

Creating the Student Platform Fall 2008

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Program Overview

This curriculum is designed to provide you and your students with the information needed to create a student platform for your classroom and school. It asks students to consider issues, research them, present information to their class, and deliberate the many proposals and positions on each issue.

- **Introduction:** To provide an overview and background on the topic, we are using the format we have pioneered here at the National Constitution Center, the Town Hall Wall. Designed as a poster, it presents an issue-based question and then provides a short description of the issue, as well as talking points for both sides. This is used to frame the issue and present a question to start the conversation in each of our Exchange programs.
- **Relate:** This classroom discussion focuses on the role personal values play in political behavior. It is designed to start the process of preparing students to compromise and deliberate the issues while respecting differing opinions.
- **Constitution:** This lesson allows students to get a full understanding of the powers of the president so they can create achievable policy proposals through deliberation. Students explore the powers granted to the president and the congress by the Constitution.
- **Investigate:** Students will choose an issue from the agenda and investigate the many facets of that issue. They will explore current proposals and policy as well as public opinion.
- **Deliberate:** Once students have an understanding of the issues, and the proposed changes and policies related to the issues, they will work together to create a student political platform.

Definitions & Deliberation

Political parties want to appeal to voters by touching on a number of issues which are important to those voters. To do this political parties create a document stating their positions on specific issues, known as a *political platform*. Political platforms are designed to attract voters to a political party and its candidates, in the hopes of creating party loyalty and unity. Political Platforms are also used to gain the support of potential swing voters, who owe no allegiance to any political party, to pick candidates from their political party on the strength of their party's political platform.

The individual topics within a political platform are referred to as “planks,” which make up the platform. Common planks in a political platform include positions on issues like education, the environment, economy, national security, foreign policy and so forth. These positions can be adjusted to meet changing values, concerns and emerging global issues. Each plank is supported by a policy statement, which is a short explanation of what policies should be implemented to address each issue.

A political platform is typically widely distributed, with journalists and political pundits, people who offer mass-media opinion or analysis, being encouraged to quote from and use the planks' policy statements from the platform when they comment candidates and upcoming elections.

The Student Platform 2008 is a document stating the policies that students, who participate in this installment of The Exchange, support in order to address the 5 most important issues facing the presidential candidates. The Student Platform 2008 should appeal to the general public, journalists, pundits as well as the presidential candidates in 2008.

The “planks” that support the Student Platform 2008 will include each of the 5 most important issues in the 2008 presidential election as selected by students during the May 2008 Exchange or other issues students feel are important, but not represented by the top 5 most important issues as chosen in May 2008. Each plank of the Student Platform 2008 should be supported by a policy statement. Each plank should include:

- 1) The obstacles that must be addressed in order to address the issue.
- 2) The values we have which are applicable to the issue.
- 3) How the deliberated policy overcomes the problems or obstacles that must be addressed.
- 4) A policy statement detailing what course of action students believe should be implemented to address the specific issue.

Deliberating implies a search for common ground for a common purpose. In doing so participants must be able to disagree without being disrespectful and be understanding of differences in perspective. Deliberation unveils shared values by compelling the participant to reflect upon their own values. There are no winners or losers, only concerned members of a diverse community who want to find a way forward.

What policies should the next president of the United States pursue?

In May 2008 student from across the country were brought together by the National Constitution Center to deliberate the most important issues in the presidential election of 2008. During 2 hours of deliberation the students discussed everything from foreign relations with China and Iran to the impact of gun violence on large urban areas. These students selected the following issues as the top 5 most important issues in the 2008 presidential election:

1. Education
2. The War in Iraq
3. The Economy
4. Healthcare
5. The Environment

It should be no surprise that many polls have found that the general public also feels that some of these issues are the most important.

Since the last Exchange, each party has nominated their candidates: Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama and a number of smaller party candidates such as Bob Barr. During the conventions that nominated these candidates, the parties also established their platforms to address these issues, among others. The positions held by each candidate are often in line with their party platform and can be found everywhere from the candidate's website to policy speeches and campaign ads. Once elected these platforms set the stage for policies that the public expects the president to pursue. The candidates have stated their positions on the issues, but now it's time for you to express your views on the issues.

