



KNOCK DOWN THE HOUSE

HIGHER
EDUCATION
GUIDE



“WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL,

my dad wanted to go on a road trip with his buddies. I wanted to go so badly and I begged and I begged and I begged, and he relented. And so, it was like four grown men and a five-year-old girl went on this road trip from New York. We stopped... we stopped here (in Washington D.C.) And it was a really beautiful day, and he leaned down next to me, and he pointed at the Washington Monument, and he pointed at the Reflecting Pool, and he pointed at everything, and he said, ‘You know, this all belongs to us.’ He said, ‘This is our government. It belongs to us. So all of this stuff is yours.’”

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ



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ABOUT THE FILM

Knock Down the House is the story of four working-class women who ran for Congress in the midterm elections of 2018. They are four of the record numbers who organized grassroots campaigns, rejected corporate PAC money and challenged the notion that everyday people can run successful campaigns against sitting incumbents. Collectively these candidates herald a cultural and political shift to transform the process of running and electing our representatives. Such changes do not occur in a vacuum, nor are they about a singular issue. Rather they are about changing the attitudes, behaviors, terms, and entrenched norms and building towards a more inclusive and representative government.



A NETFLIX ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY

KNOCK DOWN THE HOUSE

NETFLIX

LETTER FROM DIRECTOR, RACHEL LEARS

I've been making films about politics since the days of Occupy Wall Street. After having a baby in 2016, I thought I might take a break from political filmmaking—but the day after the election, I knew I had no choice. I wanted to tell a big story in this new political reality about people working across cultural and geographical divides to change American politics in big ways. That same day I contacted the progressive organizations Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats to propose a documentary project about their plan to forge a new path to Congress for “extraordinary ordinary” working people. That project has become *Knock Down the House*.

For over a decade I've investigated the way power and social change work. Too often, communities operate separately in silos and their struggles end up pitted against one another in media narratives. We won't have systemic change until we overcome this. At this critical and volatile moment, *Knock Down the House* presents a story of people working tirelessly to unite the struggles of all Americans.



USING THE HIGHER EDUCATION GUIDE

The Higher Education Guide created for *Knock Down the House* aims to inspire and engage college and university students in a critical look at what it takes to run for office, be elected to Congress in our current political climate, and to be prepared and empowered to share your voice in an ongoing, vigorous, and inclusive public debate which remains the cornerstone of a healthy democracy.

For some students, the next election may be their first time voting, their first time engaging with a candidate, and their first time sorting out political issues. Learning and reflecting on the experiences of the four women candidates in the film - Cori Bush, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Paula-Jean Swearengin, and Amy Vilela - can stand as a testament to the potential and possibilities of our democratic process, as well as revealing its shortcomings and need for transformation. Engaging with the film offers communities an impassioned call to action to not only run for office and vote for those you support, but to share your voice in ongoing, vigorous, and inclusive public debate.

