



The Taft Institute

FOR GOVERNMENT & CIVIC EDUCATION

Making Democracy Work

EXPANDING AND IMPROVING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S. SINCE 1961

The Taft Institute for Government & Civic Education

Fall 2026 Seminar for Teachers



***TEACHING THE 2026 MIDTERM ELECTIONS:
ARE THEY ALREADY RIGGED?***

September 30, 2026

Overview

❖ Hour 1 – Presentation/Discussion

❖ Hour 2 – Breakout Groups

➤ Discussion in breakout groups: Lesson preparation

❖ Part 3 – Reconvene: Lesson presentations

Hour One – Four Parts

- ❖ One – Other Teaching Resources
- ❖ Two – How is the election already (partly) rigged?
- ❖ Three – What are the threats to rig it more?
- ❖ Four – What are the prospects?
 - How can the threats be resisted?
 - Who's likely to win despite the rigging?

Part One

❖ Other Teaching Resources

- Simulations—Manuals on the web site
- Individual Lesson Plans Within Simulations
- Other Lesson Plans on the Website
- Previous Taft Seminars—on the website
 - 2024—Assessing the System—Is it Authoritarian?
 - 2023—Do elections serve the people or the elites?

Part Two—Already Rigged??

Is the Election Already Rigged?

YES, BUT ONLY PARTLY (*“COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM”*)

1. The Constitution
2. Money
3. Gerrymandering
4. Voter Suppression
5. Preparations for Election Interference and Nullification, including Violence and Intimidation

Midterms Constitutionally Rigged for the Senate

- ❖ The Constitution rigs the Senate in favor of the small population states, mostly Red
- ❖ Each state gets two senators—WY <600,00; CA >39,000,000.
- ❖ And only 1/3 of the 100 elected every two years.
- ❖ Both are barriers to majority rule
- ❖ 12/20 Smallest states=Republican—Wyoming, Montana, North and South Dakota, etc.
- ❖ Exceptions--Alaska—this year may go Democrat, but mostly Republican

Rigged by Money

- ❖ Door opened for unlimited campaign spending by
- ❖ Supreme Court—Citizens United—2010
- ❖ This year-- National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission—June 30
- ❖ Court allows coordination by parties and campaigns in spending
- ❖ Last small barrier to Big Money

Amounts

- ❖ Dark Money, overall, more than one billion dollars >\$1,000,000,000.00 (donors not disclosed)
- ❖ Both primaries and general election
- ❖ Hundreds of millions of other dollars

Republican Advantages

- ❖ Republican National Committee--\$126,000,000.00
- ❖ Democratic National Committee--in debt--3/4 million dollars
- ❖ Ad buys now until the election
- ❖ Republicans' overall advantage -- \$221,000,000.00
- ❖ OH-\$30m; TX-\$26m; MI-\$25m; ME-\$13m; IO-\$9m; AL-\$8m; NH-\$4
- ❖ This does not include the spending that will come from the Crypto industry, AI, and AIPAC SuperPacs and C4's.

Can Money Be Overcome?

- ❖ Yes, but it's a lot harder.
- ❖ For low information voters, who often decide elections, ads matter
- ❖ Especially negative ads
- ❖ People vote more from fear and dislike.
- ❖ If you can scare them or disgust them, gain their votes.
- ❖ Barrages of negative ads hurt Brown in Ohio in 2024, for example
- ❖ This year economic issues may matter more and the old playbook of anti-trans, anti-gay ads may be wearing thin.

Rigging--The House--Gerrymanders

- ❖ Framers did make this democratic—based on populations
- ❖ Gerrymanders make it undemocratic
- ❖ Drawing the district lines to make them unrepresentative
- ❖ Done by state legislatures
- ❖ Usually every ten years after the census
- ❖ But Trump calls for “mid—term” or “mid-decade” re-districting
- ❖ Texas jumps to do it—figuring gain of 5 House seats, and other states follow
- ❖ Democrats respond in California and other states

Looks Even Until

- ❖ The Supreme Court guts the last standing part of the Voting Rights Act
- ❖ Republican Southern state legislatures gerrymander their districts
- ❖ So, Republicans add more safe seats

Rigging--Gerrymanders, con.