In an election cycle with record levels of youth participation, what policies do you think the next president should pursue in order to address the issues raised by their campaign?

My Values and My Politics

A Classroom Discussion Activity

This activity is designed to help students understand how their own values influence their political beliefs. An understanding of social and political values can help students when learning to compromise with a person with a different perspective.

Objective: The objective of this activity is for your students to evaluate where they stand on the important issues facing our nation and therefore the next president.

Students will be able to demonstrate how American values inform their political beliefs.

Suggested Procedures

1. Divide your students up into small groups (approx. 3 students per group) and ask each group to brainstorm and record a list of 4 fundamental American values.
 - Possible values may be: equality, life, freedom, rule of law, economic growth, safety etc.
2. Ask each group to then determine and record, which of their political and social values is the most important value to Americans?
 - Students should use **compromise statements**, which compare two concepts in order to determine which concept is preferable, to frame their deliberations:
 - **Example:** Americans value justice, but value security more *and* Americans value security, but value freedom more
 - **Example:** Americans value social mobility, but value equality more *and* Americans value equality, but value economic growth more.
3. Once the groups have determined what they consider to be the most important American value, ask each group to share some of their perceived American values with the class.
 - Write their responses so that all the students can see the responses of their peers. If the same value is shared multiple times between groups, then mark it with a star.
4. Ask the groups to determine the most important value to Americans?
 - Groups will interact with each other to find common ground.
 - Write the groups' **compromise statements** as they orally deliberate and then circle what they have determined is the most important value to Americans.
5. Ask students, individually, to answer the short answer questions on the following worksheet.

The United States Constitution: The Powers of the President

A Classroom Activity

This activity is designed to engage your students in the Constitution and increase their understanding of the powers of the president and the system of checks and balances. Students will be asked to read through Articles I and II of the US Constitution and asked to identify the sections of it which give and limit the president's powers. They will then be asked to examine other sections of the Constitution to determine how the president's powers are restricted.

Objective: The objective of this activity is for your students to infer if the next president has the power to take the actions the student would like for the president to take.

Students will be able to evaluate the powers given to the executive and legislative branches by the Constitution.

Suggested Procedures

1. Individually or in pairs, ask the class, to state one national issue that is important to them.
 - Possible answers:
 - The cost of education
 - The war in Iraq
 - The economy
 - Healthcare
 - The environment
2. Ask the class to brainstorm some of the actions they would like to see the next president take to address the issue the students feel are important.
3. Provide each student with a copy of the United States Constitution.
 - You may also find the Interactive Constitution available at www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution helpful.
 - You can also print copies of the Constitution from <http://72.32.50.200/constitution/constitution.pdf>
4. Provide each student a copy of the attached 3 page worksheet *Powers of the Presidency*, which will guide them through the US Constitution and powers of the president.
5. Tell the class that they are going to use the Constitution to find the powers of the president and the Congress in order to find out which branch has the power to take actions they would like to see the next president take to address some of the issues the students feel are important.
6. Ask your students to partner or form small groups and complete sections A through C and then stop, raise their hands and wait quietly until you acknowledge them.

7. When your students finish section C, ask them, why the powers of the executive and legislative branches are separated?
 - Possible answers:
 - Prevent abuses of power
 - Checks and balances
 - Prevent majority / mob rule
 - Shared rule between the branches

8. Ask your students if they found the term “checks and balances” while they were reading Articles I and II?
 - Explain to the class that the Constitution nowhere contains the phrase “checks and balances” or an express injunction to preserve the boundaries of the legislative, executive and judicial branches.

9. After you and your students have finished discussing “checks and balances,” have them complete section D.

10. Once students have completed section D of the worksheet, discuss what they learned.
 - Possible discussion topics include:
 - Checks and balances and the separation of powers
 - What does the Constitution let the president do?
 - Are the actions you want to see taken by the next president achievable based on the powers granted to the president by the Constitution?
 - Are the actions you want taken achievable by Congress based on the powers granted to it by the Constitution?
 - How can Congress achieve legislation that conforms to the agendas of each of its 100 Senators and 435 members of the House?
 - How can the president achieve legislation that conforms to his or her agenda?
 - According to the Constitution, who has more power, the president or the Congress?

Name: _____

Date: _____

The Powers of the Presidency

Section A.

