

University of Virginia Center for Politics



Democracy Corps Lesson Plan 6: Introduction to Political Leaders

Purpose: This lesson is a part of YLI's Democracy Corps service learning program. Students identify local, state, and national representatives and then examine the distinct responsibilities of each level of government. They also enhance their knowledge of current issues as they open dialogue with local leaders.

Materials:

- Student Guide 1: *Who Are My Representatives?*
- Student Guide 2: *Plan a Political Forum*
- Student Guide 3: *Sample Letter of Invitation to Political Leader*
- Student Guide 4: *Craft Questions for a Political Leader*

Central Questions:

What is a political leader?

Which political leaders represent my interests?

What current issues are a priority for my leaders?

How are responsibilities divided between local, state, and national government?

Procedure:

1. Warm Up - Poll students on their level of civic involvement using some of the following questions.
 - Who has contacted the media about a public issue?
 - Who has worked for a candidate?
 - Who has contacted a local government official? National official?
 - Who has attended a campaign meeting? Joined a political group?
 - Who agrees with the statement, "Politics is a Good Thing"?
2. Tally the results and compare class data with the national results on the back pocket insert graph, Level of Youth Participation in Civic Activities (also on page 2. Discuss what this data reveals about youth participation in politics and how it impacts our democracy?
3. Distribute Student Guide 1: *Who Are My Representatives?* and provide students with time and access to the internet in order to complete Step 1.

Technology

Use the internet to conduct searches for Step 1 of this guide. Website suggestions for identifying political leaders follow.

- League of Women Voters: www.lwv.org
From LWV homepage, select your state and then click the Citizens Guide for information about political leaders.
- State and Local Government on the Net: www.statelocalgov.net

- Democracy Net: www.dnet.org
 - Online voter guide with state-specific information.
4. After Students complete Step 1, review their answers as a group and then move on to the class deliberation.
 5. Complete the deliberation as outlined in the Student Guide. Review deliberation guidelines on page 7 if needed.
 6. After deliberation, direct students to complete Step 3 and 4 of the Student Guide and review their answers.
 7. There are two planning options for a political forum:
 - Teachers and students can plan the political forum together.
 - Teachers can plan the political forum independently and inform students of the details prior to the event.
 8. Review Student Guide 2: Plan a Political Forum for detailed suggestions for the event.
 9. Teacher and/or students may use Student Guide 3: Sample Letter of Invitation to a Political Leader to prepare for the political forum.
 10. If appropriate, distribute copies of Student Guide 4: Craft Questions for a Political Leader and ask students to complete them prior to the forum.



Who Are My Representatives?

Step One

Identify Your Political Leaders

There are many people in government who represent your interests. If you are going to impact the decisions they make, it will be important to know who they are and what community issues fall under their jurisdiction. This exercise will help you answer those questions and prepare you to meet with the government leader(s) invited to participate in a political forum at your school.

Local Government

The responsibilities of local governments include public health and safety in their communities, education of children, jobs and economic vitality, zoning land for particular uses and assistance to those in need.

- Identify two political leaders who represent you on the local level.

Name of Leader	Government Title	Description of Responsibilities	Appointed	Elected
1. _____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

State Government

State governments have primary responsibility for education, public health, transportation, economic development, welfare, the environment and criminal justice. They are also the unit of government that licenses and regulates various professions such as doctors, lawyers, barbers and architects.

- Identify two political leaders who represent you on the state level.

Name of Leader	Government Title	Description of Responsibilities	Appointed	Elected
1. _____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Federal Government

The federal government's powers are derived from Article 1 Section 8 of the Constitution. They include taxation, coinage of money, regulation of commerce and the authority to provide for the national defense.

- Identify three political leaders who represent you on the national level.

Name of Leader	Government Title	Description of Responsibilities	Appointed	Elected
1. _____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	_____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. _____ ☐ ☐

Deliberate

Review the deliberation guidelines if necessary and prepare to answer the questions listed below.

Why do you think government is divided into local, state and national levels?

Is our federal democratic system effective? What are possible complications of our governmental structure?

Step Two

Discuss which level of government controls each of the following situations listed below and explain why you think it is handled at that level.

