

Engaging Philadelphia's Ward System: How democratic is our system?

Charlie McGeehan

Academy at Palumbo

Abstract

It can be difficult to engage young people in the political process, especially in our current moment. Especially on the national level, things are bleak. One way to engage students further in the political process is to focus on the local level. This unit focuses on the most hyper local component of Philadelphia's politics: the ward system. This system is primarily about organizing the two major political parties in Philadelphia, Democratic and Republican, turning out voters, and endorsing candidates. With 69 ward leaders for each party, and more than 6,800 available committee person positions, finding information about these elected officials is difficult. Through this unit, students will begin by learning about how the ward system works. Then, we will interrogate the extent that the system emphasizes personal interest or the common good. From there, students will engage the system and help build the body of knowledge around it by interviewing ward leaders and committee people, and displaying the information they collect publicly on the internet. This unit will build student awareness around the system, contribute to the body of knowledge around its officials, and hopefully motivate students to engage in politics locally.

Keywords

democracy, local politics, interview, authentic assessment, inquiry, civics, government

Unit Content

This unit introduces students to Philadelphia's distinctive ward system, the grassroots-level units in which candidates are nominated and political careers are often launched. This is the level of politics that high school students can most directly engage, as they can be elected committee people at age 18 or even fill a vacant position.

This unit is planned for my 12th grade Social Science course at the Academy at Palumbo in South Philadelphia. Palumbo is located in South Philadelphia, but serves over 1100 students from across the city. Students must apply in order to attend this magnet school, and grades, attendance, and disciplinary records are taken into consideration for admission. Our student population is racially diverse - 37% Black, 34% Asian, 15% White, and 10% Latinx. It is a rich school environment, with students who are highly motivated academically.

In teaching this Social Science course, my goal is for students to become active citizens in their communities, city, state, country, and world. While the curriculum has historically split halfway between government and economics, in recent years there have been shifts to focus more extensively on civics. I teach the course in a way that is designed to apply what they are learning about civics to issues they care about in their communities. In addition to learning about the history and structures of our government, I hope to give students ways to get involved.

As I planned for and taught Social Science in the School District of Philadelphia, I found a plethora of resources relating to national politics. However, I have found significantly less relating to engagement with local politics here in Philadelphia, especially in terms of the ward system. This is an important aspect of political engagement because it is the one that students are most likely to be able to engage with directly. I hope this unit will add another layer to my course, and provide a valuable resource for other Social Science teachers across Philadelphia, and perhaps in other locales as well.

Philadelphia is not alone in big cities having a ward system, but its system is particularly unique. In Chicago, wards align directly with the local legislative branch. Each of Chicago's 50 wards has one alderman on Chicago City Council. In Philadelphia, multiple wards are combined into council districts, and the ward system operates primarily within the two major political parties, Democratic and Republican. And, in fact, a significant number of wards are split across multiple of [the city's 10 Council Districts](#). In addition to the 10 District Councilpeople, Philadelphia also has 7 elected At-Large, or citywide. Even though many Councilpeople emerge from ward posts, there is no direct connection between the legislative process and ward system in Philadelphia.

Nonetheless I ultimately decided to use this unit to encourage my students to explore and interrogate the ward system. Democratic City Committee Chair Bob Brady has described Ward Leaders and committee people as “the backbone of our democratic process” (2018). But how democratic and representative are they? And what do they do that is so important for democracy? These are questions I would like to explore with my students.

Ward Leaders, Committee People, and the Organization of Philly Politics

Philadelphia's local politics are organized at the most grassroots levels by units termed “wards” and “divisions.” There are 1,703 divisions in the city, and they are organized into 66 wards. According to state law, each division should have somewhere between 100 and 1,200 registered voters. This system has the possibility of encouraging grassroots leadership in local politics, but it has often led more to corruption and insider deals.