List two actions you would like to see the next president take in his first days in office:

Action 1: _____

Action 2: _____

Section B.

Read Article II of the United States Constitution

List 4 powers the Constitution grants the president and what sections of Article II grant that power.

<i>Presidential Power</i>	<i>Section which grants that power</i>

Section C.

Now read Article I Section VIII and list the powers of the congress and the sections which grant those powers.

<i>Congressional Power</i>	<i>Section which grants that power</i>

Section D.

Do the powers granted to the president by the Constitution allow the next president to take the actions you would like him or her to take? How? Does the congress have the power to take these actions? Please write a short paragraph explaining who has the power to take each of the actions you listed, and what sections of the Constitution grant that power.

Action 1

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Section D. (continued)

Action 2

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Does the Constitution grant the powers needed to the Senate and House? If so, where in the Constitution are those powers granted?

Action 1

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Action 2

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Investigate

Getting informed

This lesson is designed to engage students in an issue which they are interested, and increase their understanding of those issues. It asks students to use a variety of online materials to answer questions which have the students examine issues through multiple lenses.

Objective: The objective of this lesson is for your students to demonstrate their content knowledge on the issues.

Students will be able to discriminate between the various ways information is disseminated by a number of information and media outlets.

Suggested Procedures

1. Provide each student with the attached worksheet.
 - Students can work in-class or at home to complete the following worksheet.
2. Give the class the directions for this activity:
 - Each student should select an issue they would like to know more about.
 - This could be an issue you discussed earlier, or a brand new issue.
 - For help brainstorming issues, check out <http://apps.new.facebook.com/exchangethis/comparisons>.
3. Write the following questions so that all your students can see them:
 - What is the government doing about the issue you have chosen?
 - Should the present way the issue is being handled be altered?
 - What specific information do they know about the issue you have chosen?
 - What do other people they know say about the issue you have chosen?
4. Ask your students to raise their hands and answer each of the questions you have written.
5. After your students have answered the questions, tell your students that this is the type of information they will be researching in this activity.
6. Ask your students, why should they research this information instead of relying on what they already know?
 - Possible answers:
 - The information is verified and factual.
 - They will know what was actually done and said.
 - They will get specific information from reliable sources.
 - They will know how people really feel.
7. Give the class the definitions for this activity:
 - Status quo denotes the existing policies of the president and laws passed by Congress.
 - Proposed changes are ways that the candidates want to alter the present policies or laws.
 - Facts are the statistics and other information that can be verified and therefore proved.
 - Public opinion, or what the public thinks, consists of polling data from pollsters that reflects the way the public feels about issues.
8. Go through the following example step by step to explain to how to complete the worksheet:
 - Note that each section has a citation from where it was obtained

Example Issue: *veteran healthcare and benefits*

What is the status quo?

The debate over how to improve the GI Bill has finally been resolved. In an effort to push through Sen. [James Webb's](#) (D-VA) popular "Post 9/11 GI Bill," Congress inserted the bill's language in the Emergency Wartime Supplemental Appropriations bill ([HR 2642](#)) that President Bush has signed. The changes to the GI Bill significantly increase the value of the current education benefit. Despite facing numerous obstacles, after the provision to allow Service members to transfer GI Bill benefits to family members was included, President Bush has put his full support behind it.

<http://www.congress.org/congressorg/webreturn/?url=/military/issues/alert/?alertid=10990556>

What are some proposed changes?

Barack Obama's proposed changes:

[R]everse the 2003 ban on enrolling modest-income veterans, which has denied care to a million veterans.

[M]ake the VA a leader of national health care reform so that veterans get the best care possible. He will improve care for poly-trauma vision impairment, prosthetics, spinal cord injury, aging, and women's health.

[E]stablish a national "zero tolerance" policy for veterans falling into homelessness by expanding proven programs and launching innovative services to prevent veterans from falling into homelessness.

[I]mprove mental health care at every stage of military service. He will recruit more health professionals, improve screening, offer more support to families and make PTSD benefits claims fairer.

[E]stablish standards of care for Traumatic Brain Injury, the signature injury of the Iraq war.

[E]xpand and strengthen Vet Centers to provide more counseling for vets and their families.

