

Discussion Menu and Study Guide #3 Solutions!

CONSIDERING DEMOCRACY: 8 THINGS TO ASK A REPRESENTATIVE

Documentary, 58 Minutes, DVD Extras 41 Minutes

Main Course & Discussion - Toward Solutions and Possibilities

The Role of Government

What do you think the role of government should be? (Think about how the U.S. Constitution starts.) You can start discussion from the local level, then progress up to the federal government level. For example, on the local level, what does government provide? Brainstorm. (Stop signs = ways for safe transportation to take place. Fire department = to keep the community safe from burning things, and sometimes rescues cats. Etc.) These are things that the community collects taxes for. Do you think the government should "protect and serve"? If so, who, or what entity should it serve?

What is socialism? When people or societies come together, there is usually policy created to help society function. When something is socialized, it usually means that taxes go toward something that helps everyone in society. Some things that are socialized in the U.S. are Social Security, public K-12 education, fire departments and the function of calling 911. Does the term 'socialism' have negative connotations? How do you think this happened? What entity do you think crafted the debate against socialism? What could happen if fire departments and other segments of American society are privatized? Might it become really expensive to put out fires? What are possible impacts on the economy in the short and long term? Would it help or hurt the American public? Conducting business in society is very important, but are certain businesses creating an uneven playing field by creating policy that favors one business over others? Are the terms of 'socialism' and 'free market' ever used in a careless or incorrect manner in the media?

What might happen to the cost of goods and services if there were only a handful of, say, energy providers for gasoline and natural gas? If there is a lack of competition for the market, might they be able to set the price to whatever they want? (Look at the Fortune 500 and look at the country origination of the companies and see if that nation has different policy than other nations.) Has the cost of energy gone up for the average family? Has the profit margin of energy companies also gone up? Compare the Republican, Democrat, Libertarian and Progressive point of view on this.

Healthcare

Analyze a candidate's stance on healthcare. Keep in mind that most of the other industrial democracies have citizen-wide (universal, noncorporate) healthcare. Also keep in mind that many of those other countries can supplement their social healthcare with private care if they so choose. They have that choice! Oddly, a lot of Americans pay into Medicare, but do not receive services. (It's quite unique in the world.) Look at each candidate and discuss how corporate funding may have affected their healthcare platform. (Go to www.opensecrets.org or do a keyword search.)

Corporations & Policy

Let's look at the concept of the revolving door and the different governmental agencies that exist, usually in order to protect the American public. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) is one of the governmental agencies that regulates companies that deal with food and drug product safety. They approve or disapprove of consumer products before they enter the market. Have there been recent instances of drugs that have caused more harm than good? What does this indicate about the current system? Since officials are being paid by our tax dollars, shouldn't we hold them accountable to help safeguard us? The American people do have the right to demand that their government works for them. How can we go about doing this? (Be creative!)

Former Congressman Tauzin, as a representative of the people, ensured that the recent Medicare pharmaceutical legislation favored certain corporations. He left his Congressional post early (saying that he didn't feel good) and immediately became the president of the largest pharmaceutical lobby, PhRMA, reportedly receiving \$2,000,000 per year. Should political representatives be responsible for past actions? How did this occur in a democratic nation?

Public Good versus Private Profit

The film mentions the Supreme Court's decisions of 1976 and 1978 and how they built on personhood rights for corporations. Dive into it! I've posted different pdfs of Supreme Court cases on the website. Remember that it wasn't until 1886 that finally corporations were 'given' or perhaps 'underhandedly allocated' personhood rights. Whom should policy, including Supreme Court decisions, ultimately serve: the public good, or private companies?

There has also been legislation that has been passed to give institutions (educational and corporate) selective rights that were at one time reserved for individuals and the common good. The **Bayh-Dole Act of 1980** was one of these. Do a search on the Bayh-Doyle Act and decide if you think it is fair or not. How has the Bayh-Dole Act impacted society?

Do research on the deregulation of financial institutions that began in 1980. Here are a few key phrases that may help to start your search: saving and loans deregulation, changing accounting rules, financial lobbying, financial campaign finance, Ernst and Young accounting scandal, Silverado and Lincoln Savings and Loans scandal, daisy chain accounting, and Dick Pratt. The financial deregulation that began under Reagan is continuing to show itself in collapse of huge corporations like WorldCom and Enron, and is also showing its impacts on the current mortgage market. (They changed accounting rules to create the appearance of greater wealth than actually ever existed. The accounting rules haven't been changed back. Yikes! Yet true!) With recent federal aid going toward the mortgage crisis, who has it helped more: private businesses or the average citizen? Relate your ideas to the role of government and the idea of the Common Good.

The Bigger Picture - Philosophical, but Research Encouraged

The airwaves are owned by the American public. The FCC (Federal Communication Commission) regulates "interstate and international communication by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable." According to their own policy, commissioners can not have a financial interest in any commission-related business. Being a corporate lobbyist prior to being a commissioner, however, is okay. Since the president appoints people to these positions, can the system be corrupted without the public's knowledge? The FCC makes policies that impact all Americans, and while they regulate the business of communications, most Americans don't know about these policies because it is often not reported in the news. What can we do about this irony?

How are the pharmaceutical and defense companies connected to the media conglomerates? Interestingly, how might pharmaceutical, energy, financial, and defense companies benefit from increased media conglomeration? How would this affect advertising rates? How does media conglomeration affect your access to information? Do you think it's strange that CSPAN (the televised lawmaking channel) is reserved only for private cable subscribers? Do you think there is enough demand to drive a subscription-based, noncommercial daily news? What are solutions? What current internet resources could be used?