Divisions are represented by committee people - 2 Democrats and 2 Republicans each. If all spaces were filled, there could be up to 3,406 committee people for each

political party. After the 2018 election, however, there were 400 empty seats for Democratic committee people (Reyes & Williams 2022) and 2,436 empty seats for Republican committee people (City Commissioners data). They are elected every four years during the primary, with the most recent election on May 17, 2022. For the 2022 committee person elections, there were 2,628 petitions submitted for Democrats and 388 for Republicans. This is down from 3,363 and 557 respectively in 2018 ([Commissioner Seth Bluestein, Twitter](#)). Some of these are for contested elections with up to 5 candidates, while others are running unopposed (Geeting 2022). Many committee people will also be elected by Write-In on Election Day. It is also possible for people to be appointed by party leaders as committee people if a space is vacant.

The committee people in each ward vote to elect a Democratic ward leader and a Republican ward leader for their respective parties. Wards 39 and 40 have 2 Republican and 2 Democratic ward leaders due to their size, and Ward 66 has 2 Democratic ward leaders. The ward leaders for each political party serve as the City Committee and elect a Party Chair. Party chairs wield considerable power over nominations and endorsements, especially in races that receive little attention, like those for judges. In Philadelphia as elsewhere, these judges sometimes play critical roles in deciding the rising number of election disputes.

The powerful Democratic City Committee is led by Bob Brady, who has been its Chair since 1986. Brady served in the US Congress for 20 years during his time as chair, from 1998 to 2019. In addition to serving as Chair, Brady is a registered lobbyist for both Independence Blue Cross, NBC Universal, and Rivers Casino, where his attorney is one of the owners.

The Republican City Committee was led until recently by State Representative Martina White, who was its chair from 2019-2022. She took over after Mike Meehan resigned following the 2019 City Council election, in which the Republicans lost one of their seats to Kendra Brooks from the Working Families Party. Meehan, his father, and his grandfather had been Chairs of the Republican Party for 75 years prior to his resignation. White decided to not try for a full term as chair, and Vince Fenerty became the new chair of the Philadelphia Republican Party in June 2022. Fenerty was a leader of the Philadelphia Parking Authority, where he faced two sexual harassment claims which ultimately led him to resign before being fired (Brennan).

The primary significance of ward leaders and committee people is to endorse and support candidates. And through this process, they can have significant influence over who is elected to office on a local, state, and national level, especially when it comes to judicial races. These endorsements can come with a price, including upwards of \$35,000 for a judicial endorsement from the Democratic City Committee in 2005 (Gelbart 2005). Candidates also give tens of thousands of dollars to PACs like Liberty Square or Genesis IV, who funnel the money to ward leaders or consultants and eventually help to gain

ward endorsements (Ferrick 2015). Ferrick notes that candidates describe the experience of running for judicial office in Philadelphia as “writing check after check after check”.

In various Special Elections, the City Committee can basically have the power to appoint the next person to serve. For example, City Council vacancies are filled by an election among ward leaders, not voters. Most recently, Mike Driscoll was chosen by the Democratic City Committee to replace Bobby Henon after he resigned following his conviction on federal corruption charges (Walsh & Brennan 2022). Serving as a committee person can also be a stepping stone to a career as an elected official. Many current elected officials are also current or former ward leaders or committee people.

According to a 2022 report by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, many committee people have been serving for a significant period of time, and 20% live at the same address as the other committee person from their division. There are also committee people who don't live at the address that is reported in their filings, and others who have been convicted of corruption. The *Inquirer* also reported that 10% of committee people had not voted in elections since 2020. When Bob Brady was told that 10 committee people in his Ward were among those who had not voted, he said that 8 of them had died.

Information on Ward Leaders and committee people is not readily available or easily accessible. While the Democratic City Committee Site has information about all Ward leaders, it does not include the names of committee people. The Philadelphia Republican Party website does not contain information about Ward Leaders, or even the Committee Chair. A list of committee people is available via a spreadsheet from the City Commissioners, and includes addresses for all of them. However, these spreadsheets show those elected in 2018, and do not reflect anyone who filled a position or left a position since that election. Some Wards, like the 1st, update a website with committee people, vacancies, meeting dates, and meeting minutes. But this appears to be far from the norm.