<http://www.barackobama.com/issues/veterans/>

What are the "facts?"

Military service members engaged in combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq are at risk of developing combat-related mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In many cases, signs of potential mental health conditions do not surface until months after service members return from deployment. In 2004, Army researchers published a series of articles that indicated a significant increase in the number of service members reporting mental health concerns 90 to 120 days after returning from deployment, compared with mental health concerns reported before or soon after deployment.

<http://www.gao.gov/docsearch/abstract.php?rptno=GAO-08-1025R>

What does the public think?

Americans believe wounded Iraq War veterans are not receiving high quality medical care when they return to the U.S.

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/research/horp/surveys/>

9. After you have gone through the previous example and your students have chosen an issue to research, ask them to complete the first section: *What is the status quo?*
- Here are some suggested sources your students will find helpful in completing this section of the worksheet:
 - The Library of Congress: <http://thomas.loc.gov/bss/110search.html>
 - Roll Call / Congress.org: <http://www.congress.org/congressorg/issues/bills/>
 - GPO Access: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/bills/index.html>
 - President Bush: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>
10. Now ask your students to complete the section: *What are some proposed changes?*
- Here are some suggested sources your students will find helpful in completing this section of the worksheet
 - McCain campaign: www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/
 - Obama campaign: www.barackobama.com/issues/
 - Barr campaign: www.bobbarr2008.com/issues/
 - Public Agenda: www.publicagenda.org
 - Candidate speeches
11. Move on and complete the next section: *What are the “facts?”*
- Here are some suggested sources your students will find helpful in completing this section of the worksheet
 - Public Agenda: www.publicagenda.org
 - Fact Check: www.factcheck.org
 - The Government Accountability Office: www.gao.gov
12. Now begin and complete the section: *What does the public think?*
- Here are some suggested sources your students will find helpful in completing this section of the worksheet
 - Pew Research Center for the People and the Press: www.people-press.org
 - Gallup Poll: <http://www.gallup.com>
 - Harvard School of Public Health: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/research/horp/surveys/>
13. Once students have completed the worksheet, ask each student to share one new fact that they learned about the issue they researched.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Getting Informed

Issue: _____

What is the status quo?

What laws already exist that effect this issue? What actions are currently begin taken?

What are some proposed changes?

What are the “facts?”

Use the internet to examine the issue from a variety of perspectives. Visit news websites, independent government organizations and watchdog groups. Once you have seen what leaders and thinkers have said and written, write a short summary of your findings as well as the addresses of the websites you used.

What does the public think?

Collect polling information that you feel is related to your issue.

Deliberate

Student Deliberation Activity

This activity is designed to encourage students to look at political issues from a variety of perspectives and then create a political platform based on their reactions. Like any deliberation activity, compromise and listening will play a key role in developing the platform.

Objective: The objective of this activity is for your students to evaluate multiple perspectives on issues facing the United States and thus the next president.

Students will be able to find common ground with each other over issues that are often polarizing

Suggested Procedures

1. Provide each student with the attached worksheet and ask them to complete steps 1 through 3 on their own.
 - If your students used the “planks” from this curriculum, use the attached ***Student Worksheet Using the May 2008 Student Agenda***.
 - If your students created their own “planks” using important issues they themselves generated, use the attached ***Student Worksheet Using Your Own Agenda***.
2. After your students have completed steps 1 through 3, ask them share their responses to steps 1 through 3 with the rest of the class.
3. Next place your students in groups of 3-4 and ask all your students to complete step 4 by working with their group-mates.
 - If possible, group students with a variety of perspectives together.
4. Instruct students that you will now be having a classroom deliberation on the creation of a student political platform for 2008.
5. If your students have not held a deliberation before you may want to spend a few minutes reviewing with them what a deliberation is and how it differs from debate.
 - ***What is deliberation?***
Deliberation is a form of interpersonal communication which most often takes the form of public conversation. Deliberation is different than discussion because it is measured conversation and almost always leads to action. Deliberation is focused around an issue, generally laws or policy, but also can cover public behavior and cultural practices. The public includes everyone, not just experts and politicians, but everyday people who have an opinion on the topic. Current deliberation practices offer three possible choices or outcomes, and then arrange the conversation around the pros and cons of each.
 - ***Is deliberation debate?***
Deliberation is often confused with debate, but the two are very different. Debate is a formally structured conversation between two opposing sides; some even define debate as a “quarrel.” Debate creates a dichotomy while deliberation allows for careful consideration of many sides, so the best choice can be made. The two also differ because debate is also between experts, while deliberation allows for input from laypeople. Essentially, debate is black and white, who is right and who is wrong, while deliberation allows for shades of gray.

