

## Navigating the Democratic Maze

How to make the government work for you

To many Americans, the US government is a strange and mystifying system. In fact, a poll conducted in 2006 by Zogby International found that while 73 percent of Americans could name the Three Stooges, only 42 percent could correctly name the three branches of government. (For the record, it's legislative, executive, and judicial.)

We all learned the basics of American democracy in our middle-school government classes, but did we ever find it important enough to pay attention once it got frustrating and confusing? Though it can seem overwhelming at times, it's incredibly important to understand the basic way that our government functions because, as we set out to prove in this issue, political action is one of the most comprehensive and effective tools citizens can use to address social issues that they care most about.

One of the most important reasons that citizens should pay attention to government is because of the tangible effect that it has on our lives. For instance, it sets standards for our public education, regulates our jobs, ensures

our national security, maintains our national parks, decides how to spend our taxes, and oversees our national transportation. So, if you want to get your voice heard on issues such as these, what can you do?

There are several ways to voice your opinion to your Congressional representatives – these include sending a letter or an email, calling your representative's office, setting up a meeting at their district office, and participating in local town hall meetings. Though the results of these efforts may seem intangible, they do make an impact. Representatives set aside time to listen to their constituents and weigh the opinions they hear – see our alumni interview with a former legislative aide to read about respond to constituent concerns.

If you'd like to make a greater impact, there is power in numbers – join a political party or an interest group. If you can't find one that fits your interests, make your own. American history is filled with examples of citizens who identified a



problem and formed a group to do something about it.

In order to be as effective as possible, it's important that you prepare beforehand. Know your facts by researching the information in order to highlight the strength of your own argument. Be clear and concise, and personalize your appeal.

No matter what you do, it's important not to give up on a social issue that you're passionate about just because you don't think you can affect government or because you don't understand how. We hope this issue of Catalyst will provide you with some clarity on how to navigate the maze that is the American democratic process and restore your hope in the fact that you CAN make a difference.

**CivicWeek:  
DC 2008**  
Students  
pose in front  
of the U.S.  
Capitol  
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**“Political action is one of the most comprehensive and effective tools a citizen can use to address social issues that they care most about.”**

# How you can help a bill become a law

Make your voice heard in the legislative process

## Senate

Bill is introduced

Sent to Committee

Put on the Legislative Calendar

Debate is unlimited

A simple majority floor vote is needed to pass the bill.

Simple majority vote

The President has 10 days to sign, or not sign, the bill while Congress is in session

*Bill becomes a law*

Bills can be introduced either into the House or Senate, or conjointly. All appropriations bills must originate in the House. Any member can introduce legislation.

The bill is referred to the correct committee in the House or Senate.

Committees research the proposed bill and either report on it favorably and propose amendments, or report on it unfavorably, in which case the bill dies.

Contact committee members.

Filibuster - bill is "talked to death"

In both houses, urge your Representatives to attend debate. To prevent or end a filibuster implore your Senators to invoke cloture.

Conference Committee

The House and Senate versions of the bill are reconciled. Contact conference committee members.

Sent to President

Veto - the President sends back the bill back to Congress with a list of objections

2/3 vote in Congress

## House

Bill is given to the house clerk

Sent to Committee

Put on one of four House Calendars

Debate is regulated

A simple majority floor vote is needed to pass the bill.

Simple majority vote

Pocket Veto - Congress adjourns before the President signs the bill

A 2/3-majority vote of present members of the chamber that originated the bill can override a Presidential Veto. Contact your Representative to urge them to override the veto.

*Bill becomes a law*

# Taking Action: Health Care Legislation

You've heard a lot about it lately. Where exactly does legislation for **health care** stand in Congress, and how can you still make your voice heard?

**House of Representatives:** On November 7th, HR 3962 - the Affordable Healthcare for America Act - passed 220 to 215



**What can you do?** Contact your Representative to advocate that your positions be included in the Conference Committee reconciliation.

**Senate:** On November 18th, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid introduced an \$848 billion plan. Debate began on November 30th and is expected to continue throughout December.



**What can you do?** Contact your Senators! Encourage them to vote for amendments that reflect your position. You can also share your opinion on possible filibuster options.

