

**Topic:** Democracy

**What the students do:** Newspaper search to find election-related articles and discuss policies/problem/issues the candidates or ballot initiatives are addressing. After researching the candidates' views and/or ballot initiatives, students determine how they would vote.

[California History-Social Science Standards:](#) 8.3.6, 11.11, 12.2.4, 12.7.5

[CMS Promising Approaches:](#) 1, 2,

**Thanks to:** [Constitutional Rights Foundation](#)

## Elections and Public Policy

In this lesson, students explore the connections between elections and public policy, as well as deepen their understanding of the connection between policy and problems. First, students read and discuss a short article defining policy. Then they discuss policy and its connection to problems. They do a newspaper search to find election-related articles, columns, and editorials and identify policies, issues, and problems in the articles. Finally, students select one of the policies, issues, or problems and research the candidates' views and/or related ballot initiatives to determine how they would vote in a mock election.

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define public policy.
- Explain that public policies are created to address problems and needs.
- Explain that a policy itself may sometimes be considered a problem.
- Find and identify problems and policies in a newspaper.
- Discuss the role that public policy plays in elections.

### Preparation & Materials

- Newspapers: 1 per 2–3 students
- **Handout A: What Is Public Policy?**—1 per student
- **Handout B: Newspaper Search**—1 per student

### Procedure

#### I. Focus Discussion—What Is Public Policy?

A. Distribute **Handout 2A: What Is Public Policy?** to each student. Ask students to read the handout and look for the following:

- What public policy is.
- Why it is made.

B. When they finish, hold a discussion by asking the questions at the bottom of the handout:

1. What are some examples of policies that you can think of? Which of these are private policies and which are public policies?

2. What are some institutions that create public policy? What levels of government are these institutions?
3. Read below different definitions of public policy written by political scientists. Which do you think is the best definition? Why? How would you define public policy?

## II. Connecting Policy and Problems

A. Provide students with simple examples of policy/problem connections such as:

1. Policy: In the last few years, at least six states have enacted laws restricting cellphone use while driving.

What **problems** do you think these state laws (which are policies) are trying to address?

(Prevent accidents. Accept other reasoned responses.)

2. Problem: People who are extremely overweight are more likely to have serious health problems. More children than ever before are being diagnosed with diseases, like diabetes, related to being overweight.

What **policies** might a school district enact (which is a government agency) to address this problem?

(Ban on vending machines, cafeteria requirements to offer healthy food, mandatory P.E. classes. Accept other reasoned responses.)

3. Policy = Problem: A school has a policy of leaving four minutes between classes, which many students feel is not enough time and results in many students being tardy.

What is the problem?

(The policy.)

What can be done about the problem policy?

(It can be eliminated, changed, or replaced with a new policy allowing greater time between class periods.)

Explain that policies are often controversial and viewed as a problem by some people. So in some circumstances the problem may be a policy.

### III. Newspaper Search: Problems and Policies

- A. Divide the class into groups of 2–3 students. Provide each group with a recent local newspaper and explain that newspapers are one of the best places to begin exploring issues and problems. Add that newspapers are also great sources for learning about government and public policy particularly before an election since candidates discuss and debate them and ballot initiatives directly impact and create public policy. (If necessary, remind students about the differences between articles, columns, editorials, and letters to the editor. Discuss how it is important to make the distinctions.)

Distribute **Handout 2B: Newspaper Search** and review it with students. Tell the groups that their challenge is to find as many election-related articles as they can that discuss at least two of the following:

- Government
- Policy(ies)
- Problem(s)

Give them time to complete part 1 of the search.

- B. When groups have completed part 1 of the search, ask them to quickly review all of the articles they found. Then have them do part 2 of the search. Each group member should:
- Choose one article that describes an interesting/compelling problem.
  - Make sure the article selected mentions at least one public policy.
  - Answer the questions on Handout 2B.

### IV. Research Activity and Voting

- A. Point out to the students that one of the most important responsibilities we have as members of a democracy is to vote, and it is even more important to be an informed voter.

Tell the students that they are going to become even more informed about the issue or policy they chose by researching where candidates stand on it. Even if the newspaper article discusses this, it is important to check other sources, including the candidates' web sites and non-partisan sources.