6. Remind your students to listen to each other. It is important for them to consider multiple perspectives in order to find common ground.
7. Once the students have completed the worksheets, have the groups return to the class as a whole.
8. Ask each student group to present their compromised positions and, working as a class, create a set of class room policy statements on the issues.

Deliberate: Student Worksheet Using the May 2008 Student Agenda

Background: In May 2008 students across the country deliberated on the issues facing the 2008 presidential candidates. Out of all the issues people, the media and the candidates have focused on, the students chose the following as being the most important: 1) Education; 2) The Economy; 3) The war in Iraq; 4) Healthcare; 5) The Environment.

Step One

Briefly identify your position on the following issues.

Example: We need more environmental regulations to protect the environment

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

Now briefly identify a position you feel is a different than your own.

Example: Environmental regulations should be gotten rid of because they hinder economic development or environmental regulations should be sensitive to the needs of businesses

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

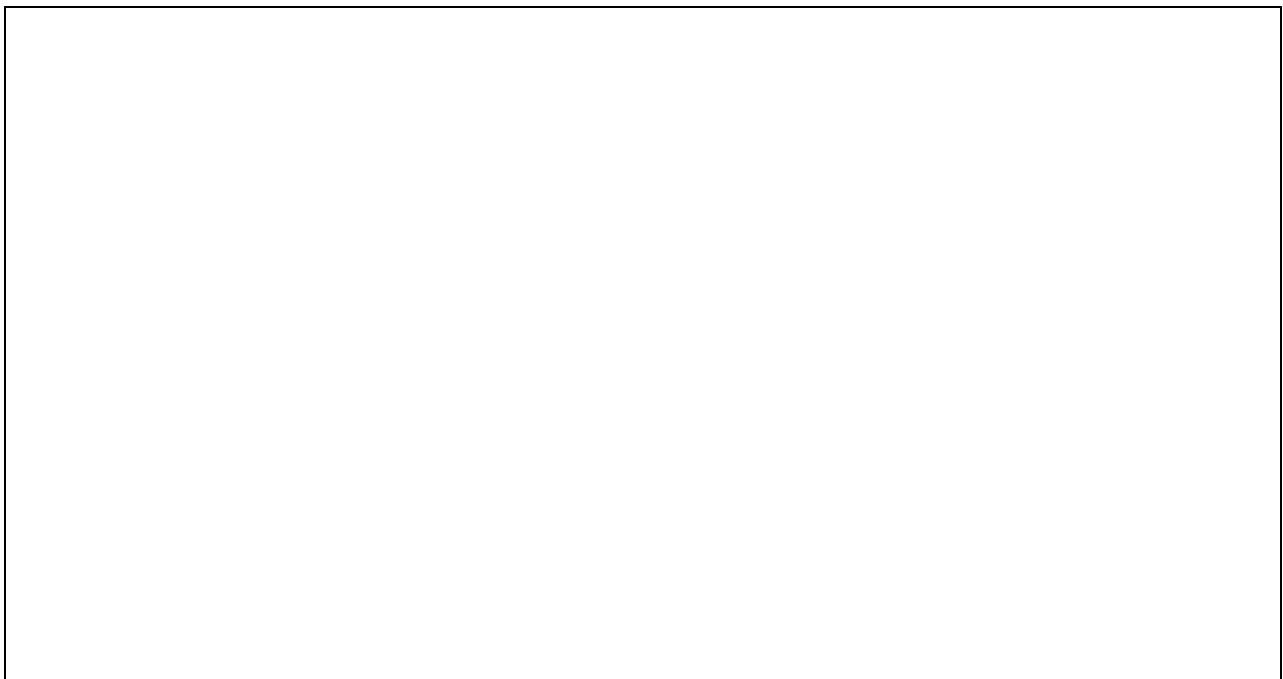
Step 2

- a) Personal values play a large role in a person's political perspective. Identify 3 values you think play a role in the development of your position on each of these issues.