A website called Philly Ward Leaders was developed by Code for Philly and is maintained by the Committee of Seventy, a nonpartisan, nonprofit good government group based in Philadelphia. They describe their site as bringing “a level of spotlight to ward leaders that is more proportional to the power they wield.” This site includes information about all Democratic and Republican Ward leaders, including pictures, phone numbers, email addresses, occupations, social media, and more. It also includes a map of all wards, how many registered voters are in that ward, what their most recent turnout was, and a list of all committee people in the Ward and their addresses. Additionally, it includes a map of all of the wards, and the rules governing both the Democratic and Republican Party in Philadelphia.

Ward System: Grassroots Political Structure or Protecting Entrenched Power?

During the 2022 Primary election in Philadelphia, the Democratic City Committee chose to endorse opponents against three progressive, incumbent Philadelphia State Representatives: Elizabeth Fiedler, Rick Krajewski, and Chris Rabb. This flies in the face of previous endorsements from the City Committee, which often overwhelmingly favor incumbents. All three of these incumbents nonetheless ended up winning their races by comfortable margins. The City Committee also endorsed Connor Lamb over Philadelphia native Malcolm Kenyatta and nominee John Fetterman in the US Senate race. Lamb ended up coming in 3rd in the Democratic Senate Primary in Philadelphia.

This dynamic of opposing popular and progressive candidates is not new for the Democratic City Committee. In 2021, the City Committee declined to make an endorsement in the District Attorney's primary, not endorsing progressive incumbent Larry Krasner. In 2019, the tensions came to the forefront when Kendra Brooks ran for City Council with the Working Families Party. In City Council, 2 at-large seats are reserved for candidates who are not in the dominant party. Those seats are most often occupied by Republicans, but Brooks and Nicholas O'Rourke ran in 2019 to change that. Brooks would eventually go on to win a seat on Council, leaving only one at-large Republican remaining.

Democratic City Committee Chair Bob Brady opposed Brooks' run, worrying that she would take votes from and possibly knock out one of the 5 Democratic Party candidates for the 7 At-Large seats. Democrats who endorsed Brooks, like Councilmember Helen Gym, Chris Rabb, Malcolm Kenyatta, and Elizabeth Fiedler, said that there was almost no chance of a Democrat being knocked out due to the 7-to-1 registration advantage Democrats hold in Philadelphia (Marin 2019). Brady publicly expressed frustration with Democratic officials and ward leaders endorsing Brooks, and it doesn't seem coincidental that the incumbents he opposed were some of those who endorsed Brooks in 2019.

These moments raise questions about what is being prioritized when the City Committee makes its endorsement decisions. It also calls into question just how much those endorsement decisions mean, when so many of their endorsed candidates were defeated in this election. While endorsements for judicial nominees seem to carry weight, it's less clear how much weight they carry in other races.

Efforts to Transform the Ward System

The Open Wards Project is an effort to move "towards a more transparent, accessible and democratic ward system." The Project includes both new and veteran committee people and ward leaders. They have established principles in a wide variety of categories designed to create the ward system they would like to see. These categories include:

Bylaws, Endorsements, Finances, Accessibility, Meetings, Officers, Records, Order, and Appointments & Expulsion.

The Open Wards Project argues that the most important role of committee people and ward leaders is endorsing candidates. They differentiate between open and closed wards. In a closed ward, they argue, ward leaders and possibly a small group of others make decisions about endorsements. In wards that they describe as having an open process, candidates have opportunities to engage with committee people, and there is a clear, written procedure for voting on endorsements. They argue that closed ward systems can lead to “pay-to-play deals and the kinds of backroom politics that has a corrosive effect on our local government and democracy.”

