



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

The Federal Election Commission

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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The Federal Election Commission Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 6, 7, 8

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: United States Government, Election Processes; and
- Language Arts: Writing.

Duration: 1-2 class sessions

Description: This lesson provides an overview of the structure of the Federal Election Commission and a discussion of its strengths and weaknesses.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14A, 14C, 14D; and

B. English/Language Arts: 3A, 3C; 4A.

Objectives:

1. Describe the structure and purpose of the Federal Election Commission.
2. Evaluate the functioning of the Federal Election Commission.

Materials:

1. Handouts - tables for listing characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the FEC
2. Pen/pencil
3. Chalkboard or overhead projector

Instruction and Activities

Lecture - Structure of the Federal Election Commission (FEC)

Key Points:

Membership

Voting

Enforcement of laws

Introduce the lesson by posing the question: What would happen if you played basketball (or some other team sport) without a referee? Student responses may include: players would not follow the rules, the game would not be fair, or players would end up fighting with one another. As in sports, the election system also has a referee to make sure elections are fair. The election system referee is the Federal Election Commission, or FEC.

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Either distribute copies of the attached tables for students to fill in the information as you go along or write information as it is collected on the chalkboard or on an overhead projector sheet.

Membership:

The FEC is an agency of the Federal Government and has six members. The members are appointed by the President, three members from each political party (Democratic and Republican), and are confirmed by the Senate. Each member of the FEC serves a six-year term and the terms are staggered such that two seats are up for appointment every two years.

Voting:

Four or more votes are required in order for the FEC to take action on a matter.

Laws:

The FEC is responsible for enforcing campaign finance laws. Examples of campaign finance laws include:

- Limitations on the amount of money that individuals may contribute to candidates in primary and general elections.
- Restrictions on the amount of money that corporations or labor unions may contribute to national political parties (significantly affected by recent Supreme Court decision *Citizens United*).
- Restrictions on “issue ads,” which are advertisements paid for by non-profit organizations or corporations which name specific candidates. “Issue ads” may be permissible if the ads don’t call for the election or defeat of a specific candidate. Many millions of dollars may be spent on advertising of this type.

Lecture/Small Group Discussion -- Strengths and Weaknesses of the FEC

The FEC has been widely and routinely criticized, often for two particular reasons:

1. Members of the FEC are chosen by leaders of political parties, and so are not neutral; and
2. Fines or penalties issued by the FEC for violations of campaign finance laws are not really deterrents because the fines are so small in proportion to the amount of money groups spend on the advertising itself.

Divide students into small groups of three or four students each. Spend five to ten minutes having each small group generate a list of strengths and weaknesses of the FEC. (Use the handout table attached.) Afterwards, bring the class together to combine their lists. Specific aspects that students might consider include:

- Affiliation of members with a political party
- The number of votes needed for the FEC to take action
- Term length of FEC members
- Rotation of the chairmanship of the FEC
- Speed at which the FEC makes decisions

Here is an example of what the compiled chart of strengths and weaknesses may look like:

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Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since four (of six) votes are required to take action on an issue, the FEC cannot split votes along party lines • The long term limits (6 years) might make commissioners feel secure that they can make possibly unpopular decisions without fear of losing their position immediately • New leadership and new members mean commissioners may be well tuned into current laws and events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioners could vote according to party allegiance, creating deadlock on various issues • The slow speed with which decisions are made means that groups and candidates in violation of law are only punished long after the election is over; other groups may try similar tactics, realizing that their messages will be heard in time to affect elections, even if a small fine is eventually assessed at some point in the future • Commissioners may fear not being renominated if they vote against their own party on any issue

Independent Student Activity

Students will role-play members of Congress sitting on a Committee charged with the task of rewriting the rules for the FEC. The job of each “Congressperson” is to write a list of recommended rule changes to bring to the other Committee members. How would they change the structure of the FEC? Which aspects of the FEC would they keep the same?

Closing

In either a whole group discussion or as individual written responses, have students respond to the following questions:

What are the FEC’s strengths? Weaknesses?

What impact do you think the FEC has on elections?

The Federal Election Commission

Membership	Voting Rules	Enforced Laws

Strengths	Weaknesses