



# Reality Check

What Our Students  
Really Need to Learn  
About State Legislatures

Key Messages for Wyoming's  
Legislators Back to School Program

Prepared by the  
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The Alliance for Representative Democracy  
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# Do We Need a Reality Check ?

Why do we need a reality check about the value of our legislative institutions? Well frankly, there aren't many people out there singing its praises, and students are particularly turned off by their government. Ironically, much of the cynicism about our system of government is unwarranted. As a legislator or a civics teacher, you are in the best position to help educate our students about the value of our legislative institutions. The key messages presented in this booklet have been distilled from the wealth of scholarly research and evidence supporting the vital role representative democracy plays in our society. Use these messages to spread the word and give voice to our remarkable system of government.

Introduction

A large, overflowing cup of yellow popcorn is the central visual element. The cup is white with a colorful, multi-colored band around the bottom. The popcorn is piled high, spilling over the top of the cup. The background is plain white.

# Hollywood Has it Wrong

Although casting government in the role of the villain may draw crowds at the local cinema, it doesn't represent reality any more than the latest monster flick. Hollywood loves to lampoon politicians and popular culture, but we all know that the real world doesn't look much like the movies and issues aren't as simple as those portrayed on the big screen or on television. Politicians are not the villains portrayed by a cynical popular culture. Unfortunately, pop culture oversimplifies life by turning complex issues into a series of winners and losers or heroes and villains. If only life were that simple. Because life is not black and white, you elect your legislators to represent the diversity of opinions in our society. It's fun to suspend reality for a couple of hours and live in a world of make-believe. Nevertheless, when the lights go on, we still need to roll up our sleeves and work to develop solutions to our problems through debate, negotiation and compromise. Real life requires more than special effects to find solutions that we can all live with in our diverse society.



# We Don't All Agree

We all know that disagreements are a natural part of life, both at home and in the legislature. Nevertheless, because we tend to spend time with people who think like we do, it's easy to forget that we don't all think alike. Sometimes it's hard to remember that most Americans disagree on issues and have different values, interests, and priorities. It's easy to agree when we speak in generalities. We all want good schools, low crime, and first-rate health care, but as the old saying goes, "the devil is in the details." Agreement is harder to maintain when we work on specific solutions to our problems. The more detailed the potential solution, the more we will differ on the best way to go about achieving general goals. Naturally, legislators cannot represent everyone's interests all of the time. As a result, some people will not be happy with some policy decisions and some will not agree with other decisions. It's the job of the legislature to help find common ground between these different ideas and to pass laws that work well and benefit the largest number of people possible. Compromise is always necessary and beneficial in our society.

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# You Can't Win 'em All

Winning and competition are very important in America and winning certainly has its place. We all want to do well in our society. However, somewhere along the line, we have gotten to a point where we believe that we need to win for our political system to work. Just because we don't win all of the time in politics, doesn't mean the system is broken. In baseball, "batting 300" is considered a remarkable batting average, even though it means failing 70 percent of the time. We can't – and shouldn't – win everything we want all of the time. The winner-takes-all attitude is simply not workable if we want to make sound public policy. Our founding fathers purposefully and painstakingly crafted our system of government to ensure that one group doesn't get everything they want and leave everyone else empty-handed. It's time to redefine what winning means in our representative democracy. True winning in our political system is achieved through compromise. The framers designed the system to implement the will of the majority, while protecting the rights of the minority. Compromise ensures the greatest good for the greatest number of people. So, rather than keeping score by tallying so-called winners and losers, let's give the victory to the process itself, which has worked remarkably well for the past two centuries.



# Change Takes Time

We have become an instant gratification society. Fast food isn't fast enough.

Our Internet connections get faster and faster and yet we are more and more impatient with the time it takes to surf the Web. It's no wonder that people think the legislative process is too slow. But, we need to remember that the framers designed the system with specific "speed bumps" along the way. Our founders ensured that any changes to our laws would be carefully crafted and not subject to the passing whims and passions of the people. Although the checks and balances critical to our way of life may appear to be unnecessarily inefficient, they exist to protect all of us. People often say that they want action and not talk. However, patience and careful deliberation are the hallmarks of sound public policy. The process is designed to provide ample opportunity for debate, as legislators try to find common ground and areas of agreement to respond to the needs of different values and interests of the voters they represent. Like anything precious and lasting, finding that common ground takes time, but it's time well spent.

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# Your Ideas Count

People believe that legislators don't listen to ordinary people. But, legislators are regular folks, too. They live and work in the communities that they represent. Legislators have ties to their communities that allow them to understand the pulse of their districts. They have family, friends, and co-workers who live in those same communities. Legislators work hard to stay in tune with their constituents. They attend community meetings, they respond to constituent letters and phone calls, and they work closely with local government officials. This community interaction allows legislators to truly understand their districts. But, it's also important to remember that constituents don't all speak with one voice. People don't always agree on what's right. So, one of the responsibilities of legislators is to balance the diverse opinions that exist in a district and across a state. Think about it: do you agree with your neighbor or spouse on every issue? Legislators must balance the demands of many points of view and use their best judgment on behalf of the residents of their districts. Ultimately, if legislators want to be re-elected, they will pay close attention to the culture of their districts.