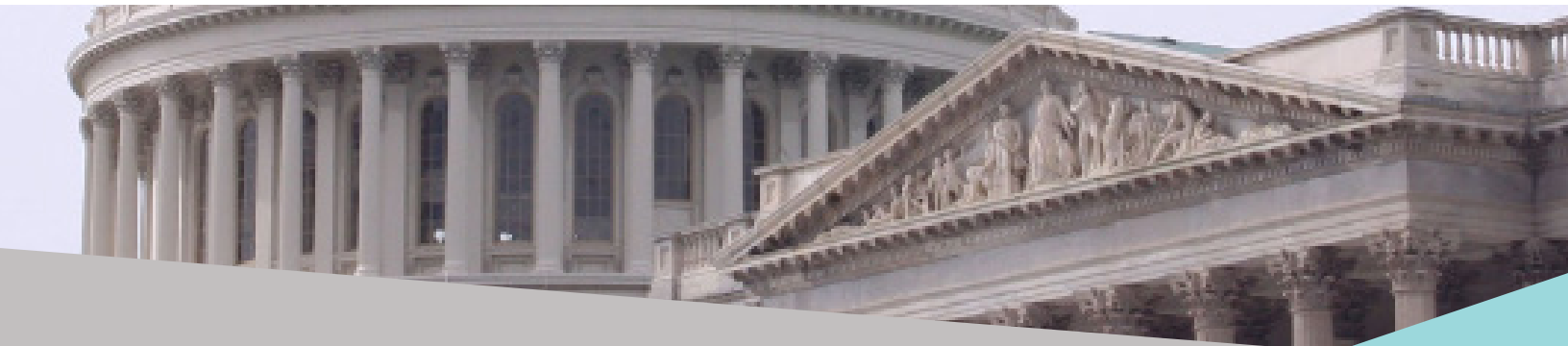
Since 2016, issues of climate change, criminal justice reform, immigration, and gun safety have galvanized students aged 18 - 24 to politically organize in record numbers. Watching *Knock Down the House* on your campus offers a unique opportunity to engage your immediate community in a vigorous discussion and critical examination of the state of our political process and the health of our political institutions. It is also an opportunity to forge new connections with others committed to civic engagement, political organizing, and activism.

This higher education guide includes supplemental content organized around three topics central to the candidates campaign and germane to higher education settings:

- **Representation & Participation**
- **Campaign Finance & Equity**
- **Campus Organizing Today**

A General Discussion Guide, Youth Toolkit, and High School standards-aligned lessons are also available to support screenings and additional engagement with the film.

Access these screening resources at www.knockdownthehouse.com/resources



ORGANIZING A SCREENING EVENT ON CAMPUS

1. Click [here](#) for instructions on how to access the film on Netflix for a public screening.
2. All screening events must abide by the Netflix [screening license](#).
3. A reminder that you cannot fundraise or charge admission to any *Knock Down the House* event.
4. Click [here](#) for Downloadable Assets including sample *Knock Down the House* images for Facebook and Twitter to help publicize your event.
5. Check out the Discussion Guide for your screening [here](#) and the Youth Organizing Toolkit [here](#).



BEFORE THE SCREENING

Before watching *Knock Down the House*, pose several opening questions to build community and to introduce the central topics that will be discussed following the film.

- Who runs for Congress?
- What role do you think money plays in electing candidates?
- What is the role of young people in today's political campaigns?



POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before delving more deeply into the topics included in this guide, consider asking several of these more general questions as a transition:

- What did this film make you think about the future of the American Congress?
- Did the film change your ideas about what it takes to run for office?
- What moments in the film stood out to you as new or surprising?
- What traits did you see in the candidates that you'd like to see in your representatives?
- What did you see in the film that made you skeptical or concerned about the current election process?
- What did you see that made you feel hopeful for the future?





DISCUSSION TOPICS

REPRESENTATION & PARTICIPATION

WHY RUN?

The candidates in *Knock Down the House* give voice to many intersecting issues that have historically remained invisible to those holding the reins and the purse strings of political power.



CORI BUSH, MISSOURI 1ST CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

“I was not trying to become an activist. Didn’t set out to do that. This is the district where Mike Brown was murdered. I only live six minutes from Ferguson. I’m a registered nurse. I’m an ordained pastor, and I’m the mother of two teenagers. It was like a battle zone at home. I took to the streets to lend a hand as a nurse. What I was wanting to see was justice happen. It didn’t happen so, I just kept going back again and again. This district was able to affect the entire world. Just regular everyday people.”



ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ, NEW YORK 14TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

“My Dad had passed away. Working in a non-profit just wasn’t enough for our family, because we were about to lose our home. You’re trying to make a three hundred dollar student loan bill here, and your foreclosure installment here... You just do your best to survive. That’s been the reality for millions of people in this country. That feel like they’re just hanging by a thread. And they feel like no one’s fighting for them, and everyone’s just in it for themselves.”