	Community Issue	Local	State	National
1.	Determining if library computers should be censored	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Policing the beach during spring break	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Wetland conservation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Stopping construction of a nuclear waste dump in the Mojave Desert	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Driving age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Speed limit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The month that school begins	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	When students are released from school on snow days	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Rules regarding the illegal downloading of music	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Highway construction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11.	Purchases of land - eminent domain	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12.	Zoning laws that prohibit the construction of a department store	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Step Three

Reflection: Please draft a brief essay answering the following question:

What community issue are you most interested in learning more about? (It does not need to be one of the issues listed above.) Why are you interested in this issue? Based on your knowledge of the division of responsibilities between state, local, and national leaders, which political leader will be the most helpful in answering questions about this issue?



Lesson Plan 6
Student Guide 2

Plan a Political Forum

Step One

What Is a Political Forum?

A political forum is a program involving open discussion of community issues by political experts. A popular model involves a panel of political leaders who give opening remarks about their backgrounds and priorities and then follow that with a question-and-answer session directed by the audience.

How Do I Organize A Political Forum?

- Make a list of the political leaders you'd like to invite.

- Select a date for the event.

- Select a location for the event.

- Name the event.

- Determine the format for the event.

- ☐ Lecture with one political leader, or Panel Discussion with multiple speakers who give background information and then answer student questions,

OR

- ☐ Informal Question/Answer session only.

- Send political leaders written invitations to the event with descriptions of the format for the day.
- Once panel members are identified, complete Student Guide 4: Crafting Questions for a



Political Leader.

Lesson Plan 6
Student Guide 3

Sample Letter of Invitation to Political Leader

Step One - Compose a letter in the format below

Name

Address

Dear (leader's title and name),

I am a teacher at _____ and I am writing to invite you to participate in a political forum being held at the school for my _____ class.

My students are currently participating in the Youth Leadership Initiative Democracy Corps, a national civics education program that builds citizenship skills through dynamic classroom activities and hands-on political experiences in the community. A critical step in this process is for students to meet their elected leaders to discuss current priorities and to learn more about how local government operates. A political forum is an ideal way to begin this conversation and we hope you will be able to participate.

In order to accommodate your demanding schedule, we have selected three possible dates for this event. (You may not be able to be this flexible if you are inviting several different people.) Please contact me at _____ to advise which one of these dates is convenient for you.

Date 1 ____/____/____
Date 2 ____/____/____
Date 3 ____/____/____

Time 1 ____:____
Time 2 ____:____
Time 3 ____:____

The format for the forum is as follows.

- Brief introduction that includes biographical information about how you became involved in politics and a description of your political responsibilities.
- Question-and-answer period with student-generated questions.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I am confident that your participation will strengthen students' understanding of government and help to engage them in our political process.

Sincerely,



(Teacher or Student names)

Lesson Plan 6
Student Guide 4

Craft Questions for a Political Leader

When meeting with a political leader, it is important to ask questions that are detailed and specific.

These questions may focus on some of the following topics:

- A request for information on contemporary political issues that are important to you
- An explanation of the responsibilities of the political leader
- Background information on the political leader
- Clarification of a complex issue
- Goals during his/her term of office

Step One - Identify Political Forum Participants

(Complete for each participant)

Name of Political Leader: _____

Government Position: _____

Political Ideology: _____

Term of Service: _____

Appointment: ☐ Appointed ☐ Elected

Level of Government: ☐ Local ☐ State ☐ National



Step Two

Research the background of forum participants by visiting the websites and periodicals listed below.

As you read, take notes on issues that are important to each individual and record information that is new to you or unclear.

Visit the **personal website** of the political leader

NOTES: _____

Visit the **office website** where the political leader serves

NOTES: _____

Read **current newspaper articles** related to the political leader

NOTES: _____



Lesson Plan 6
Student Guide 4

Crafting Questions for a Political Leader

Step Three

Review the examples of stronger versus weaker questions for political leaders and identify distinctions between the two.

Apply the ingredients of strong questions to the original ones you write for the forum.

Strong Questions: How do you plan to vote for the upcoming bond to raise money for technology in schools? Why are you voting that way?

Do you support efforts to preserve more wetlands in our state and if yes, how do you plan to accomplish that goal?

Weak Questions: How do you feel about education? What are your environmental goals?

Step Four

Write original questions to ask leaders who attend the political forum at your school.

As you craft questions, think about contemporary issues that are important to you and review the guidelines outlined above. Be sure questions clarify any information that was confusing during your research.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____


