AMERICAN CIVIC RESOURCES

Teaching the Midterms Through Constitutional Inquiry and Civic Discernment

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As we approach Election Day 2026, the midterm elections offer an opportunity to move beyond the headlines, electoral predictions, and partisan divisions to examine the principles underlying our constitutional system.

Our system of government was designed to balance competing virtues and aims, recognizing the value of different principles even when they exist in tension with one another. Yet these virtues do not always operate in harmony. A feature of our constitutional design that advances one principle may simultaneously challenge another.

How can we help students recognize and grapple with these tensions?

This resource invites students to explore competing virtues through excerpts from *The Federalist Papers*, examining the different principles underlying the design of the House and Senate. Through historical inquiry and constitutional analysis, students will consider how the same institutional features can serve as both strengths and limitations of representative government.

Recognizing these tensions also offers an important civic lesson: Understanding that competing virtues can coexist helps us move beyond simplistic judgments and approach political disagreements with greater intellectual humility, curiosity, and discernment. Cultivating this habit of mind can help foster a civic culture in which we are less inclined to see ideas and one another in binary terms, and more willing to recognize that even positions we disagree with may reflect principles worthy of consideration.

We welcome your thoughts and feedback on how this resource resonates with your students and school community.

Source 1: James Madison, "Federalist No. 52." The Federalist Papers, 1788. Excerpt.

The midterm elections bring particular attention to Congress, especially the House of Representatives, where all 435 voting members face reelection every two years. This reflects the Framers' emphasis on accountability and responsiveness to the people, making the House the chamber of Congress most directly accountable to voters.

Theme: The House of Representatives Accountability and Responsiveness

"As it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the branch of it under consideration should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people."

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Madison emphasize the importance of representatives maintaining a close connection with the people?
2. When is responsiveness to public opinion a virtue? Can representatives ever become too responsive to public opinion?

Source 2: James Madison, "Federalist No. 63." The Federalist Papers, 1788. Excerpts.

Theme: The Senate, Stability and Deliberation

"The cool and deliberate sense of the community ought, in all governments, and actually will, in all free governments, ultimately prevail over the views of its rulers."

"In answer to all these arguments, suggested by reason, illustrated by examples, and enforced by our own experience, the jealous adversary of the Constitution will probably content himself with repeating, that a senate appointed not immediately by the people, and for the term of six years, must gradually acquire a dangerous pre-eminence in the government, and finally transform it into a tyrannical aristocracy."

Discussion Questions:

1. When should elected representatives follow public opinion, and when should they exercise independent judgment?
2. What does Madison mean by "tyrannical aristocracy"? Why might critics of the Constitution have feared that the Senate could become one?
3. How might the very features designed to promote stability and deliberation also create the risk of an unaccountable political elite?
4. Can the same feature of our constitutional system be both a strength and a weakness? How does the Senate illustrate this tension?
5. What competing constitutional values are reflected in the different designs of the House and Senate?

Source 3: James Madison, "Federalist No. 63." The Federalist Papers, 1788. Excerpts.

Theme: The Paradox of Frequent Elections

"I add as a SIXTH defect the want, in some important cases, of a due responsibility in the government to the people, arising from that frequency of elections which in other cases produces this responsibility."

"There are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn."

Discussion Questions:

1. Can a representative best serve the people by occasionally resisting what the people want?
2. How can the very same feature—frequent elections—both strengthen and undermine accountability?

Classroom Activity for Younger Students

Discuss with the students: *What makes a good representative?*

Imagine you are electing a representative for your school community. What qualities would you look for?

- Someone who listens carefully to what students want?
- Someone with experience who knows how to get things done?
- Someone willing to make difficult or unpopular decisions?
- Someone who brings fresh ideas and perspectives?

Classroom Dilemma: A student representative promised to support a popular school event. After being elected, however, the representative learns that the event would exclude some students.

Discussion Questions:

1. Should the representative honor the wishes of the majority or reconsider the decision?
2. What does it mean to represent others responsibly?
3. Can a good representative sometimes make an unpopular decision?

Concluding Reflection:

How can recognizing competing virtues help us better understand the decisions of our representatives and the perspectives of those with whom we disagree?