PAULA-JEAN SWEARENGIN, U.S. SENATE CANDIDATE FROM WEST VIRGINIA

“This was my house, where I raised my kids. My neighbor’s daughter ended up with a rare form of bone cancer. I know this lady had cancer. There’s a person in that house that has cancer. And our leadership is not hearing us. They’re in bed with the industries. You talk about jobs you can probably count here how many people’s out here on this site for miles and miles and miles. Where are the jobs? We don’t have to do this. If another country came in here, blew up our mountains and poisoned our water, we’d go to war. But industry can. My name is Paula Jean. I am a coal miner’s daughter, running for the U.S.”



AMY VILELA, NEVADA 4TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

“It’s not just our family. It’s thirty thousand families a year. Thirty thousand of us... a year... that are losing loved ones because they don’t have insurance. No one in this great country should be dying because they don’t understand the intricate system of insurance.”

Corbin Trent, working for Brand New Congress at the time of filming, offers another perspective:

“Essentially it’s because there’s so few incumbents in either party that are actively fighting to build a better America. It seems that both parties have the assumption that they are witnessing the decline of America and that they’re wanting to manage America’s decline. We’re saying no, we don’t want to manage America’s decline. We want to rebuild and reinvigorate our economy and our culture and our democracy with people that share a vision of a brighter future. And we think there are very, very few of the 435 members that have a vision of a brighter, better future for America in the near term, so that’s why we’re going after them. Not because they’re bad people or because they even vote poorly, it’s because they don’t have a vision for the future. We also don’t think that this is this big dramatic thing - that these people have some birthright to these seats. You know, we’ve got to be able to challenge incumbents through primaries. I mean we have to - this is a democracy.”¹

INTERSECTIONALITY AND POLITICS

The four working-class women candidates in *Knock Down the House* not only are representative of the many demographic shifts that occurred in the 2018 midterm elections, but also of intersectionality, defined as the way in which oppression and discrimination applies across multiple identities, such as race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation.²

529

women ran for Congress. 3/4 of whom were Democrats

45

women of color were elected, 37 elected to the House (a record)

More women, people of color, and LGBTQ people were elected to Congress than ever in the history of the nation.

The youngest woman was elected to Congress, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, at age

29

AND THERE WERE SEVERAL FIRSTS:



The first **NATIVE AMERICAN** women elected to Congress



The first **MUSLIM** women elected to Congress.



The first openly **BISEXUAL** woman elected to Congress.

Excerpted from the March 31, 2017 interview with Corbin Trent.
¹https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality/transcript

CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE U.S. ELECTORATE



GENERAL POPULATION

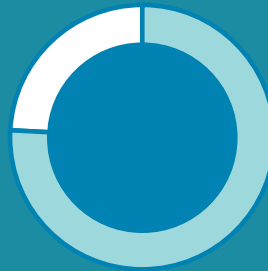


● 49% Men
● 51% Women



● 61% White, Non-Hispanic
● 39% People of Color

2019 CONGRESS



● 76% Men
● 24% Women



● 78% White, Non-Hispanic
● 22% People of Color

From: Reflective Democracy 2018 Report⁴

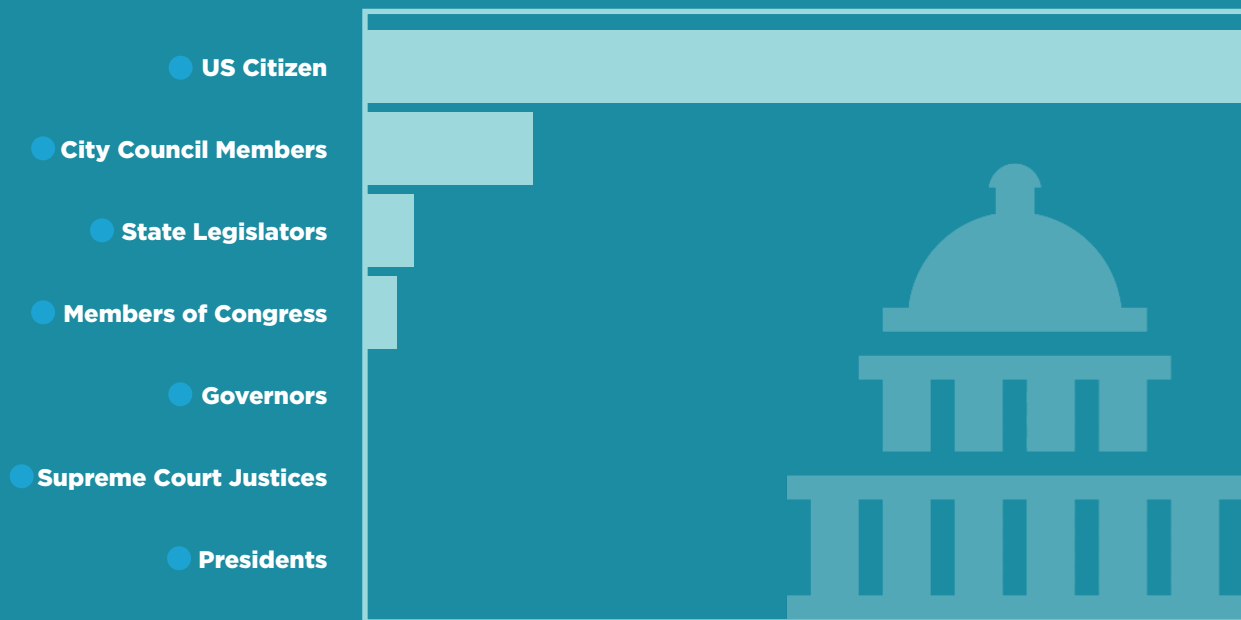
³ U.S. and World Population Clock. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>
⁴ A Rising Tide? (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://wholeads.us/2018-report/>

INCOME

Class and income are major barriers to running for office and winning elections. A little more than half of the American economy is made up of working-class people, defined as those employed in manual labor, the service industry or clerical jobs, and yet members of Congress, who were working-class prior to holding office, only hold two percent of the seats in Congress.

Overall in 2017, the median net worth of Congress was \$511,000, roughly five times higher than the average American net worth of \$97,600.⁵

WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE MAKE UP HALF OF US CITIZENS BUT LESS THAN A TENTH OF US ELECTED OFFICIALS⁶



⁵ UHawkings, D., & Hawkings, D. (2018, March 02). Wealth of Congress: Richer Than Ever, but Mostly at the Very Top. Retrieved from <https://www.rollcall.com/news/hawkings/congress-richer-ever-mostly-top>

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/10/24/18009856/working-class-income-inequality-randy-bryce-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>



DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- ▶ What is the government's role in promoting the common good? (e.g. clean air and water, access to decent food, shelter, work, education, health care.)
- ▶ What are the components of that common good? Do the candidates share a sense of the common good that's not being served?
- ▶ How do you define political representation? What is the role of political representation in democracy?
- ▶ Describe the relationship between intersectionality, political representation, and political participation. Why does intersectionality matter in politics?
- ▶ Describe how each candidate interacts with their constituents and their community as they campaign for office. To what extent does their geography, education, professional or personal experience, age, or gender influence how they engage with their communities?
- ▶ What does it mean to have political power? Who has access to it? Who does not?
- ▶ How are the candidates in the film challenging entrenched political power?
- ▶ Why challenge incumbents? Who and what is being served by challenging incumbents?
- ▶ How do you, as a constituent, weigh the benefits you might enjoy from electing an incumbent against the importance of electing new representatives to Congress?
- ▶ Consider the relationship between a political ideology, a policy position, and a party position. What are critical distinctions and what do they share? Why is this important?
- ▶ What do grassroots movements and party politics share in common? How do they differ in relation to political representation and participation?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Does Diversity in Congress Translate to Representation?](#)⁷

A 36-minute interview with researchers who examined how age, race, sex, and veteran status influence legislators' decisions.

