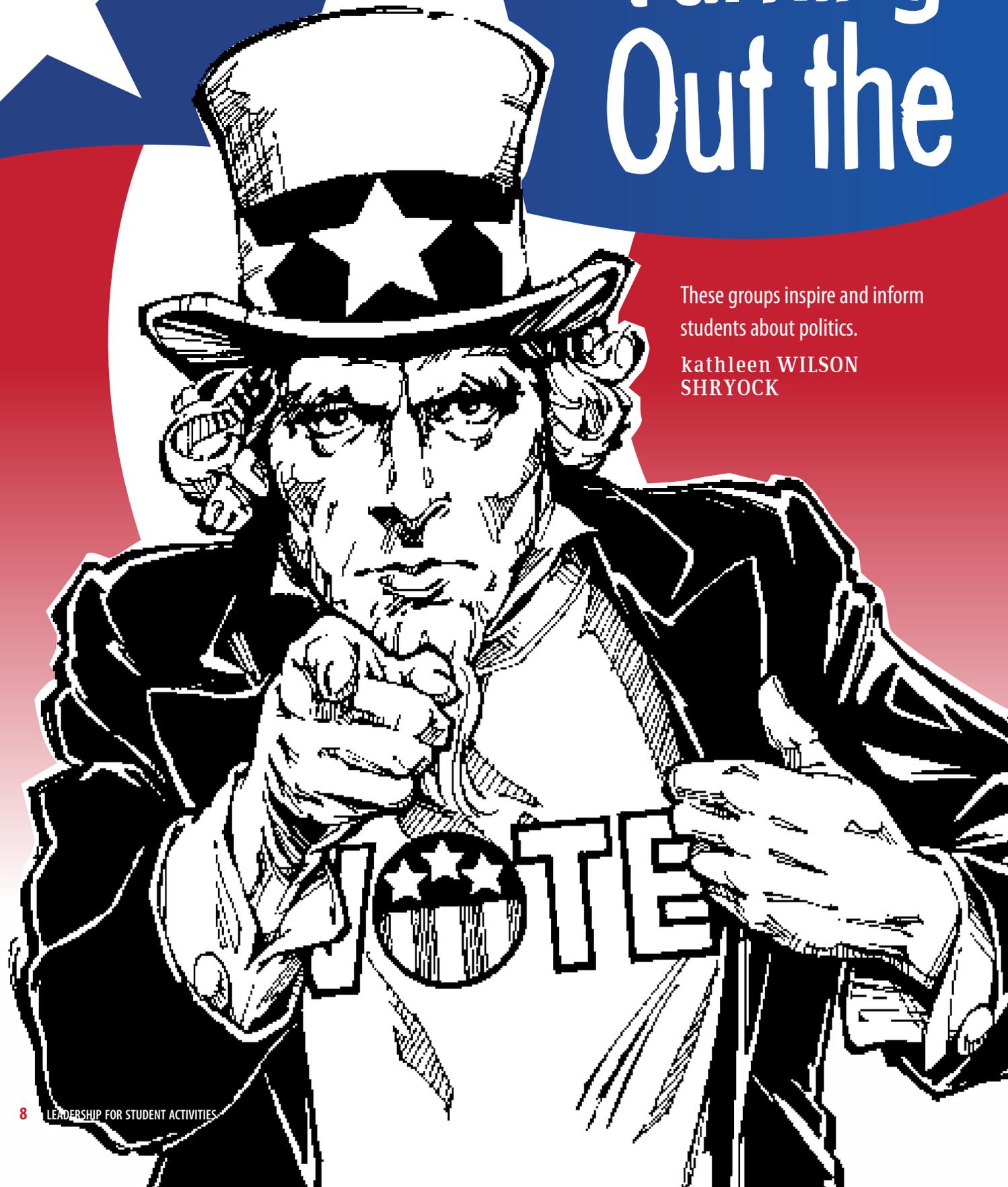


Turning Out the

These groups inspire and inform
students about politics.

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VOTE

From school budget cuts to the future of health care, the decisions made by elected officials have an impact on our young people, now and in the future. But young people do not often speak out about the issues that affect them, and when they do, their voice is not always heard. As an activity adviser, you can be the spark that ignites civic awareness and involvement among your students. Many national organizations are available to support your efforts in helping a new generation of leaders find their voice.