In 2016, Karen Bojar, a prominent Philadelphia scholar and activist, described wards as open, closed, or hybrid. She said that, at the time, there were five open Democratic wards: 5, 8, 9, 27, and 30. She described an open ward as one that had a clear process for endorsements, transparency around their finances, and had the independence to make their own endorsements, rather than just distributing endorsements from the City Committee. She said that the rest of the wards were either closed or hybrid. A closed ward was one that did not have a clear process for endorsement or disclosing finances, and just distributed City Committee endorsements. While a hybrid ward is most similar to a closed ward, Bojar said that they often contain certain committee people who operate independently and make their own endorsements even as the ward as a whole does not. She described the 2nd Ward as a hybrid ward during that time.

While Open Wards Philly does not list all of the wards it considers to be open, their website includes the bylaws for the 1st, 2nd, and 9th wards. This would put the approximate number of open wards in Philly as 7 out of 66. It is hard to know the characteristics of the other wards today without doing further research, and I am not sure about the current status of wards 5, 8, 27, and 30. In the wake of the 2022 committee person elections, there is mention of other wards becoming open wards - but it is difficult to find this information. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that progressive leaders took over in wards 15 and 39a in May 2022 (Brennan). Billy Penn also listed the 24th ward as becoming open (Ravich & Meyer). Hopefully students will be able to participate in the process of describing additional wards during the unit.

Ward reorganization meetings, where ward leaders are elected, took place in Philadelphia on June 6, 2022. At these meetings, elected committee people come together to elect a leader for their wards. In advance of this year’s meetings, Steve Paul and Vanessa McGrath wrote in the *Inquirer* about their views on the significance of open wards, and asked the questions: “Will ward leadership elections on Monday be free and fair?” They connected their concerns about ward leadership elections to concerns raised nationally about the fairness of our elections. While details are still emerging about this year’s leadership elections, there have been reports on Twitter that the election in the

46th Ward (West Philadelphia) was not fairly held. An opposition faction, claiming to have a majority of committee people in favor of a new ward leader, Sergio Cea, have said that they were not able to hold a fair election, and were denied that using “intimidation, violence, fraud” (@teicherj). A few days later, the *Inquirer* published coverage of the meeting, explaining that the election was being challenged (Brennan).

As a part of this unit, I plan to have students interact with people involved in the ward system. I will reach out to the Committee of Seventy, Open Wards Philly, ward leaders, and committee people from our school neighborhood to try to get a variety of visitors to join us in class. I also plan to have students reach out to and interview their own ward leaders or ward leaders from other parts of the city. A major value of focusing on this level of politics is the real possibility of students engaging with actual decision makers and politicians involved in the process, which is far more difficult when we focus on Federal or State governments.

Educating for American Democracy Framework

Educating for American Democracy (EAD) publicly launched in March of 2021, after several years of development that included many academics and educators from across the country. They set out with a goal to strengthen history and civic learning, and ensure that those opportunities are equitably available throughout the country. EAD believes that our democracy is in peril, and they believe that an investment in history and civics education is one of the ways to address this peril. They have established a framework that tries to shift history and civics learning from focusing on a wide range of topics to diving deep and encouraging students to seek answers to difficult questions. This very much aligns with what I hope to accomplish with this unit.

In terms of the EAD framework, I see this unit addressing the content themes of Civic Participation and Contemporary Debates & Possibilities. For Civic Participation, I will primarily focus on the concept of “Engaging as active community members and examining the tensions between personal interests and civic responsibilities.” While engaging in politics is not the only aspect of civic participation, it is an important one. Local politics are one important way for students to be active community members, and a way to see the issues they care about addressed. It will also be important for this unit to incorporate the work of grassroots organizations and how they work to influence local politics - because that is key to understanding how the tensions between personal interests and civic responsibilities can be worked through.

For Contemporary Debates & Possibilities, I see us primarily focusing on the key concept of “Cultivating an understanding of personal interests, motivations, and decisions as civic agents.” In working to understand the ward system, students will be asked to consider the role that personal interests play in the decision making of ward leaders and committee people. This exploration will allow them to explore questions of whether and

to what extent ward leaders are acting in their own personal interests or the public good, and where those interests intersect and diverge. This will allow students to interrogate the decision making of these local elected officials, and then to consider their own personal interests and how they see those affected. As students interview ward leaders and committee people, they will be encouraged to raise these types of questions in conversation.