[Politicians' Motivation, Political Culture, and Electoral Competition](#)⁸

Research findings that self-serving and opportunistic behavior by politicians is influenced mostly by the behavior of the politicians around them

[The Consequences of Primary Challenges to Incumbents, 1970-2008](#)⁹

Historical perspective on the motivations and consequences of primary challenges to incumbents.

[The Coming Primary Challenges to Corporate Democrats](#)¹⁰

An overview of the motivations and serious challenges to democratic primaries in the 2020 elections.

[Why Scaling Up Women's Political Representation Matters](#)¹¹

An analysis of multiple research studies, demonstrating that the importance of women's presence in Congress is less about the way that women legislate, and more about influencing others to run, perceptions of women's trust in government, and other social effects.

[Working-class people are underrepresented in politics. The problem isn't voters.](#)¹²

An examination of the barriers in place that prevent working class people from running for office.

⁷ <https://www.niskanencenter.org/does-diversity-in-congress-translate-into-representation/>
⁸ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10797-006-8878-y>
⁹ https://www2.clarku.edu/departments/politicalscience/pdfs/boatright_MPSA2010.pdf
¹⁰ <https://prospect.org/power/coming-wave-primary-challenges-corporate-house-democrats/>
¹¹ <http://www.genderwatch2018.org/scaling-womens-political-representation-matters/>
¹² *ibid.*



CAMPAIGN FINANCE & EQUITY

HOW DOES MONEY INFLUENCE POLITICAL POWER AND SHAPE ELECTIONS?

The modern era of U.S. campaign finance reform begins with the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971 and its 1974 amendments. FECA required all candidates to disclose sources of campaign contributions and expenditures and also brought about limits on individual contributions to campaigns, established partial public financing of Presidential campaigns, broadened disclosure requirements, created the Federal Election Commission (FEC), and limited both individual and candidate campaign spending. Although the individual and candidate spending limits were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court [*McCutcheon v. FEC*],¹³ the goal of limiting wealth and its influence on elections continues.

The landmark 2010 Supreme Court case – *Citizens United v. FEC* also changed the face of campaign finance and money in politics in the United States, overturning certain long-standing restrictions on political fundraising and spending transforming the entire political landscape of the country. Most notably, *Citizens United* granted corporations, nonprofits, and unions unlimited political spending power. Known as “dark money,” those donations may come from wealthy individuals, private interest groups or others. Dark money spending increased ten-fold from 2012 to 2016, when more than \$300 million was spent in the presidential elections.¹⁴ There is a strong perception that candidates who are elected with dark money are more likely to represent the interests of their large donors than the everyday people in their constituencies.

As a result, many who ran in 2018 announced they would reject corporate Political Action Committee (PAC) funding. Though corporate PACs are different than dark money, candidates who reject the corporate PACs want to bring attention to the influence of big money in politics and emphasize the importance of bringing in small donations from many individuals. Turning down money from corporate PACs became a shorthand way of saying that this candidate rejects the influence of big money, and is committed to the individuals and communities they represent.¹⁵

¹³ <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2013/12-536> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/us/politics/supreme-court-ruling-on-campaign-contributions.html?login=smartlock&auth=login-smartlock>
¹⁴ The Center for Responsive Politics. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.opensecrets.org/darkmoney/dark-money-basics/shadow-infographic.php>
¹⁵ Godfrey, Elaine. (2018, August 23.) “Why So Many Democratic Candidates are Ditching Corporate PACs,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/why-so-many-democratic-candidates-are-ditching-corporate-pacs/568267/>





DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- ▶ How does money influence political power and elections?
- ▶ Under current law, (*Citizens United v. FEC*) candidates can receive unlimited funding through anonymous channels. Do you think voters know where candidates get their money from?
- ▶ How does access to wealth shape elections? Do you think that big money influences the way that candidates represent the interests of their communities?
- ▶ What are the policy implications and consequences of economic wealth?
- ▶ What are ways to equalize the campaign playing field in regards to financing campaigns?
- ▶ Do issues of equity and economic inequality define political policy, party affiliations, and a candidate's political identity? How?
- ▶ What are the connections between money and re-election?