- ❖ Net gain for Republicans
- ❖ 10-15 seats
- ❖ So, this will reduce Democrats margin in the House
- ❖ Likely 25-30 without the gerrymanders
- ❖ Now--15-20
- ❖ Assuming the polls are accurate and
- ❖ No big events change the voters' choices

Rigging--Voter Suppression

- ❖ Republican State Legislatures pass laws to suppress vote:
- ❖ **Require Voter ID**—Burden to poor and students (vote Democrat)
 - Fees
 - Documents—birth certificates, etc., can be hard to get
 - ID's formerly used, like student ID's now ruled out
 - In person registration—business hours at far away offices

Comprehensive list of states and laws from the Brennan Center

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-voting-laws-roundup-may-2026>

Both Voter Suppression and Election Interference

Rigging--Voter Suppression--2

- ❖ **Criminalize voter registration campaigns**
- ❖ Make it a felony to mis-register someone—AZ, TX
- ❖ June, 2026 FBI raids Ohio Organizing Collaborative offices
- ❖ **Reduce early voting periods—TX, OHIO this year**
- ❖ **Reduce the number of polling places** in minority, low income, and student areas (decision can be at the county or municipal level)
- ❖ Done before—2004 election in Ohio, may have swung the election
- ❖ Republican Secretary of State, Ken Blackwell, reduces polling places in areas likely to vote for Democrats

Mail Voting

- ❖ Unsuccessful attempt to give the Postal Service the power to decide to whom ballots will be mailed
- ❖ Too much even for this Trump-friendly Supreme Court
- ❖ In part because of how slapdash the organization is and how late the process is
- ❖ So, Court rules against it this time, but leaves door open.

Polling Places—2026—One Example

- ❖ Georgia—Polling places reduced by law (2021 SB202)
- ❖ From 295 in 2020 to about 185 this year, statewide
- ❖ Four urban/suburban counties with largest Black population see the biggest drops
- ❖ And hours are reduced from 24/7 to 9-5:00 pm.
- ❖ Makes it hard for working people to vote

Georgia—Drop Boxes—Atlanta Metro

Overall Reduction of 75%

County	2020 drop boxes	2026 drop boxes	Reduction	Percent reduction
Cobb	16	7	9	56.3%
DeKalb	35	6	29	82.9%
Fulton	38	8	30	78.9%
Gwinnett	23	7	16	69.6%
Total	112	28	84	75.0%

And...

If there are long lines at the polls...

- ❖ It is illegal to give someone who is waiting in line a bottle of water

Voter Suppression—3—Purging Voter Rolls

- ❖ **State laws/acts to purge voter rolls—remove legitimate voters**
- ❖ Done Before—Florida—2004—Republican Governor, Jeb Bush, brother of Republican Presidential Candidate, George W. Bush and
- ❖ Kathryn Harris, Republican Secretary of State
- ❖ Carry out deliberately broad, sloppy purge of voter rolls
- ❖ Knock off large numbers of Black voters
- ❖ Election officially decided by 537 votes
- ❖ Makes George W. President

Purging Voter Rolls, con.

- ❖ This year--Supreme Court allows federal government to use unreliable data bases to check for “illegal voters”
- ❖ States can choose whether or not to use this database
- ❖ Voter fraud is a vanishingly small problem in the U.S.
- ❖ Much more likely to remove properly registered voters
- ❖ Federal law prohibits big purges in voter rolls within 90 days of election, but Trump admin asks SCOTUS to overturn this

Intimidation—Part One—Election Officials

- ❖ Trump and his DOJ demand voter rolls from states
- ❖ 22 Red States comply
- ❖ DOJ threatens the other states' officials with prosecution
- ❖ FBI seizes ballots from Fulton County, 2024 (Tulsi Gabbard)
- ❖ Sets the stage for denying election results and trying to overturn them if Republicans lose
- ❖ Constant accusations of past and future fraud and death threats
- ❖ Many resignations

Intimidation Part Two—General

- ❖ Retribution Prosecutions—Letitia James, James Comey, et. al.
- ❖ Attacks on big law firms, universities, media companies
- ❖ Death threats against Republican politicians and others who oppose MAGA/Trump, including
- ❖ Megan Kelly and other media figures

Intimidation, con.