Example: I think we need more protection for the environment because I value the environment or I think we need fewer environmental restrictions on corporations because I value economic growth.



- b) Now try to identify some of the values of a person who holds what you would consider to be a position different from that of your own on all 5 of the issues.



Step 3

Considering your values and the values of someone who has a different position on the issues than you, determine what you believe would be a compromise position between you and someone with a different position. List the positions below.

Example: We should provide incentives such as tax credits to companies which practice environmentally safe business practices.

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

Step 4 (sections a through d)

a) Work together in your small group to reach an agreement on the values that have influenced your position on each issue and then list them below.

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

- b) Now, within your small group, discuss the obstacles to finding a solution to each issue. Work together to reach an agreement on the obstacles and then list them below.

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

- c) Now discuss how the above stated obstacles can be overcome. Work together to reach an agreement on ways of overcoming these obstacles and then list them below.

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

d) Now, within your small group, discuss the proposed compromise positions. Work together to reach an agreement on each policy issue and write your deliberated / compromised policy statement below.

Education	
The Economy	
The War in Iraq	
Healthcare	
The Environment	

Deliberate: Student Worksheet Using Your Own Agenda

Out of all the issues people, the media and the candidates have focused on, we students choose the following as being the most important:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Step One

Briefly identify your position on the issues.

Example: We need more environmental regulations to protect the environment

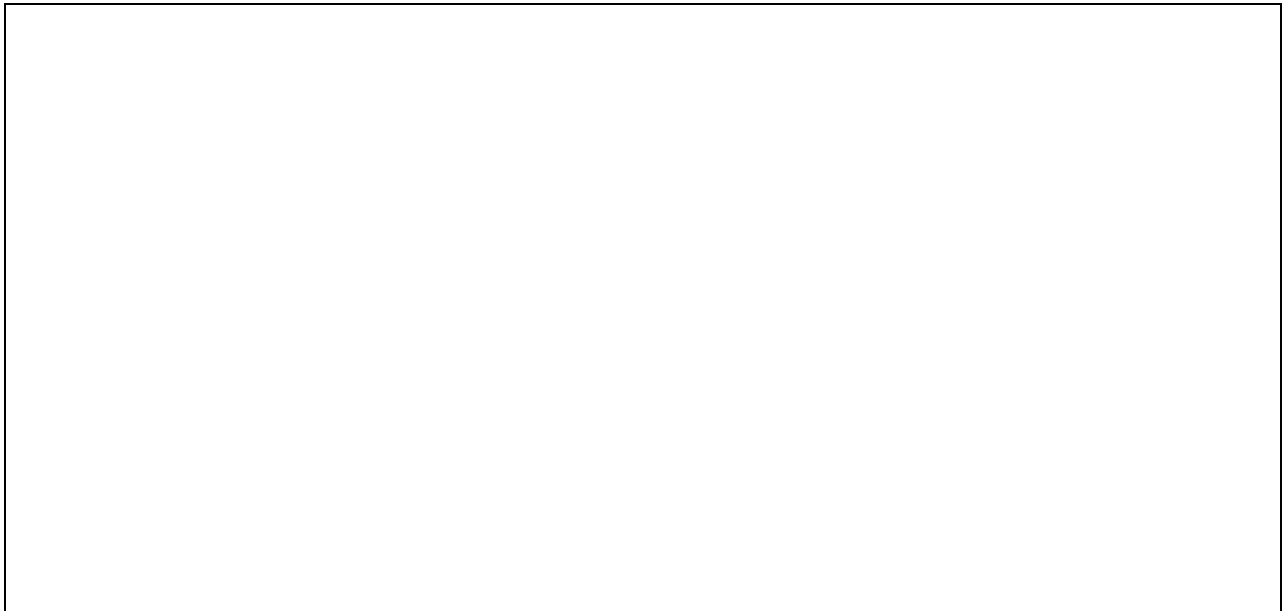
Now briefly identify a position you feel is a different than your own on the issues.

