveys about their own congressman or state legislator (that is, the person who represents the district in which they live), on average seven out of 10 people respond positively. They trust their own representative; they just have little trust in the rest. The obvious question is, why don't they generalize from their own representative to others?

One reason they don't is that the dice are loaded against a positive generalization. It is almost impossible to regard legislators as a species in any affirmative way. The image that members of Congress and state legislators have today derives in part from the unethical or illegal behavior of some members. It is undeniable that there are lawmakers who behave unethically or

corruptly. Some members of Congress have been convicted of bribery, extortion, and other felonies. Some members have resigned under fire. During the past 30 years, state legislators have been tried and convicted as a result of sting operations in Arizona, California, Kentucky, South Carolina and Tennessee. In other states legislators have stepped over the ethical line. It should be pointed out, however, that these public officials have been elected by a plurality or majority of voters in their state or district.

In any barrel of apples you can expect that a few will be bad. Bad lawmaker apples exist, but they are a very small proportion of the 7,382 legislative and 535 congressional apples in the barrel. Unfortunately, it is mainly these few that the public hears about. They provide the basis for the public's generalizing from the few to the many.

Curiously, people have a much better idea of the few bad apples than they have of their own legislator. This is because, while most people have only a vague and fuzzy impression of their own representatives in Congress and the state legislature, their impression of lawmakers in general is more concrete, as illogical as this may seem. The picture that people have of lawmaking is largely a product of what they see and hear about in the media and in political campaigns. There's not much fuzzy about this.

The media's imperative is to accentuate the negative and underplay the positive. The media are the principal storytellers about political institutions, political processes, and political people. Although no single story in print or on television shapes people's orientation, the accumulation of negatives has effect over time. Political scientist Joseph Cooper describes media coverage of Congress as follows:

Politics and politicians are covered in ways that highlight conflict and controversy, on the one hand, and personal ambition and ethical lapses, on the other....The defining impression created is of Congress as a bunch of politicians squabbling over the distribution of benefits to special interests and jockeying for personal power while the needs of the country are ignored.

The same can be said of the coverage of state legislatures. The cliché, “no news is good news,” has a corollary: “good news, by and large, is no news.” In the idiom of journalism, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Thus, for the media, the more negative the better, while the scandalous is best. The media are not solely to blame. The media respond to public tastes, and in doing so create the picture of politicians that people carry in their heads.

Political campaigns work along the same lines. Today, the competition between the Democratic and Republican parties in the nation and most of the states is ferocious. The two parties represent different constituencies and promote different agendas. The stakes for each are high. Both parties and their candidates want to win and they do what they can to accomplish their objectives. One of the things they do is to attack the other side. This is because voters pay more attention to the negative in campaigning than to the positive. Part of the attack often includes a challenge to the integrity of the opposing candidate or the opposing party. Democrats accuse Republicans of fostering a “culture of corruption” in Washington, D.C. Republicans accuse Democrats of fostering a “culture of corruption” in New Jersey. And so it goes.

Charge and counter-charge have become a normal part of politics today. These charges not only appear on radio or television in paid political advertisements, they are also reported in the media. “He says, she says”--and the public response is that since they are both saying it, it’s probably true for both sides. Over time, the public’s impression is that no politician can be trusted.

**Problem**

With the help of the media and political campaigns, people generalize about lawmakers from what they see and hear, most of which is negative. Is it any wonder that their impression of lawmakers is the way it is? The fundamental question, however, is whether such a generalization makes sense. Self-serving, unethical and corrupt lawmakers--are they the rule, or the exception to the rule?

The civic education of high school students ought to address such questions. The lesson presented here has that objective in mind, which it tries to accomplish by giving the “good guys” equal time, so that students have a more balanced picture. The idea is for students to get a bit nearer political people--who they are, what motivates them, and what they do--by inviting them for a question-and-answer session in class. Familiarity, we believe, will breed understanding, not contempt.

The National Conference of State Legislatures currently sponsors a program that encourages state legislators to visit classrooms in elementary, middle and high schools. Each year more than 1,500 legislators from around the country participate and reach about 300,000 students. This lesson fits into that endeavor. It focuses on a member of Congress or the state legislature as a person who has chosen to run for public office, who has adapted to the jobs of representing and lawmaking, and who has to balance public and private responsibilities.