Rock the Vote

For 20 years, Rock the Vote (www.rockthevote.org) has been using music, pop culture, and new technology to engage young people in democracy. Through online tools, teacher supports, and a grassroots campaign that reaches out to students where they roam, the organization has registered more than 5 million young voters and empowered them with the tools and the knowledge to create political and social change.

Chrissy Faessen, vice president of communications and marketing, notes that youth involvement is crucial to the future of our democracy and believes that teachers are a key element in promoting civic engagement. To highlight the importance of the student-teacher relationship, Rock the Vote marked the 40th anniversary of the 26th amendment giving 18-year-olds the right to vote by bringing a democracy class to schools.

Democracy class (www.democracyclass.com) is a 45-minute, nonpartisan lesson plan designed to educate and excite students about voting and elections. “The passage of the 26th amendment provides a perfect example of how teachers and students worked together on an issue that was important to them,” says Faessen.

“Democracy class capitalizes on the student-teacher relationship by helping teachers bring the conversation to the classroom. It sparks excitement and shows the power that comes with the right to vote. It helps kids make the connection that decisions affecting their lives and communities are tied directly to the people we elect.”

In anticipation of the November 2012 election, the organization will sponsor a nationwide bus tour. Rock the Vote representatives will be traveling to community festivals, high schools, and college campuses in an effort to raise awareness among students. Rock the Vote also maintains an informative website that offers easy access to voter registration and Electionland (www.electionland.com), a nonpartisan site where people can learn more about the voting process and ask questions about current elections in their state. “Young people are beginning to understand that they are in the thick of the issues facing our country. They want candidates who will address it at their level,” notes Faessen. “Through awareness, they learn that civics is not just about a class or a subject. It’s something that affects daily life.”



VOTE

League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters (www.lwv.org) is a nonpartisan political organization that seeks to empower citizens through education and advocacy. Through its more than 800 local leagues, the organization reaches out to citizens at all levels, including students in elementary, middle, and high schools. Through mock elections, awards, and scholarships, the League celebrates and encourages civic participation. Organization facilitators hope that by engaging young people early in life, civic involvement will become a lifelong habit.

League President Elisabeth MacNamara notes that providing opportunities for students to vote is

the first step in a process. And while voter registration doesn't guarantee engagement or participation, it does open the door toward awareness. "The most fundamental way of becoming involved in a democracy is registering to vote," she said. "But even more empowering is knowledge and a real understanding of the issues. Adults can provide support by talking to young people about the issues that are really impacting them directly and by teaching them that their vote can be powerful."

To assist educators, the league has prepared a comprehensive training manual designed to help in the development of high school voter registration programs.

The guide book, *Empowering the Voters of Tomorrow*, can be downloaded for free from the library section of the leagues' website.

In addition, the league provides nonpartisan resources and information regarding current issues and candidates. Much of this information, including a polling place finder and voting dates, can be found at www.vote411.org.

Along with voter registration initiatives, the league offers many volunteer opportunities for students to practice their interest in politics. MacNamara encourages students to contact their local league, also listed on the organization's website, for more information.



American Legion Boys State and Boys Nation and American Legion Auxiliary Girls State and Girls Nation

The American Legion Boys State and American Legion Auxiliary Girls State programs (www.boysandgirlsstate.org) offer students an opportunity to learn leadership skills while learning about their rights and responsibilities as a citizen. Mike Buss, program director for Boys State, explains that the summer workshop is available to high school students in every state except for Hawaii. (Hawaii has a similar program sponsored by another organization.) Students are selected by application during their junior year. While there is a separate program for boys and girls, the opportunities are similar. Participants learn about city, county,

and state governments by running for office, creating and enforcing laws, and attending legislative sessions operated by students acting as elected officials.

At the conclusion of the program, two boys and two girls from each of the states are selected to attend Boys Nation and Girls Nation in Washington, DC. While in Washington, each student acts as a "senator" representing his or her home state. Students learn about the workings of the federal government by creating a mock legislature, submitting bills, and attending committee hearings. The students also spend a day on Capitol Hill meeting with actual state senators and representatives.