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Become an Expert](#)¹⁶

An essay from Democracy Matters, a non-partisan group on the history of campaign finance laws and reform efforts.

[How Money Affects Elections](#)¹⁷

An examination of how contributions to candidates influence elections, that money does not necessarily lead to successful campaigns, but it does generate more money.

[OpenSecrets.org](#)

A non-profit non-partisan organization that tracks campaign contributions and reports on special PACs and dark money.

[The Federal Election Commission - Federal Campaign Finance Law](#)¹⁸

The most current federal election laws.

¹⁶ <http://www.democracymatters.org/what-you-need-to-know-about-money-in-politics-2/overview/become-an-expert/>

¹⁷ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/money-and-elections-a-complicated-love-story/>

¹⁸ <https://transition.fec.gov/pages/brochures/fecfeca.shtml>



CAMPUS ORGANIZING TODAY

In 2018, **7.5 million** college students who were eligible to vote went to the polls. That was a **40 percent** turnout, more than double the rate four years earlier. In 2020, people between 18 and 23 will make up **a tenth** of the electorate, up from just **4 percent** in 2016. Going beyond college-age Americans, voters between **18 and 29** now represent **21 percent** of the population. That's **46 million** voters, compared to **39 million** among seniors.¹⁹

Campus administration, faculty and staff, students, and organizers all have a role in political participation and activism. Many organizations and campuses are working to register voters on campus, and to remove potential barriers to student voting like lack of awareness about where to go to vote, and lack of identification.²⁰ Additionally, connecting students to causes that directly connect to their passions, and increasing general civics education are shown to encourage students to find connections and meaning in political participation.²¹



DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Why is campus organizing so critical? Historically what role has campus organizing played in organizing and grassroots movements in the past?
- Young people continue to harness the power and influence of social media as a new tool for political organizing and participation. Why do you think social media is so influential? What are its strengths? What are its challenges?
- Do you believe there are significant political differences between your generation and older generations? What are they? What factors can you identify that contribute to them?
- Do particular generations have particular interests in common?
- What other conflicts or societal challenges does an emphasis on generational differences obscure?
- What motivates you to participate in the civic health of your democracy on a local, state or national level?

¹⁹ <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2019/11/15/2020-election-college-campus-politics-battleground-states-070076>

²⁰ <https://www.campusvoteproject.org/why-student-voters-matter>

²¹ <https://www.ewa.org/blog-educated-reporter/whats-motivating-teens-vote>



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Campus Vote Project

A project of the non-partisan [Fair Elections Center](#) that is focused on increasing student engagement with elections.

CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Tufts University.

Democracy Counts: Increased Student and Institutional Engagement²²

A study from the Tufts Institute for Democracy & Higher Education on student engagement and how college and university campuses across the nation have encouraged their students' political engagement.

Harvard Institute of Politics Youth Poll - Spring 2019²³

The annual Harvard poll asks Americans age 18-29 about their political opinions and engagement.

²² <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/spring-2019-poll>

²³ <https://idhe.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/DemocracyCounts2018.pdf>



GLOSSARY²⁴

Activist: A person who takes action to make social change.

Citizens United: Shorthand for a landmark 2010 Supreme Court case – Citizens United v. FEC that changed the face of campaign finance and money in politics in the United States, overturning certain long-standing restrictions on political fundraising and spending transforming the entire political landscape of the country. Most notably, Citizens United granted corporations, nonprofits, and unions unlimited political spending power.