This unit will also address the EAD Design Challenge of Motivating Agency, Sustaining the Republic. I am particularly drawn to this question: How can we help students understand the full context for their roles as civic participants without creating paralysis or a sense of the insignificance of their own agency in relation to the magnitude of our society, the globe, and shared challenges? This has been a core challenge in my classroom, and I think students feel especially disengaged and even hopeless when it comes to national politics. My hope is that focusing on local engagement, even with the corruption that is so often prevalent in Philadelphia politics, students can feel like politics are something they can engage with and even influence.

Teaching Strategies

Inquiry-Based Learning

This unit, as with all of the units in my course, centers inquiry-based learning. I want students to explore real world issues, and focus on asking and answering their own high-level questioning. This is the most engaging, and also most appropriate, way to explore things like the ward system. I am especially leaning into this approach with this unit, as I also definitely do not have all the answers about the ward system. There is a lot of information that I do not know, so I decided to lean into the challenge of learning and learn alongside my students in this unit.

Action Civics

This unit aspires to fit within traditions of Action Civics, giving students opportunities to learn by doing. Rather than solely placing the curriculum in the classroom, this unit will encourage students to engage in the political process. Through the Action Civics approach, driven by organizations like Generation Citizen, students identify issues, learn about those issues, and then take action. This unit incorporates parts of this approach, but ultimately decides on the issue of the ward system for students. Other parts of my curriculum allow students to identify their own issues for discussion.

Partnerships & Community Engagement

This unit will be enhanced by engagement with people involved in the system as ward leaders and committee people, and people who work with organizations like the Committee of Seventy and Open Wards Philly. I will be reaching out to the Democratic and Republican ward leaders in the ward that surrounds our school, Ward 2. When teaching a unit that encourages students to get involved in our political process, it is helpful to have them engage with folks on the ground and active - to get a sense of what being engaged looks like, and see examples of people doing it.

Authentic Assessment

I aspire to have the projects and assessments that students do in Social Science class be authentic - meaning that they have a realistic application beyond the classroom and a student's grades. In this unit, that means that I am looking to have students create work designed to be publicly displayed - most likely on the internet. There is a lack of transparent information about ward leaders and committee people, and I hope to have students contribute to that body of information. I plan to reach out to Code for Philly or the Committee of Seventy for ideas on how students might best contribute to their work.

Classroom Activities

Introduction to Ward System

Guiding Question

What is the structure and purpose of the ward system in Philadelphia politics?

Objectives

- Explain the structure of the ward system in Philadelphia politics.
- Analyze the significance of this structure in the politics of Philadelphia.
- Identify their own ward leader and committee people.

Materials

- [Guide for committee people](#)
- [Ward System 101](#)
- [City of Philadelphia Atlas - Finding Ward, Division, District Councilmember](#)
- [Philly Ward Leaders Website](#)
- [Philadelphia Democratic Party Rules](#)
- [Republican Party Rules](#)