## Q&A with Daniel Backman

CEP sat down with one of our 2009 participants of CivicWeek: Washington, DC, to chat about his insights into politics. In addition to participating in our program themed on Politics & Urban Poverty, Backman, a junior at Glenbrook South High School in Glenview, IL, has also worked in a US Congresswoman's district office.



**Q: What was the most impactful part of your CivicWeek experience?**

A: The most amazing part was meeting this homeless woman named Angela who became homeless through no fault of her own, and has to struggle to find work and navigate the sparse homeless aide network to survive. It was great to talk to her, and it totally changed my view of homelessness.

**Q: Tell me about your previous governmental work.**

A: I worked in US Congresswoman Debbie Halvorson's office in Normal, IL, for a month this past summer.

**Q: Is there anything you learned about government that you think the public should know?**

A: I learned that politicians are there not only

to serve their constituents through national policy, but also through helping locally and personally to solve problems. [Where I worked,] people would call in every day asking for status on their passports or help with getting a visa, and would get a prompt, personal response from the Congresswoman's staff. Though these are fairly simple things, I never realized how many things politicians do daily to make their constituents' lives better. It helped to restore my faith in government and its ability to improve society not just through expansive laws, but through individual action.

**Q: What do you think is the most effective way for Americans to affect public policy through government?**

A: Learn about the issues! The government works best with an informed electorate. Then, vote.

## Spotlight on service



Founded in 1992 by 40 national leaders, including former Presidential candidate John McCain and former Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, Project VoteSmart (PVS) is a non-profit, non-partisan research organization that collects information on candidates for public office and distributes it through a website, a toll-free phone number, and print publications.

PVS provides information on candidates and elected officials in six

basic areas: background, issue positions, voting records, campaign finances, interest group ratings, and speeches and public statements.

PVS does not accept donations from governmental organizations, lobbyists, corporations, labor unions, or other special interests. It is financed entirely by donations and by grants from philanthropic organizations.

Visit [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org) to learn more about your elected officials and to see what PVS has to offer you.

# Who Else is Influencing Your Representative?

**“We the people are the rightful masters of both Congress and the courts” – Abraham Lincoln**

Many Americans would agree with the above quote from Lincoln if asked the question, “Who influences your representative?”

Of course the easy answer to that question would be – and should be – that you do. American citizens elect representatives to the House of Representatives and to the Senate who we believe will best serve our interests. But members of Congress are not solely responsive to their constituents or to even to the American public at large.

Running for office in the United States is an expensive venture, one that few, if any, Congressional hopefuls can afford to finance personally. In addition to individual donors, much of their campaign funds come from companies through their Political Action Committees (PACs). PACs provide a mechanism that allows companies and interest groups to contribute funds directly to candidates and political campaigns.

Once elected or reelected, many new and returning members of Congress feel indebted to those companies and interest groups. And to insure a company or interest group’s continued monetary support, members of Congress may vote for bills that will benefit their contributors in some way. **To see where your**

**representative’s campaign funds are coming from, check [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org).**

Every year, interest groups such as the American Association of Retired People (AARP), AFL-CIO, the Human Rights Campaign, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Rifle Association (NRA), and Planned Parenthood provide ratings for members of Congress based on their voting records on the issues that the interest group supports. This public display of approval or disapproval again encourages representatives to vote with their contributors. **Go to [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org) to check ratings for your representative.**

Companies, interest groups, and sometimes even foreign countries also spend billions of dollars each year to hire lobbyists who seek to further influence the political process. To put it simply, lobbyists – so named for the traditional practice of waiting in the lobbies of Congress– present Members of Congress with reasons to vote for or against a particular bill. For example, lobbyists for AARP, one of the top-spending lobbying organizations, would be expected to urge congressional members to vote for a bill concerning benefits towards retired Americans.



**Check [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org) to see the other top lobbying organizations.**

Similarly, many foreign countries also have interests in the American legislative process. Our foreign policy affects our relationship with other countries, for instance, through taxing imported fruit or banning the outsourcing of jobs to workers abroad, so foreign countries seek to influence our laws. **To see the influence of foreign countries on our policy, visit [www.foreignlobbying.org](http://www.foreignlobbying.org).**

Average American citizens can still make their voices heard even amongst

all of this outside pressure. In addition to more traditional routes of influence like writing a letter to Congress, joining an interest group is one of the best ways

to merge your views with others’ and increase your impact. Most interest groups are open to any that would join but some, like AARP, have restrictions on membership. You can become a member by going to an interest group’s website and applying for a small membership fee. If you don’t want to become a member, most interest groups accept donations regardless of membership status.

