Money in Politics Lesson Plan

Does money unfairly influence our political process?

note: you can save a copy of this and other handouts as Google Doc or download it as a Word doc so you can save and edit it to fit your needs. Go to the “File” dropdown menu, above.

Introduction: If the famous quotation by Jesse M. Unruh is true, and “Money is the mother’s milk of politics,” what does that mean in a post-Citizens United America? With the growth of Super PACS, and the influx of negative ads this campaign season, many Americans are concerned about the influence of money on our electoral system and our democracy itself. Others point out that wealthy individuals, corporations, and labor unions have always influenced politics and point to the loopholes of the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act as the origin of unlimited contributions. Does money = speech, and do any restrictions on campaign contributions violate the First Amendment? This lesson plan presents a balanced approach to teach about the impact of the Citizens United decision and whether or not money unfairly influences our political system. Carefully selected C-SPAN video clips are supplemented with articles representing a variety of points of view. Additional resources for further analysis are provided at bottom of the web page.

Objectives: Students will research how federal campaigns are financed, and answer the question: Does money buy too much influence in our political system? They will focus this answer on whether they support or oppose the 2010 Supreme Court decision in the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission case.

Timing:
• A full analysis of this issue will take about three class periods of about an hour each.
• If you have only one class period, start with the “Background knowledge” section of the note-taking handout, then do the “Take a Stand” activity, and continue with note-taking on the C-SPAN videos supporting and opposing the Citizens United decision and the resulting changes in campaign finance. Each video is less than 10 minutes long. Conclude with a final “Take a Stand” activity so students can change their position from where they stood at the beginning of class based on what they learned in the lesson.

Full Procedure:
1. Give students the note-taking handout or give them access to it online (they can save a copy of the Google Doc to take notes electronically) and have them complete questions #1-3 to see what background knowledge they have about campaign financing. You can then brainstorm some possible answers as a class through an online text poll or with the chalkboard.

2. Lead students through a “Take a Stand” activity to see whether they support or oppose limits on individual and corporate spending before learning more about it. Ask students for their answers and tell them that they’re going to learn much more about it, so it’s OK if they don’t have a strong position at this point. They’ll do another “Take a Stand” activity after learning the arguments on both sides.

https://sites.google.com/site/theissue2011/issues/money-in-politics
3. Give students the handout, or give them access to it online (they can save a copy of the Google Doc to take notes electronically). Complete this vocabulary preview as a whole class, in small groups, or individually before watching the videos and reading the articles.

4. Return to the note-taking handout to answer questions #4-6. To do this, students will need access to the wikipedia article, the first C-SPAN video, describing Citizens United and Super PACs, this guide to federal elections, and the Times Topics page. Additional introductory material is found below the first video. You can do this as a whole class or individually.

5. Now it’s time to explore the arguments supporting and opposing the Citizens United decision. Give students the last two pages of the note-taking handout (one page is for supporting arguments, the other is for opposing arguments). These two pages can be copied back-to-back, and you may need additional copies if each student reads multiple articles in addition to the videos.

**Note:** The handout focuses students on the key differences of opinion between on those who do and those who do not feel money buys undue influence in our political system and the key questions on which supporters and opponents of the Citizens United decision disagree:

- what is the Citizens United decision about?
- who has undue influence in our political system?
- what is the best way to finance campaigns?
- why should students support or oppose the Citizens United decision?

*How our campaign financing system works and the history of campaign finance reform are difficult, complex topics for students to understand, so you may want to abbreviate the readings and vocabulary list and/or use reading apprenticeship strategies to help students decode the text.*

C-SPAN videos supporting and opposing the Citizens United decision have been provided. Watch these as a class and help students identify the conflicting arguments. Students should take notes on the note-taking handout as they watch.

After viewing, taking notes, and discussing the videos together, assign students to read articles on one side or both sides of the issue. Three articles have been provided for each side.

**Articles supporting** the Citizens United decision (money does not buy undue influence):

- [Citizens United Doesn’t Mean What Campaign Finance ‘Reformers’ Think It Does](https://www.cato.org/blog/citizens-united-doesnt-mean-what-campaign-finance-reformers-think-it-does), Ilya Shapiro, Cato Institute
- [ACLU Board Addresses Campaign Finance Policy](https://www.aclu.org/politics/campaign-finance), American Civil Liberties Union
- ‘Fixing’ Citizens United Will Break the Constitution, American Civil Liberties Union

**Articles opposing** the Citizens United decision (money does buy undue influence):

- [Effect of Citizens United Felt Two Years Later](https://www.rollcall.com/2013/06/18/220796-the-effect-of-citizens-united-felt-two-years-later/), Roll Call

If you have time, or if a student finishes reading and note-taking quickly, explore the additional web resources at the bottom of the page. There are infographics there and on the [campaign finance reading guide](https://www.propublica.org/money) from ProPublica in the background article section.
The C-SPAN video in the "Additional Programming" section provides a comprehensive, clear, and entertaining panel discussion of the issue of money’s influence in politics for your students or for your own viewing. You could extend the assignment by having students follow campaign contributions and spending through político influence or openscrets.org. They could also keep track of campaign ads they see and research who is paying for them.

6. After students have read and taken notes on the articles, choose a deliberation strategy to engage in an informed discussion or debate about this issue. You may assign students to a position or let them choose. Students usually enjoy a debate as a great way to analyze both sides of this issue.

7. Do a final Take a Stand activity to see how students’ positions have changed after learning.

8. Assessment could be measured with a position paper, a written summary of the leading arguments on both sides of the issue, or participation in the other activities.

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