Example: Environmental regulations should be gotten rid of because they hinder economic development or environmental regulations should be sensitive to the needs of businesses

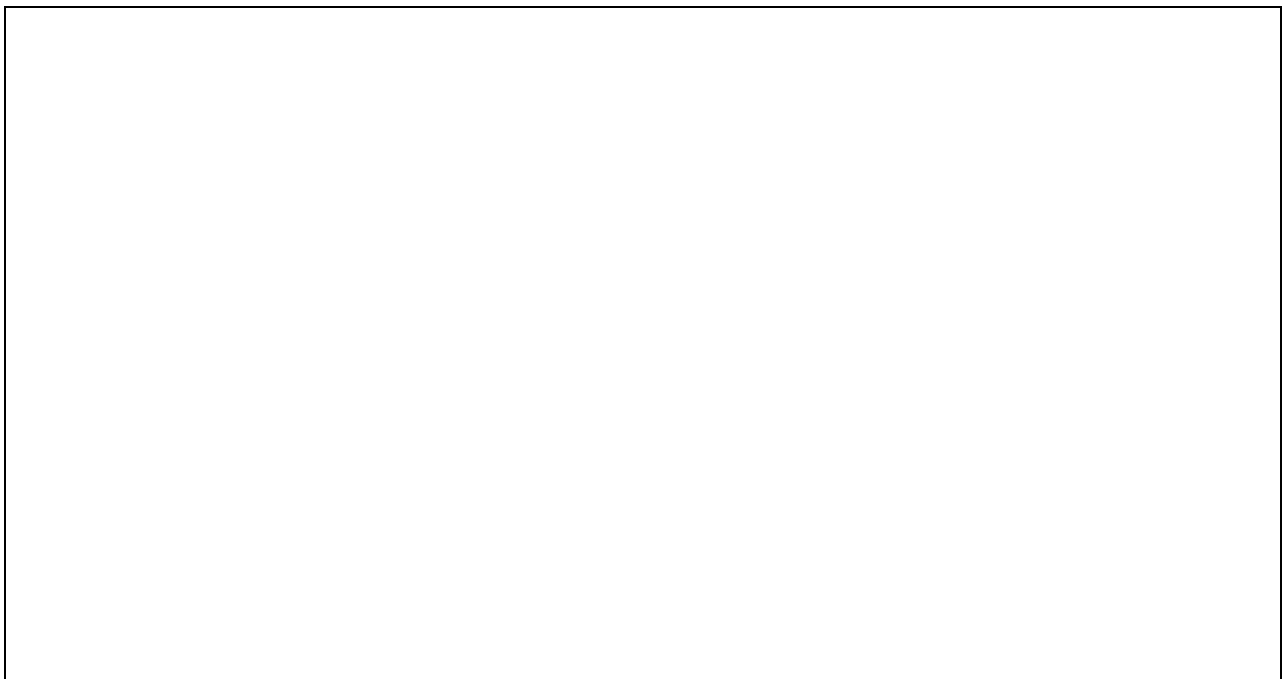
Step 2

- a) Personal values play a large role in a person's political perspective. Identify 3 values you think play a role in the development of your position on each of the issues.

Example: I think we need more protection for the environment because I value the environment or I think we need fewer environmental restrictions on corporations because I value economic growth.



- b) Now try to identify some of the values of a person who holds what you would consider to be a position different from that of your own on the issues.



Step 3

Considering your values and the values of someone who has a different position on the issues than you, determine what you believe would be a compromise position between you and someone with a different position. List the positions below.

Example: We should provide incentives such as tax credits to companies which practice environmentally safe business practices.

Step 4 (sections a through d)

a) Work together in your small group to reach an agreement on the values that have influenced your position on each issue and then list them below.

b) Now, within your small group, discuss the obstacles to finding a solution to each issue. Work together to reach an agreement on the obstacles and then list them below.

c) Now discuss how the above stated obstacles can be overcome. Work together to reach an agreement on ways of overcoming these obstacles and then list them below.

d) Now, within your small group, discuss the proposed compromise positions. Work together to reach an agreement on each policy issue and write your deliberated / compromised policy statement below.

Works Cited

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Words to Know

Policy Statement: A short list or explanation of what policies you think should be implemented to address an issue.

Political Platform: A collection of policy statements which are associated with an organization or group of individuals.

Status Quo: The current state of affairs.