Congressional Districts: The 435 areas in which the nation is divided for the purpose of electing members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Each district is to be as proportional in population size as practicable within a given state.

Conservatism: Political doctrine that emphasizes the value of traditional institutions and practices.

Constituency: All voters in a particular district.

Democracy: Government by the people, through free and frequent elections.

District: Geographic area represented by an elected official.

Down ballot: Refers to party candidates on a hierarchical structure where the President is the top of the ballot, Congress members are below, state officials below, municipal offices at the lowest level, or “down ballot.”

Electoral College: The voters, or electors, of each state that formally elect the United States President and Vice President. Each state has as many electoral college votes as it does U.S. Representatives and U.S. Senators in Congress.

Establishment: In the political context, refers to the traditional party structures of national committees and their hierarchies.

Grassroots Campaign: Refers to the nature of a campaign being led and/or contributed to by many individuals. Often defined by comparison to “top-down,” where a leader like an incumbent or party official chooses or endorses a candidate and expects party members to support that person.

Ideology: A system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.

Incumbent: A person currently holding an office or elected position.

Intersectionality: The way in which oppression and discrimination applies across multiple identities, such as race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and others.²⁵

Left Wing: In politics, the portion of the political spectrum associated in general with egalitarianism and popular or state control of the major institutions of political and economic life.

Lobbying: The activity to persuade members of the government to enact legislation that would benefit their interest group.

Neoconservative: Having or expressing political views that are conservative or right wing, with a strong belief in the free market and the belief that your country should use its military power to become involved with or try to control problems in other countries:

Neoliberalism: A political philosophy that emphasizes the value of free market competition and a free market economy popularized in the 1980’s by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom and US President Ronald Reagan.

Non-Partisan: Idea, policy or person not associated with a particular political party.

Partisan: Idea, policy or person associated with a party.

²⁴ Definitions adapted from usa.gov/voting-and-election-definitions, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>, <https://www.britannica.com>

²⁵ https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality/transcript

Party Committees: The official organizations that establish the platform and hierarchies of each of the national parties. Committees offer endorsements and financial support to candidates.

Political Action Committee:²⁶ A group organized to support a particular candidate, policy, or political cause. There are several kinds of PACs that the Federal Election Committee regulates, and that are allowed to contribute specific amounts of money and offer campaign support in different ways:

- **Connected PACs:** PACs that represent unions, corporations, health organizations or other membership groups where members can contribute unlimited money to the PAC, which in turn can contribute money and/or other kinds of campaign support. PACs can give \$5000 annually to any campaign, \$15,000 to a party committee, and \$5000 to other PACs.
- **Corporate PACs** are a kind of connected PAC where shareholders and/or employees of the corporation, industry association or business entity contribute to the PAC. Corporate PACs can contribute a maximum of \$5,000 annually to any one campaign.
- **Non-Connected PACs:** Groups that convene to support a specific cause, policy or candidate, to which anyone can contribute, which in turn contribute donations to campaigns.

- **Leadership PACs:** Candidates or current office holders convene Leadership PACs to support other candidates. Contributions are unlimited as long as they do not use the funds to support a candidate that is not endorsed by the parties.

- **Super PACs:** Groups who can raise unlimited funds that do not go directly to candidates, but rather to purchase advertisements, mailers or other kinds of indirect support for candidates.

Power: The authority and influence held by an individual or group within a society that allows for the administration of public resources and implement policies for society.

Primary Election: An election held to determine which candidate will represent a party in the general election.

Progressive: A person who advocates for social reform. Though the term is sometimes used to refer to Liberal candidates, it can also be applied in a non-partisan way. For example, campaign finance reform is seen as a Progressive issue that is also non-partisan.

Right Wing: The portion of the political spectrum associated with conservative political thought.

Working Class: A reference to a social and economic group consisting of individuals who earn their livelihood from wages often through manual or industrial labor.

²⁶ PAC descriptions adapted from [Center for Responsive Politics](#)



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