## **Procedure**

Invite a member of Congress or a state legislator to class to discuss his or her life as a lawmaker with students.

If you want to invite a lawmaker who represents the district in which your school is located, it is easy to obtain his or her name and contact information. Go to the Project Vote Smart website, which is [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org). On the left side of the page, enter the nine-digit zip code for your school. The server will show the name of the state's two U.S. senators, the U.S. representatives, and the senate and house members of the state legislature. If you click on any of their names, you will be given personal and contact information.

In preparation for the lawmaker's visit, the teacher should give the class the lesson handout (which is attached) to read in advance at home. This handout provides information on:

- (1) The number of lawmakers by state;
- (2) Their general backgrounds;
- (3) The reasons they run for public office;
- (4) How they get elected;
- (5) What their jobs are like; and
- (6) What they get out of legislative service.

This handout should serve as a basis for the questions students ask the lawmaker in class. In class, after reading the handout and before to the visit, students can frame the questions that they will ask the lawmakers. During the session itself, follow-up questions may be asked, depending upon what the lawmaker guest says. It is important that the class session focus on the

topics suggested in the handout. That way, students will get a good sense of what makes at least one lawmaker tick. They might consider generalizing to others.

The following are questions that are worth asking the lawmaker guest:

- (1) Why did you run? What did you hope to achieve in public office?
- (2) How hard was it to get elected? What did you have to do? What qualities did you need to be a good candidate?
- (3) Now that you're in office, how much time do you spend on the job? What part of the job do you like best? What part least? What personal qualities do you possess that help you do your job? Just what does it take?
- (4) How does being a lawmaker fit in with your private life? Do you have an outside job as well? How does your job as lawmaker affect your family?

After the lawmaker's visit, it would be useful for students to be assigned a brief essay, responding to the question, "What did I learn?" Whether they are assigned the essay or not, students should be debriefed in class on: what they learned; whether and how their view of lawmaking changed; and whether (and why or why not) they would consider undertaking careers in politics and public service.

## **Handout: What Makes Lawmakers Tick\***

What are people in elective public office like? Are they different from you and me?

Why do they run? Why do they serve? Do they care about the people they represent, their state and the public interest or are they just out for themselves?

Let's take a brief look at what makes members of the U.S. Congress and state legislatures tick.

### **Who they are**

First of all, there are relatively few of them. In a nation of more than 280 million people, only 7,917 serve as members of the U.S. Congress and members of the legislatures in the 50 states.

The accompanying table shows the number of members in the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, the state senate, and the state house for each state in the nation. In Congress, each state is represented in the Senate by two senators, no matter how large (California and Texas, for example) or how small (Wyoming and Vermont, for example) the population. For representation in the U.S. House, however, the size of the state population matters. The larger the population, the more representatives the state has. At the state legislative level, the number of members varies greatly. State senates are smaller than state houses, ranging in size from the 67-member senate in Minnesota to the 20-member senate in Alaska. State houses range from New Hampshire's 400 members to Alaska's 40. You can look up your own state and see how many members of the U.S. House and the state legislature it elects.

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--\* This essay is based on Alan Rosenthal, *Legislative Life* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, forthcoming), Chapter 2, and Lee Hamilton, "The Rewards of Public Service," The Center on Congress at Indiana University.

**NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF CONGRESS  
AND LEGISLATURES, BY STATE**

State	CONGRESS		STATE LEGISLATURE	
	Senate	House	Senate	House
Alabama	2	7	35	105
Alaska	2	1	20	45
Arizona	2	8	30	60
Arkansas	2	4	35	100
California	2	53	40	80
Colorado	2	7	35	65
Connecticut	2	5	36	151
Delaware	2	1	21	41
Florida	2	25	40	120
Georgia	2	13	56	180
Hawaii	2	2	25	51
Idaho	2	2	35	70
Illinois	2	19	59	118
Indiana	2	9	50	100
Iowa	2	5	50	100
Kansas	2	4	40	125
Kentucky	2	6	38	100
Louisiana	2	7	39	105
Maine	2	2	35	151

**NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF CONGRESS  
AND LEGISLATURES, BY STATE**  
(continued)

State	CONGRESS		STATE LEGISLATURE	
	Senate	House	Senate	House
Maryland	2	8	47	141
Massachusetts	2	10	40	160
Michigan	2	15	38	110
Minnesota	2	8	67	134
Mississippi	2	4	52	122
Missouri	2	9	34	163
Montana	2	1	50	100
Nebraska*	2	3	49	--
Nevada	2	3	21	42
New Hampshire	2	2	24	400
New Jersey	2	13	40	80
New Mexico	2	3	42	70
New York	2	29	62	150
North Carolina	2	13	50	120
North Dakota	2	1	47	94
Ohio	2	18	33	99
Oklahoma	2	5	48	101
Oregon	2	5	30	60
Pennsylvania	2	19	50	203

**NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF CONGRESS  
AND LEGISLATURES, BY STATE**  
(continued)

State	CONGRESS		STATE LEGISLATURE	
	Senate	House	Senate	House
Rhode Island	2	2	38	75
South Carolina	2	6	46	124
South Dakota	2	1	35	70
Tennessee	2	9	33	99
Texas	2	32	31	150
Utah	2	3	29	75
Vermont	2	1	30	150
Virginia	2	11	40	100
Washington	2	9	49	98
West Virginia	2	3	34	100
Wisconsin	2	8	33	99
Wyoming	2	1	30	60

\* Nebraska is a unicameral legislature, with a single chamber called a senate.

Like students in practically any high school, legislators differ from one another. Each one is

unique. In general, however, there are fewer women than men in legislative office, but more than previously. The numbers of African-Americans, Latinos and Asians in office have also increased. But the majority of congressmen and state legislators are white males. Most lawmakers have graduated from college and a good number have advanced degrees. A range of professions and occupations are represented--law, business, education and agriculture are among the principal ones.

Being in Congress is full-time, so members are not allowed to earn outside income. Being a state legislator, on the other hand, is considered a part-time job in most states, and most members also have other jobs. Just how much time state legislators spend as lawmakers varies from state to state. In New York, for example, about 85 percent of the members spend at least 70 percent of their time on the job. In South Dakota, by contrast, only 5 percent spend that much time.

Despite differences among them, congressmen and state legislators all have one characteristic in common. They are elected by voters in their states and districts.

### **Why do they run?**

Lee Hamilton, who served for many years in the U.S. House, then co-chaired the 9/11 Commission, and now directs the Center on Congress at Indiana University, writes that: "...most people come into Congress with a sense of idealism. They have a commitment to public service and they want to do good--to help their constituency, their state, and their country as each of them sees it." The same can be said for lawmakers in the states. They, too, are committed to public service. They, too, want to do good. Their goal is to improve education, welfare policy, or whatever; help out people who have problems with government; or do a better job than the person presently in the office they hope to win. They also want to do well. That is, they want gratification from their jobs. Wouldn't anyone? Hamilton writes about the appeal of "...putting your imprint on policies that affect millions of people in this country and abroad, steering money to medical research or weapons systems or other causes you hold dear, or getting a highway built at home or a new bridge, or a hospital wing."

Many people who run for and are elected to office got interested in politics at a young age. Some of them come from families whose members had experienced politics or public office. We can all think of the leading political families in the nation, such as the Kennedy and Bush clans. Other families may not be as prominent, but they also pass the love of politics from one generation to the next. Fred Risser, who in 2007 was serving his 50th year in the Wisconsin Legislature, was the fourth generation of his family to serve in the legislature. Those who don't come to politics directly from political families get interested in other ways. Many are bitten by the political bug in high school or college, when they intern in Washington, D.C., the state capital, or a district office or when they work on a political campaign. Others develop their interest later in life.

### **How do they get there?**

Those who run for election, and risk rejection by the voters, have to be motivated to do so. They also must have the wherewithal to wage a campaign.

First, of course, they have to be legally qualified to serve in Congress or a state legislature. This entails American citizenship (in half the states), being the required age (between 18 and 30, depending on the office and state), and residency in the state and usually the district.

Second, they have to be in sync with their districts, if they hope to win. A Democrat has a much better chance in a district where most voters are Democrats; a Republican has a much better chance in a district where most voters are Republicans.

Third, it helps candidates if they have good reputations and experience in their local community. Most have lived in their communities for a while. Their base is strengthened by having held local office before running for the state legislature or Congress. In fact, anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of those elected to the legislature have been mayors, members of municipal councils, county commissioners, and on school boards. Many have also been involved in social and political organizations locally. Half the members of the U.S. House had prior service in the state legislature.

