



# VOTES OF CONFIDENCE

*A Young Person's Guide to American Elections*

BY JEFF FLEISCHER

## STUDY GUIDE

For more information, contact:

Emma Boyer  
Marketing and Publicity Manager  
Zest Books | [emma@zestbooks.net](mailto:emma@zestbooks.net)

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

*Votes of Confidence* explains government and voting in the United States, from how the founders set up the different branches of the federal government to how bills become law to how voting works in both general elections and primaries. Along the way, readers learn about what makes the American political system unique, and are introduced to many examples from history. *Votes of Confidence* also tells readers how to get involved by encouraging them to vote, become informed about politics, volunteer on campaigns, and even run for office — all of which will help them become engaged in the process for years to come.

### ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE:

This study guide is designed to help teachers, educators, and parents explore the book's content with students in grades 9, 10, 11 and 12, though the material can also be adapted for younger students. The guide is divided into two parts — Government and Elections — each with four sections. "Keyword and Concepts" lists central terms and provides page numbers for cross referencing. "Reading Response" provides questions that test reading comprehension. "Group Discussion" offers prompts for discussion that applies concepts from the reading. "Additional Projects" suggests ideas for papers or projects related to the reading.

### COMMON CORE LITERACY STANDARDS:

Each section in the study guide is aligned with the following history/social studies-related Common Core standards (CSS, ELA - History/Social Studies):

**Common Core Standard Grade 9-10: RH 9-10.1, RH 9-10.2, RH 9-10.3, RH 9-10.4, RH 9-10.5**

**Common Core Standard Grade 11-12: RH 11-12.1, RH 11-12.2, RH 11-12.3, RH 11-12.4, RH 11-12.5**

# I. Government

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## KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS:

Cabinet (page 41), Executive Branch (page 36), Executive Order (page 38), Federalism (page 24), Filibuster (page 33), House of Representatives (page 27), Judicial Branch (page 43), Legislative Branch (page 27), Political Party (page 87), Senate (page 27), Separation of Powers (page 26), Veto (page 37)

## READING RESPONSES:

- Before the Constitution, the United States had a government under the Articles of Confederation (page 16). What were some of the problems with that system?
- The book describes how the Senate and House of Representatives were created as a compromise (page 19) and the differences between the two bodies (page 29). What are the important differences between the Senate and House? What powers does one have that the other does not?
- The executive branch includes the president and vice president, as well as several cabinet departments (page 40). What are examples of cabinet offices that did not exist under George Washington but do today?
- Many Supreme Court decisions have had major impacts on the country (page 44-45). Give two examples from the book.
- Chapter three explains how the Democrats and Republicans became the two dominant parties in the United States (page 91). Explain how that happened, using examples from the book.

## GROUP DISCUSSION:

Of the following political offices described in the book other than president, which would you most like to have as a job — cabinet official, Supreme Court justice, governor, US senator, US representative, state legislator, mayor? Think about the advantages and disadvantages of each office, and which powers each holds. Explain why that particular office is most appealing to you.

## ADDITIONAL PROJECTS:

**Mock Congress:** In small groups, have students write a sample bill they would like to see as a law in real life, then have all groups present their bills to the full class for a vote. Ask anyone who voted against the bill to think of an amendment that would turn the bill into something they would support.

**Court Cases:** In small groups, have students look up one of the Supreme Court cases cited in the book and research the arguments that both sides used during the case. Ask them to explain both arguments, as well as the court's reason for its ruling.

**Write Your Congressman:** Students individually brainstorm an issue that affects their community that the federal government has authority to change, and write letters to their congressman/congresswoman about it.

# II. Elections

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## KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS:

527 Group (page 176), Ballot Initiative (page 182), Convention (page 67), Early Voting (page 148), Electoral College (page 57), Exit Poll (page 161), Gerrymandering (page 95), Platform (page 104), Political Action Committee (page 174), Primary (page 64), Push Poll (page 162), Super PAC (page 177), Third Party (page 108), Voter Suppression (page 146)

## READING RESPONSES:

- Chapter two explains the role of the Electoral College in presidential elections (page 57). What are some of the disadvantages of the system? Illustrate with examples from the book.
- The presidential primaries always begin with the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary (page 70). What are some advantages and disadvantages of those states voting first? Give at least two examples of each from the text.
- Problems with the Florida election of 2000 led to the passage of the Help America Vote Act in 2002 (page 127). What changes did that law introduce?
- Groups such as 527 groups, Super PACs, and 501(c)(4) organizations all spend significant money on politics (page 176). Explain the differences between those groups.

## GROUP DISCUSSION:

The book explains the idea of “primary as a verb,” in which parties sometimes replace incumbents with more-extreme candidates who might have a harder time winning an election against the other party’s candidate. Would you rather have a candidate who agrees with you almost all the time but might lose, or a candidate who agrees with you only some of the time but is more likely to win? Explain why.

Many people in both political parties are concerned about the role of money in politics. Using examples from the book, which if any aspects of campaign financing do you find concerning? What would you change about the system?

## ADDITIONAL PROJECTS:

**Electoral College History:** Assign students to look up the Electoral College history of your state. They should find out how many electoral votes the state had in each of the last ten elections, and which party’s candidate it supported in each of those elections. Based on that, have them explain what they think the state’s voters will do in the next presidential election and why.

**Conduct a Poll:** Have each student come up with a list of three poll questions to ask their classmates. One question should have only two pre-set answers, one should have four to seven pre-set answers, and one should be open-ended so that respondents can provide any answer.

**Your Local Election Cycle:** Have students research when elections are held in their state and locality. They should determine when the following elections will next take place: presidential election, state presidential primary, governor, US senator, US representative, state senator, state representative mayor, local school board. They should also identify the incumbent official for each of those roles.

**Redraw Your District:** In small groups, assign students to research how your congressional district has changed over the last three decades. Ask them to research, using old news articles, to explain why they think it has or has not changed during that time.