If the issue or policy students selected is related to a ballot initiative, they should research the initiative, including who is opposed and in favor and their reasons.

Students should make a reasoned argument for the candidate and/or ballot initiative they would vote for (or against).

- B. Participate in the California Secretary of State's Mock Election or hold an election in class.

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# What Is Public Policy?

You've heard the word "policy" many times:

"Honesty is the best policy."

"It's the store's policy only to give credit and not refunds on returned merchandise."

"Three tardies and I'll see you after school—that's the tardy policy."

Policies are established ways of doing things. You have ways of doing things and so do businesses and government. The policies that individuals and businesses adopt are **private policies**. Even so, these policies may affect the community. A fast food restaurant, for example, may have a policy of serving drinks in Styrofoam containers, which can harm the environment.

**Public policies** are those that governments adopt to address problems. For example, every state government has adopted the public policy of banning the sale of alcohol to minors. This public policy addresses the problem of teenage alcohol abuse. It is expressed in the body of laws, regulations, decisions, and actions of government.

Policies differ from goals. "Teenagers should not drink," "everyone should have a home," "people should be able to walk the streets at night safely." These statements are goals, not policies. Policies are the means of achieving goals. If the goal is to provide homes for people without homes, a policy might be a plan to build 1,000 units of low-income housing. If the goal is to fight crime, a policy might be to put 200 more police officers on the streets of the city.

Many policies are translated into law by government action. For example, to control drunk-driving deaths, a state may pass tougher drunk-driving laws. Or to improve the environment, the federal government may pass an air-quality law. Or to raise money for public libraries, a city may enact a tax increase.

When public policies go into effect, they can deeply impact people's lives. People can gain or lose significant things, such as jobs, services, and equal treatment. Changes in economic policies can affect whole countries or regions. Changes in education policies can affect whole generations.

## Questions

1. What are some institutions that create public policy? What levels of government are these institutions?



# Newspaper Search

## Part 1

Your team should search your paper for election-related articles that discuss **at least two** of these three things:

- 1. Problem.** As a starting point, think about problems, issues or needs that people are concerned about in the categories of health, environment, social problems (crime, drugs), safety, or education. Problems might also be focused on people (government officials, police, unemployed, workers, etc.) or places (building being torn down, housing, certain streets/neighborhoods, parks). Or, a policy itself may be a problem.
- 2. Policy.** Look for mandates, rules, laws, regulations, ordinances, etc. An article may be discussing policies that are being considered, policies that need to be changed, or the need for new policies. One article might discuss more than one policy. (Ballot initiatives are public policies in and of themselves.)
- 3. Government.** Are candidates running for office discussing the issues? What about ballot initiatives? Remember: There is a broad range of government agencies. Public schools, public transportation, streets, city services (like trash pickup, water, and other utilities), airports, county/public hospitals and clinics, and prisons are all connected to government agencies.

Articles might include columns or editorials, too.

## Part 2

After you have found as many articles as you can, **each member of your team** should:

1. Select one article that is interesting.
2. Write on this handout a sentence or two about each of these things:
  - A. The election (candidates, ballot initiatives, or other issues). Is the article reporting news or is it editorial (stating an opinion)?
  - B. The **problem(s)** described by the article.

C. **Policy** connection(s).

D. In addition to the election, other **Government** connections(s).

### Part 3

1. Using the policy or problem that interests you, find out how it is being discussed by the candidates or addressed by any of the ballot initiatives. How do different candidates stand on this? What are the key points being discussed or voted on in an initiative? Who favors/opposes the initiative and why?

(See below for websites to help you research.)

Summarize your research findings:

Based on the problem/policy that interests you, how would you vote? (List candidate(s) you would vote for and/or ballot initiatives you would vote for or against.)

2. To help you with your research:

California Secretary of State: <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/>

League of Women Voters California: <http://ca.lwv.org/>

Easy Voter Guide: [http://lwc.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=easyvoter\\_home](http://lwc.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=easyvoter_home)

Smart Voter: <http://www.smartvoter.org/ca/state/>