Lesson Progression

1. Begin class by asking students to raise their hands if they can name their ward leader and/or committee people. If anyone raises their hand, ask them who their ward leader / committee people are. You can check responses [using the Philly Ward Leaders website](#).
2. Then ask students to raise their hands if they know what a ward leader or committee person does, and how they are elected. If students provide responses, you can use those to transition into your explanation. If no students respond, explain that that is what they will be exploring during today's class.
3. Begin with an explanation of the structure of ward leaders and committee people. It can be helpful to use the pyramid diagram at the top of this page to help with your explanation. You could have students read and take notes on [this Ward System 101 from the Committee of Seventy](#), or walk students through using a slideshow (I may create one as I finish the unit, if it would be useful).
 - a. Emphasize the number of ward leaders and committee people, how they are all elected, and how they relate to one another.
 - b. You should also explain that these roles fall within the Democratic and Republican Party. Other parties in Philadelphia (Green, Libertarian, and Working Families) have different structures of establishing party leadership.
 - c. It is also helpful to explain that, with a 7-to-1 registration advantage, the structure is much more robust within the Democratic Party than the Republican, and that side will bear a more direct examination in this unit due to that fact.
4. Once you have established the overall structure, describe the responsibilities of ward leaders and committee people. This is most helpfully laid out [on pages 7-8 of this guide from the Committee of Seventy](#). Similar to the previous point, you can either have students read and take notes or you can walk this through in a powerpoint (to be added).
 - a. As you explain the roles and responsibilities, emphasize those that take place before Election Day and on Election Day.
 - b. You can also begin here to introduce the concept of open and closed wards, and explain how that plays a role in different responsibilities that exist depending on the ward's structure.
5. Close the day's lesson by asking students to find their ward, division, and ward leader and committee people for the Democratic and Republican parties.
 - a. Students should [visit the City of Philadelphia Atlas and type in their address](#). When they scroll down to "Voting", they will see their ward and division. Encourage them to write that information down.
 - b. Students should then [go to the Philly Ward Leaders website](#). They should click "Leaders" and then navigate to their ward. by clicking on the photo of their ward leader and "Details".

- c. Encourage students to write down the name of their ward leader, and any other pertinent information they discovered from this site (such is their occupation).
 - d. Then, students should scroll down to find the committee people for their division. If there is only one listed or there are no committee people listed, that means those positions are vacant.
 - e. Students should repeat steps b-d for both the Democratic and Republican parties.
6. As you wrap up the day's class, ask students to brainstorm 2-3 questions that they would like to explore in the rest of this unit about the Philadelphia Ward System. Ask students to share those questions and record them, referring back to them as you move through the unit.

Standards

D2.Civ.5.9-12., D2.Civ.6.9-12., D2.Civ.7.9-12.

Discussion: To what extent are committee people the backbone of our democratic process?

Guiding Question

To what extent are committee people the backbone of our democratic process?

Objectives

- Analyze the role and significance of the ward system in the democratic process.
- Explain the difference between an open and closed ward.
- Evaluate the role of personal interest and public good in the functioning of the Philadelphia ward system.

Materials

- [Brady, Bob. "committee people Are the Backbone of Our Democratic Process."](#)
- [Open Wards Principles](#)
- [Ferrick, Tom. "Election Day? A Big Payday for Philly Political Bosses."](#)
- [Ravitch, Lizzy McLellan, and Katie Meyer. "In Democratic Ward Elections Full of Infighting \(and Physical Fighting!\) Philly Progressives Make Key Gains."](#)

Lesson Progression

1. Begin class by revisiting some key points about the ward system that were reviewed during the previous class period. Explain that today's class period will

- be spent exploring how the ward system works to benefit personal interests of those involved and/or the common good.
2. Ask students: What are “personal interests”? What are some ways that personal interests can play a role in politics? As students share, consider writing down a list on the board. Be sure to add financial issues and power/clout to the list, if students have not already added them.
 3. Then, ask students: What is the “common good”? Have students share their thoughts and discuss how this might intersect with and differ from personal interests.
 4. Close the opening discussion by asking students: What do you think the role of personal interests and the common good should be in politics? Have an open conversation with students, and refer back to some of what they listed about personal interests and the common good earlier. Use this as a segue into an exploration of the role of personal interests and the common good in the Philadelphia ward system.
 5. Transition into a discussion of the articles, most likely on the second day of the lesson. There are multiple options for how to discuss these articles. Choose what makes the most sense for your class.
 - a. As students explore the articles, have them consider what they show about the ward system, the common good, and personal interest.
 - b. If you have a class that responds well to self-directed reading, you could assign these 4 articles for independent reading. Then, you could bring the class together for a discussion about the articles, and how they apply to the role of personal interest and the common good in the ward system.
 - c. If you have a class that needs more direction, you could read each article individually and then discuss when students finish. If you choose this route, you can close with a discussion of similarities and differences between the articles, and students’ overall evaluations of the role of personal interest and the common good in the ward system.
 - d. If you want to move through this lesson more quickly, consider a jigsaw. You could assign 4 different groups of students to read each of the articles. Then, each group should share the responses and you can close with a discussion.
 6. To close the class period, lead a conversation about the guiding question: Do students consider the ward system to be the backbone of the democratic process after reading these articles? Do they see more personal interest or common good in what they have read?
 7. Explain that moving forward in the unit, students are going to interact with people involved in this system as ward leaders and committee people, eventually conducting their own interviews.