People in public office tend to rise through the ranks.

Fourth, it is important for those who want to get elected to have certain resources. It helps candidates to have a fire burning in their belly--not the fire of indigestion but that of wanting to win badly. They must be willing to commit the time and energy demanded by a campaign and by the legislative job itself. Good health is important, as is the ability to raise money for the campaign. In most states and most districts, the money required for a campaign is not terribly much. But in the competitive districts of large states it can run to more than \$2 million per candidate for the U.S. House or even a state legislative seat.

### **What is the job like?**

It takes a lot of time. Members of Congress spend 50 hours or more each week at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., working on legislation or at home in their states and districts serving their constituents. The amount of time state legislators spend varies from person to person and state to state, but for most it is a lot. In a recent survey, state legislators from across the country were asked, "What proportion of a full-time job is your legislative work, averaged over an entire year?" It was under half a full-time job for a total of 26 percent and it was over half a full-time job for a total of 74 percent (among whom it was just about full time for 22 percent).

Members of Congress receive annual salaries of \$165,200, out of which most of them have to pay for homes in Washington, D.C., as well as their own states. State legislators make much less. Except for California, which pays \$110,880 a year, Michigan \$79,650, New York, \$79,500, Pennsylvania \$69,647, Ohio \$56,260 and Massachusetts \$55,569, states do not pay their legislators much at all. New Mexico pays them nothing besides daily expenses when they are in the capital. New Hampshire pays them the grand sum of \$100 a year.

Three out of five of the nation's state legislators still work for pay on the outside. They juggle their careers and suffer a loss of income in order to serve in legislative office. Working at two jobs at

the same time makes life especially tense. Some legislators decide not to run again because they have to return full-time to private life in order to earn enough to support their families and send their children to college.

What's really difficult for people in Congress and state legislatures are the sacrifices that have to be made with regard to family life. Some members of Congress bring their families with them to Washington, D.C.; others leave their families at home and get together with them on weekends. Either way, one's frequent absence can be harmful to a spouse and children. State legislators ordinarily spend a lot of time at the Capitol or at functions in the district, and don't get home until late in the evening not only during the week but sometimes even on weekends. It is not easy for lawmakers to be available for their children's baseball, soccer or hockey games or their school plays and concerts.

Lawmakers also relinquish their privacy. Almost everything they do is, or can be made, public. Their workload is heavy. Hundreds, or even thousands, of bills are introduced in a legislature each session. Members cannot read every bill, but they have to vote on these bills. The issues are complex, and no lawmaker can be on top of all of them. Furthermore, people in a legislature have different ideas as to what ought to be done to solve problems and what ought to be enacted into law. Their constituents whom they represent have different interests and different ideas about political issues. Lawmakers are pulled in different directions--by presidents and governors, legislative leaders, colleagues, constituents, lobbyists, friends, family and others. The pressures are unrelenting. And the legislature is a frustrating place. It is not possible for lawmakers to achieve all their objectives nor is it possible to win on every vote or get every bill of theirs enacted into law. Drawing on his experience in Congress, Hamilton sums up: "The truth is, the governing process is inclusive and messy, and progress is usually made inch by inch." That's the way it has to be and the way it ought to be in a democracy such as ours.

### **Is it worth it?**

Relatively few lawmakers discover that legislative life is not for them, and leave voluntarily after

a term or two. Some stay longer, but exit for personal or family reasons. Still others get beaten in an election. Nearly all of those who serve like the job of lawmaking, despite its drawbacks. They are like Sandy Rosenberg, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, who at the start of the 2007 legislative session wrote a friend: “I don’t recall ever being as excited for the start of a legislative session as I am for this one. So many interesting issues that I am working on.”

People who are elected to Congress and state legislatures usually get what they are looking for-- attention for their ideas, being in the thick of policymaking, responding to challenge after challenge, helping people with their problems, and engaging in the excitement of the legislative and electoral processes. In Lee Hamilton’s words, “the give and take of public life is usually what most satisfies them.” America’s congressional and state legislative lawmakers are fortunate to play a part in their nation’s ongoing experiment with democracy. In the future, maybe you will, too.