Vickie Koutz, Girls State chairman/Girls Nation director for 2010–11, explains that the program also offers students a chance to practice patriotism. This summer, the "senators" visited Arlington Cemetery, sponsored a picnic for wounded soldiers, and sang at the Vietnam Wall.

Koutz believes that the program's hands-on experiences are a foundation for creating engaged, knowledgeable citizens and notes that teachers are an important source of civic support. "Teachers can provide their students with role-playing opportunities through field trips to local government facilities," she says. "And, they can be good role models by sharing their excitement for the governmental process."



National Youth Association

Through government advocacy, media support, financial and educational aid, events, and opportunities, the goal of the National Youth Association (NYA) (www.nyaamerica.org) is to advance the youth agenda in the United States and to help youth realize their true potential. Tim Hwang, NYA president, believes that taking a proactive role in politics is one important way that young people can protect their interests. “Youth are perhaps the largest underrepresented group in government,” he notes. “At all levels, a deluge of lobbyists and special interests compete for attention from policymakers. Yet, our youth are often shut out. This process seems counterintuitive considering the fact that the world these policymakers craft is the world that will be inherited by younger generations.”

Hwang explains that the NYA is active in a number of initiatives that represent the voice of our youth and invite youth participation. In part, the association organizes volunteers who meet with elected officials regarding issues that directly impact young people. They also send out regular legislative alerts advising members of relevant policy changes. In addition, NYA facilitates forums, town hall meetings, and debates to increase awareness and understanding of the issues. As the 2012 election approaches, they will be working with partner organizations to increase voter registration in the youth population.

Hal Zeitlin, a senior at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, MD, is an active member of the NYA. On behalf of the association, he travels to Washington, DC, to assist in the creation of nonpartisan and bipartisan partnerships. He hopes that his work will encourage elected officials to consider the opinions of young people. “We are all citizens,” says Zeitlin. “We all feel the effects of public policy. Some people think it is unique to see a student involved in politics, but it really shouldn’t be a rarity. Student leadership has evolved and young people are taking more of a role. It’s important that all groups are represented in government.”

Hwang advises that educators can help students develop an active interest in politics by informing them of important issues facing our society. They can make it personal by discussing how these topics affect the students and then working to get them involved in issues that they care about. “Whether it is a local issue or a national topic, advisers should seek out opportunities and help students connect to them, regardless of political affiliation,” he suggests. “Democracy is a full contact sport with competing interests. Once you get your students involved in that process, you can really unlock their passion and get them on the road to advocacy for the issues they believe in.”

Hwang also encourages students not to be afraid of taking the leap into the political arena. “Jump right in,” he says. “The great thing about America is that anyone with a will and an opinion has the opportunity to play a part in the democratic process. Take an issue you really care about, do your homework, and begin working toward making a change.”

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Youth Leadership Initiative

In a 2004 study, *Politics: The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education*, researchers at the University of Virginia Center for Survey Research found that a quality civics education is crucial to the development of lifelong civic involvement and responsibility. Because of this, educators from the Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI www.youthleadership.net) at the University of Virginia Center for Politics believe in providing teachers with free, innovate civics materials and programs. “To create a stable democracy, you have to educate people,” says Meg Heubeck, director of instruction. “The best way is to teach these skills all year, every year. We provide free, easy access to materials that can be infused into any curriculum.”

Heubeck notes that it is also important to learn civics skills early on and to reinforce these lessons throughout a student’s school career, so YLI provides materials for all grade levels, K–12. A database of teacher-developed lesson plans covers topics ranging from service learning to the legislative process. And, according to Heubeck, the materials are designed to show that students can make a difference—at any age.

In addition to providing valuable lesson plans, YLI hosts a student-only, mock election every fall. Electronic ballots are tailored to reflect actual candidates and issues from each student’s home legislative district. The online application also allows educators to adapt the election program to meet individual needs. Activity advisers can even use the program to host an actual student council election at their own school.

Other features include an interactive E-Congress program that allows students to write sample legislation and follow it through the lawmaking process, and Democracy Corps which invites students to learn about civic engagement through community service.

Heubeck considers YLI to be a free, one-stop shopping spree for civics educators. “Our materials are designed to teach students the benefits of getting involved. Rather than waiting for someone else to solve problems, they can take action and work toward a solution,” she says. “Voting is just one step. Problem solving skills are also critical to the process and are stressed through our programs.” ■

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