Standards

D2.Civ.10.9-12., D2.Civ.14.9-12.

Research & Prepare to Interview Ward Leaders / Committeepeople

Guiding Question

What would you like to learn from ward leaders and committee people?

Objectives

- Explain what makes a strong interview.
- Develop common and individual questions for their ward leader or committee person interview.
- Prepare to conduct their interview by practicing interviewing skills.

Materials

- [Philly Ward Leaders Website](#)
- [Sample Interview: Terry Baines and Darryl Cook \(StoryCorps\)](#)
- [4 Tips for an Effective Interview \(StoryCorps\)](#)

Lesson Progression

1. Explain to students that the next stage of this unit will ask them to conduct an interview with a ward leader or committee person. Students can do this individually or with a partner.
 - a. Ideally, students should focus on their own ward / division, but for the sake of creating a robust documentation of ward leaders and committee people, it might be helpful to ask students who have classmates in their same ward and/or division to focus on different wards / divisions that are not covered in classes.
 - b. If you try to get students to focus on different people, this process will likely take a couple of days while students decide who to focus on. Consider doing the introduction to interviewing first, and then looping back to the selection process of who will be interviewed.
2. Have students listen to a Sample Interview from StoryCorps with [Terry Baines and Darryl Cook](#). As they listen, ask them to write down what stood out and another question they would ask if they had a chance to step into the interview.
 - a. After listening, have students review the transcript and look for the initial and follow-up questions that were asked.

- b. Then, have them reflect on what ideas this sample interview gives them for their own interviews. Push students to emphasize the role of active listening, expressing genuine engagement, and a conversational approach.
 3. Then, watch the [4 Tips for an Effective Interview](#) video from StoryCorps. Have students make a note about each of the 4 tips, and then consider which of the tips they think is most important for them as they prepare for their own interviews.
 4. Explain to students expectations around recording their interviews and gaining consent from the people they are interviewing. Explain that the plan is to use these interviews and recordings in their final projects, and to ultimately have them publicly available. Students should also explain this to the people they are interviewing.
 - a. Create a consent form and review it with students. Explain the importance of getting consent when conducting an interview, especially when you are planning to use or publish what is said in the interview. Be sure that they get this form, or the digital version, signed by their interviewee before completing the interview. You could use [something like this for a paper version](#) or [this for a digital version](#).
 - b. Explain to students their options when it comes to recording their interviews. If students are interviewing in person, encourage them to use their phones to record. I will be letting my students know that they only need to record audio, not video. I will also give students the option to record their interviews online, and will encourage them to use Zoom for the recording if they opt for this method. It can be helpful to give students a chance to practice recording interviews in class, just so that they catch any glitches that might occur during their actual interview and avoid them.
 5. In preparing for interviews that will contribute to the final project, you should work with your class to come up with some common questions that you will ask every committee person and ward leader that you interview. As you brainstorm these questions, encourage students to think back to the previous discussion about personal interests and the common good, as well as the specific examples that were discussed.
 - a. You can have them brainstorm individually then come together in small groups to create lists of combined and edited questions.
 - b. Each group can share their top questions, and then the group can work together to determine a top 3-5 questions that should get asked in each interview. It is helpful to encourage students to think about how they can combine similar questions into one cohesive question.
 6. It may be helpful to bring in a ward leader or committee person to class during this unit to do a practice interview. The teacher could either lead this interview as a model, or ask a student volunteer to lead it. You should use the common questions that the class decided upon, and then have students help determine additional questions that should be asked.