# You Are a Special Interest

Although there is a great deal of concern in our society about the influence of special interests in politics, special interests are really nothing more than a collection of individual interests. All Americans are represented either directly or indirectly by interest groups. Every conceivable point of view is represented by the multitude of interest groups in our democracy. Did you know that there are over 135,000 nonprofit membership organizations worldwide listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*? Chances are, you are represented by one of these “special” interests. Eight out of ten Americans belong to an organized group with a policy agenda. Even if you aren’t a member of one of these groups, you likely identify with the causes of many of these special interests. You know, we often characterize interests that we don’t share as “special interests” and our own interests as “public interests.” Organized interest groups do play a significant role in making public policy, but their influence also represents the diversity of opinions held by a variety of Americans, all of which are special.

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# They Are Just Like You

Legislators live and work in same community as you. A legislator is your neighbor, your co-worker, your friend, your mother, father, daughter, son, sister or brother. One of the greatest strengths of our representative democracy is that it reflects the diverse fabric of our society and reflects the communities in which we live. Most legislators enter public service to make a difference and to give back to their communities. Unfortunately, as in any other profession, a few bad apples can spoil it for everyone else. However, individuals who run for office for self-serving purposes are the exception rather than the rule. Sometimes it's easy to fall into the trap of making broad generalizations based on the actions of a few. And, let's face it, negative and sensational events get more attention than the day-to-day acts of integrity and dedication that go largely unnoticed among the majority of our nation's lawmakers. There are over 7,000 state legislators currently serving in legislatures around the country and the vast majority of legislators sincerely want to serve their communities. These very human individuals have strengths and weaknesses, just like anyone else.

A young boy with short brown hair is smiling and eating a vanilla ice cream cone. He is wearing a blue denim shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

# Politics is Messy

Politics is as messy as ice cream and just as good. Although appearance means a lot these days, to judge the merits of legislative institutions on appearance alone is misleading. The process is slow, it's contentious, and boy, does it get frustrating. But, do you know what? That's how it's supposed to work. We need to embrace the messiness of politics. That reality doesn't mean that we shouldn't continually strive to improve our legislative institutions, but to assume that the system is not working because it is messy misses the point. It is a beautiful process, not only in the abstract or in textbooks, but how it plays out in real life in our communities and capitols all over the country. Democracy is not always easy to appreciate. Nor should it be. It is extremely human and it is filled with conflict. Conflict is normal – and even desirable – in our political system. It's not easy to settle differences in a diverse country, such as ours. As a result, you will not get 100 percent of what you want and you may walk away empty-handed. Sometimes form wins out over function, but our legislative institutions are remarkably functional ways to find common ground and win out over appearance any day.

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# We Have the Gold Standard

Our system of government is truly the envy of the world. Leaders of emerging democracies visit our country to learn how to effectively govern themselves. We can always work to improve our own processes, but we must never take for granted the remarkably relevant and lasting system our founders created. As the saying goes, “familiarity breeds contempt” and we need to recognize that there is a difference between a healthy dose of skepticism, which is vital to the health of a democracy, and unchecked cynicism, which could lead to representative democracy’s decline. You have a right to hear about what’s wrong with your government, but you also have a right to hear about what’s working well. Cynicism should be challenged. Our government has been a work in progress since its founding, but we need to give the system the benefit of the doubt and question our assumptions about how representative democracy should work before we jump to the conclusion that we need to change it. As Winston Churchill once said, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”



# You Have the Keys

This government belongs to you. It is not an exclusive club reserved for only a few. It's your government. In fact, you are the government. The words "we the people" are truly the three most important words in our American democracy. The legitimacy of the government comes from the consent of the governed. Although you do not directly govern in our system of representative democracy, you govern indirectly by electing the individuals you would like to represent you in your state legislature. However, just because you do not vote directly on most issues, that does not absolve you from the responsibility to play an active role in the legislative process. There are rules to the legislative game, but there is no secret handshake to play in the legislative arena. It's up to you to get informed and get involved. There are many ways to participate in the legislative process, which is the most open and accessible branch of government. Call, write, or e-mail your representatives. Make your voice heard. You are in the driver's seat of a remarkable government that, as Abraham Lincoln noted, is "... of the people, by the people, for the people ..."

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# Want to Know More?

The key messages presented in this booklet represent some starting points for you to present a more positive message about legislative service. These messages have been culled from a wealth of scholarly research. All of the concepts presented in this publication were adapted from materials prepared by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Alliance for Representative Democracy, and leading political scholars and credit for these concepts goes to these organizations. The following publications provide many fruitful avenues to develop positive statements about the value of our representative democracy. Although you never lack for reading materials, the publications below are essential reading for anyone who wants to make the case for representative democracy and the value of the legislative institution.

*Heavy Lifting: The Job of the American Legislature*, Alan Rosenthal, CQ Press, 2004

*Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy*, John Hibbing, Karl Kurtz, Burdett Loomis, Alan Rosenthal, National Conference of State Legislatures, 2002

*The Case for Representative Democracy: What Americans Should Know About Their Legislatures*, John Hibbing, Karl Kurtz, Burdett Loomis, Alan Rosenthal, National Conference of State Legislatures, 2001

*Your Ideas Count* materials, National Conference of State Legislatures