## So... How Can YOU Influence Your Elected Officials?

- **Send an email or make a call** to their Congressional offices (for a directory of the current Congress, go to [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org))
- **Make an appointment** to visit their local office.
- **Call the White House!** 202/456-1414
- Go to a **town meeting**
- Join an **interest group**
- **Submit a “Letter to the Editor”** to your local paper
- **Start a petition** and send it to your representative
- **Attend a protest** or a march
- **Run for office**
- **Support the campaigns** of the candidates of your choice

# Service Organizations In the News

The ACORN Controversy



## Who's it All About?

Founded in 1970, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) works to help low- to moderate-income families.

Past participants of CivicWeek and the Civic Leadership Institute have volunteered at various ACORN offices. Students have helped distribute flyers and have conducted outreach to learn about the role of community development organizations in addressing complex social issues.

## What Happened?

In August 2009, a few ACORN staff members were secretly videotaped advising a couple posing as a pimp and prostitute. While an independent report found that the employees in the videos had not engaged in any illegal activity,<sup>2</sup> this story garnered significant media attention because ACORN has received \$53 million dollars in federal funding over the past 15 years<sup>1</sup>.

Interestingly, this controversy has led to broader questions about organizations that receive federal funding, particularly those accused of illegal activities. In September, Rep. Alan Grayson (D-FL) pointed out that the recent bills in Congress to defund ACORN were written broadly enough to defund any organization that "has filed a fraudulent form with any Federal or State regulatory agency" (H.R. 3571). According to the Project on Government Oversight, 43 federal contractors have engaged in 87 instances of fraud. Given these figures, should Congress defund these other organizations as well?

Remember, when you see issues like these in the news, get the facts and do your best to look critically from all angles so that you can be an active *and* informed citizen.

1. J. Linkins, "The Unintended Consequences of the 'Defund ACORN' Act." *The Huffington Post*, September 24, 2009.

2. "Report on videos: No illegal conduct; Roadmap to renewal." [www.acorn.org](http://www.acorn.org), December 7, 2009.

3. Federal Contractor Misconduct Database, Project on Governmental Oversight, [www.contractormisconduct.org](http://www.contractormisconduct.org)

## CEP Updates

### Spring 2010 Program Dates:

**March 14 - March 20:**

CivicWeek: San Francisco - Hunger & Homelessness

**March 21 - March 27:**

CivicWeek: New York - Law & Social Justice

**March 28 - April 3:**

CivicWeek: Washington, DC - Politics & Urban Poverty

CivicWeek: Chicago (1) - Public Health

**April 5 - April 11:**

CivicWeek: Chicago (2) - Youth & Education

### Summer 2010 Program Dates:

**June 27 - July 16**

CTY Civic Leadership Institute - Baltimore

CTD Taking Action: Leadership & Service - Baltimore

CTY Taking Action: Leadership & Service - Evanston

**July 11 - July 30**

CTD Civic Leadership Institute - Chicago

**July 18 - August 6:**

CTY Civic Leadership Institute - San Francisco

CTY Taking Action: Leadership & Service - Baltimore

CTD Taking Action: Leadership & Service - Evanston

### Courses for Middle School Students

Our summer course for middle school students has a new name! *Taking Action: Leadership & Service* will be offered in Evanston and in Baltimore this summer, and is part of our new series of programs for middle school students called CivicAction.

### Stay Connected!

Become a fan of our Facebook page to stay connected with CEP and with other alumni:

[www.facebook.com/CivicEducationProject](http://www.facebook.com/CivicEducationProject)

### The Spirit of the Season

As 2009 draws to a close, we ask that you consider making a donation to the CEP Scholarship Fund. Many students depend on scholarships to participate in our programs, and with your support, we can offer our life-changing experiences to even more outstanding young people. Thank you for your generosity!

**The Civic Education Project combines traditional education and community service to promote civic responsibility among young people, giving them the knowledge, experience, and leadership skills they need to make a positive impact on society.**

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