In the Media DVD extras, there is a clip of MSNBC broadcasting from NYC. Is it fair to use public funding and police support for a private, for-profit broadcast event? (Discuss that first, and then weave in the fact that the airwaves are owned by the American public.) What to do? Is it feasible to take them to court? What about the lawmakers who passed these laws? What seems to be the most workable solution?

Interestingly, some Latin American country legislatures are debating the rights of nature. This is a very innovative way of thinking green. How can this positively or negatively impact society and future generations or people?

Net Neutrality - Communications

Research other developed countries' systems of news delivery, communication and internet rights. You might find that other societies are very technologically advanced and their population spends much less on communication technology.

Budgetary Spending - Or Your Taxes

Do private, no bid contracts help or hurt America? What different crazy spending scenarios have recently happened? For example, in Colorado, we appear to be going back to the paper vote. This is because the voting machines that were purchased for millions of dollars a few years ago don't seem to work. This is one example of a preferred contract that didn't go as planned. Was this an isolated incident or are there other instances?

What happens when you purchase something that does not work? If it cost 100 dollars, what do you do? What if you spent 2,000 dollars? What if you spent 30,000 dollars? (This is approximately each American's share of the national debt.) Okay, receipt in hand, what do you feel you should do?

How might shifting how we spend our taxes strengthen or weaken America? How would you allocate the budget and how would it impact greater society? Interestingly, I went on an online internet video chat site and asked industrial countries (all representative democracies) to respond to how they felt about their mandatory, legislated vacation time (usually 5 weeks.) Interestingly, they commented on how it helps their general well being and actually helps the economy because they can go on vacation or can use a few days off work to go shopping. Think about the situation that Europe was in after WW2. Weren't they rebuilding their economies? Yet, many countries after WW2 created healthcare and other social structures to help the people in their countries. Interesting.

If government policy consistently gives contracts to certain private companies, does it seem that free market mechanisms are at work? If public taxes are allocated to no bid contracts with private companies, can it be called corporate socialism?

When money and special gifts are given to officials, are things expected in return? Private contractors are usually paid between 4 to 10 times more than the usual cost. Does that seem like a healthy free market economy at work? Think of different solutions and systems of accountability. Be creative when brainstorming and eventually we will find solutions that work.

Do the current campaign finance and lobbying loopholes take away rights from American individuals and communities? Keep in mind that while campaign finance is hot a topic before the elections, lobbying has more impact and continues relentlessly through the year.

The Upcoming Elections and Advertising Spin

In the previous elections, Bush had a fairly strong backing from Lockheed Martin, the largest defense corporation in the world. If you think about it, if they don't have government contracts, they wouldn't make money, nor would they make the products if they didn't have the customer base supporting them. Think back and recall Bush's campaign commercials. What emotions did they harness to help to get him elected? Are emotions being used to drive the current campaign? If you think that emotions are being used, which ones are being harnessed or manipulated? Is this effective? Why or why not?

What entity will try to keep military funding where it currently is? What arguments and tactics will they use? Do you think that the populace will believe them? More importantly, what do you believe?

Where do you think more conservative and more progressive people get their information? Do you ever listen to informational sources that you normally don't use? Even though there may be more media conglomeration, say on the radio, instead of ignoring it, what would happen if people who disagreed with what was being said all began to call in and comment?

Corporations and politicians develop strong relationships because the system is set up that way. Isn't it interesting that ONLY senators in 2008 had a mildly successful run at the presidency. It doesn't have to be this way. In the U.S. we live in a republic. As a U.S. citizen, your representatives are there for you, even if you didn't vote for them. Ask them questions! Whom should the system benefit? How does the Constitution begin? We the . . .

Take a break, then check out the Activities Guide. Learn how to relax as well as be engaged!

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Discussion Menu & Study Guide #3

CONSIDERING DEMOCRACY

A documentary to **Refresh** and **Recharge** your Dialog!

Appetizers - Before Discussion

This is the third Discussion Menu. It assumes that you have seen **Considering Democracy**, the DVD extras, and have discussed information in Menus 1 & 2. This one is geared toward recent analysis and moving toward possible solutions. Your conversations with others are important! Remember that there are also links, documents and other information on the website below. There's a lot of stuff to talk about, so in trying to keep it to two pages, appetizers appear here.

Remember also that there are many good things happening in the United States. They may not be reported upon in the news, but good things are happening. Talking to people with different views both challenges and refreshes my thinking.

As we get closer to the elections, if previous elections are any indication, the media and politicians will craft the elements of the debate for us. But let's go beyond that and instead *drive the debate*. When having discussion with others, remember to have respectful (yet spirited!) dialog. Also keep in mind that while the film brings up different ideas, we live in a democracy. It's good to discuss these things! Talk nicely. The following protocol may help: Keep the discussion to the issue at hand. It's okay to attack ideas in a rational manner (this means to give examples that relate to the issue at hand) but never attack the person. Discussions can get heated, but use the enthusiasm to find workable solutions. **Always shake hands after the discussion and remember that it's okay to disagree.** Sometimes it's good to think things over before deciding anything. Smile. It's okay. We will persevere. Some of the topics in this guide are philosophical and ready to be discussed, while others are better when integrated with recent information. It's perfectly fine to concentrate on one topic. There are a few delightful specials to choose from.

Form a Discussion Group!

Talk to others. Nicely. Define solutions. Take breaks. Enjoy life!

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