- ❖ Extreme prosecutions of demonstrators as “terrorists”
- ❖ (This is a long-term trend, but accelerated)
- ❖ Prairieland Nine
- ❖ Rifle fire hits ICE agent during a protest; conspiracy alleged
- ❖ One person convicted for moving a carton of pamphlets
- ❖ “Material help for terrorism”
- ❖ All convicted, sentences from 30 to 100 years

And...

- ❖ Deployment of national guard to DC, Chicago, and other cities
- ❖ Creation of ICE—
- ❖ A paramilitary organization acting like secret police
- ❖ Murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti as well as
- ❖ Ruben Ray Martinez, Silverio Villegas Gonzales, Keith Porter, Jr., Lorenzo Salgado Araujo, Joan/Johan Sebastian Duran Guerrero
- ❖ 58 people who died while in ICE custody, 2025-2026
- ❖ Creation of concentration camps (“detention centers”)

Messages?

- ❖ Oppose this government at your own risk
- ❖ Beware of anything, including voting,
- ❖ That draws attention to you

One Big Message

IF YOU OPPOSE US,
YOU WILL PAY A PRICE, AND
THAT PRICE
MAY INCLUDE YOUR LIFE.

What Does All This Add Up To?

- ❖ A New System--
- ❖ USA is Not a democracy any more...
- ❖ But not quite a dictatorship either.
- ❖ Something in between

Competitive Authoritarianism

- ❖ What is this?
- ❖ As Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt tell us:
- ❖ A system in which parties compete in elections, but the systematic abuse of the incumbent's power tilts the playing field against the opposition.
- ❖ “It costs to go against the government.”

Part Three: How Could It Be Rigged More?

- ❖ More Voter Suppression
- ❖ Election Interference
- ❖ Election Overturning
- ❖ Election Nullification

These are the further threats to democracy in 2026.

Voter Suppression—Police or ICE at the Polls

- ❖ Intimidation—Scare voters away from polls
- ❖ 2000 Presidential election—Florida
- ❖ Jeb Bush, Governor of Florida, brother of George W. Bush, Republican candidate for President,
- ❖ Sends state police to patrol polling places in Black neighborhoods
- ❖ This year it is likely to be ICE and/or the National Guard.

Voter Suppression—Purging the Rolls

- ❖ If SCOTUS gives the go ahead, massive purges in Red states such as Ohio, North Carolina, Alaska, Texas, even Georgia and NH
- ❖ Could make the difference in close senate races

Election Interference

- ❖ State or federal officials descending on polling places
- ❖ Harassing workers or voters
- ❖ Trying to seize ballots
- ❖ Disrupting process
- ❖ Setting the stage for legal cases or
- ❖ Just depressing the vote

Overtaking an Election

- ❖ In some states, such as Georgia, laws passed that give the legislature the power to intervene in disputed elections
- ❖ Make the decision
- ❖ So, if disruption succeeds and there's a court case that follows
- ❖ The Legislature could overturn the results of the election

Election Nullification

- ❖ House of Representatives could refuse to seat newly elected Democrats
- ❖ Speaker Johnson (before January 3rd, 2027), could attempt to de-certify the elected Democrats

More Far-Fetched, But ...

- ❖ Trump could declare a national emergency and try to cancel the elections
- ❖ But they are run by the states, so it would probably require him to mobilize the national guard to prevent the states from acting
- ❖ At least the blue states
- ❖ And that's likely to meet a lot of public opposition
- ❖ So, it seems unlikely, but who knows?

Part Four: What are the Prospects?

- ❖ 1. Meeting the threats:
 - Maximize Turnout, especially early voting
 - Armies of Poll watchers; lawyers—go to the courts
 - Rely on local law enforcement
 - Peaceful, nonviolent resistance to ICE or national guard at the polls or the FBI seizing ballots
 - Massive street protests; strikes, consumer boycotts
- ❖ 2. The Election itself—Who's likely to win if it's a free vote and a fair count?

Maximize Turnout

- ❖ Seems to be the consensus strategy
- ❖ Indivisible, MoveOn, Our Revolution, Movement Voter Project, Working Families Party
- ❖ All emphasize this point
- ❖ Push early in-person voting
- ❖ Avoid long lines
- ❖ Avoid possible polling place assaults by ICE
- ❖ Avoid issues with mail-in ballots or drop boxes

Poll Watchers, Lawyers, Courts

- ❖ Groups like Democracy Docket are training poll watchers and
- ❖ Recruiting lawyers to stand by to go to court
- ❖ Get injunctions against disruption at polls or at vote counting

Non-Violent Resistance

- ❖ Freedom Trainers and others supposedly training large numbers of people to protect polling places and counting places
- ❖ Civil Disobedience/nonviolent resistance
- ❖ In my view this is better because the courts will be too slow, but it's hard to know how much of this is going on or how well coordinated it is.

Other Ideas for Responses: Into the Streets

- ❖ Chris Hedges, Naomi Klein, and others
- ❖ Mass Demonstrations
- ❖ General Strike
- ❖ Consumer Boycotts

Prospects—if no worse—House

- ❖ If the votes get cast and counted,
- ❖ Democrats win 15-20 seat majority in House
- ❖ Would be more if not for the gerrymanders

Senate

- ❖ Democrats win 52-48 majority in the Senate
- ❖ Need this to offset possible defection by Fetterman (PA))
- ❖ Hold GA, NH, MI, MN
- ❖ Win Alaska, Ohio, Texas, Iowa, North Carolina
- ❖ Could be more—Kansas, Nebraska are close

Why?

- ❖ Bad economy—inflation—gas and housing prices—jobs for young people—people strain to make ends meet
- ❖ Unpopular war (Broken Promise; Decline in trust)
- ❖ Trump's brazen corruption
- ❖ ICE's violence—killing of Americans
- ❖ Data Centers
- ❖ Growing inequality (ties to corruption and bad economy)

And...

- ❖ Democrats have generally good candidates
- ❖ Lots of personal appeal and good resumes
- ❖ Hard to call ex-marines communists or soft on crime
- ❖ Good messaging:
- ❖ Inflation, corruption, “them vs. us”
- ❖ May have raised **enough money** to stay competitive even if they can’t match the Republicans dollar for dollar

Hour 2: Breakout Session

Your Task:

- You will be assigned to a random breakout room.
- Work with your colleagues to begin developing a lesson, mini-unit, or project related to the 2026 Midterm Elections.
- Designate a **note-taker** to record your group's ideas in the shared Google Doc.

Hour 2: Breakout Session

During your breakout, consider:

1. **What is your focus?** What issue, concept, claim, or question from today's seminar do you want students to investigate
2. **Who are your students?** Consider grade level, course, prior knowledge, and appropriate level of complexity.

Hour 2: Breakout Session

3. What is your essential/driving question?

What question will give students something meaningful to investigate rather than simply something to learn?

4. What will students examine?

Identify potential primary sources, data, news reports, historical evidence, political-science research, or other materials.

Hour 2: Breakout Session

5. What will students DO?

Consider source analysis, research, discussion, debate, simulation, document-based inquiry, presentation, or another authentic task.

6. What will students produce?

A written response? Argument? Presentation? Podcast? Infographic?
Research project? Other product?

7. How will you assess learning?

What will demonstrate that students can use evidence and support their conclusions?

Hour 2: Breakout Session

Before Leaving the Breakouts :

- ✓ **Designate** a spokesperson to briefly share your group's developing lesson/unit/project.
- ✓ **Identify** one idea your group believes is ready to develop further.
- ✓ **Be prepared** to receive feedback and questions from your colleagues.

The Goal:

- ✓ Don't leave with just an idea. Leave with a starting point you can actually take into your classroom.

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