- a. After conducting this interview, debrief with students. Ask them what ideas it gave them for their own interviews.
7. After the sample interview (or the collective brainstorm), have students research and determine specific questions for their ward leaders and committee people. For some interviews, students will be unable to find much information online. For others, they may have plenty of background. Students should keep that in mind as they prepare questions for their interviews.
 - a. Remind students that the interviews should be conversational - so they should not plan to just run through an exhaustive list of interviews, but rather should prepare for follow up questions and a conversation.
 - b. This would also be the time for students to call or email their interviewees to arrange time for the interviews to occur. This process will likely be messy, and some may not get a response. You can even encourage them to start reaching out earlier, just to ensure they are able to get an interview.
8. I recommend setting at least 2 weeks between this lesson and the beginning of the final project. This should give students sufficient time to record their interviews. Be sure to emphasize the importance of completing these interviews by the deadline, as it will be difficult to complete the final stage of this project without the interviews being completed.

Standards

D1.5.9-12., D3.1.9-12.

Intro to Final Project / Assessment

Guiding Question

How can we display the information we learned about our ward leaders and committee people to help inform the public about the ward system?

Objectives

- Reflect on what they learned from their interviews.
- Design a virtual page to display the information they learned from their interview.

Materials

- Google Sites - I have found it to be the simplest way for students to create websites, especially when their school accounts are on Google.
- [Google Sites support](#)
- Completed interviews with ward leaders / committee people
- [Philly Ward Leaders Website](#)

Lesson Progression

1. Begin by having students listen back to and reflect on their interviews. You could also ask students to transcribe all or a section of the interview. In order to get another set of eyes, it could also be helpful to have students listen to the interviews of their classmates.
2. The project portion of this project can be done individually or collaboratively in groups. I am probably going to be taking a hybrid approach - allowing some students to work individually while others work collaboratively.
3. We are going to build a website to house and then publicly present the information we learned. I will create a template for the website, including necessary pages. If we end up collaborating with Code for Philly and the Committee of Seventy for this project, it will change the nature of what we are doing - and I will determine student roles to help accomplish what they need to be accomplished.
 - a. The work will be envisioned either as a part of or a companion to the [Philly Ward Leaders Website](#), which students will have used earlier in the unit.
 - b. I am not sure of the timeline for updating this website based on the 2022 committee person / ward leader elections, but students may also contribute to the general design of that page.
 - c. If we are doing a webpage as a class, we will use Google Sites. I will create a site, and eventually share it with students as editors so that they can update their own pages.
4. I envision the student work for this unit as divided into three categories. It is possible that there will be additional work
 - a. Web Design: These students will be responsible for the general design of the website overall and individual pages. This will be suited for a small group of students who will work collaboratively on this project. Our school has a Computer Science program, so this is especially good for students who work in web design. These students will have first access to the webpage, and will do their design work and template creation before other students work on the page.
 - b. Content Creation: These students will be responsible for taking content from interviews and research and using them to create individual pages on ward leaders and committee people. These students will begin by creating their content on a document, and then eventually transfer it onto the website after the designers have created the templates for the pages. I will provide a template for which material needs to be included and the order, so that it will be easier to import onto the website when the time comes. They will incorporate audio, video, images, and/or text in their content. This will be the largest group.

- c. Editorial: This group will be responsible for working with both of the other groups to ensure consistency and check for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formatting across pages. This will be another smaller group, focused on students with great attention to detail. It is important to have this group because the sites being built are designed to be publicly accessible.
5. As students work on their components, establish goals and deadlines in stages. For each stage, each of the groups should have goals for what they will accomplish during that time period.
 - a. Spend time during class on those days checking in with groups and individuals about their progress.

Standards

D3.3.9-12., D4.3.9-12., D4.7.9-12., D4.8.9-12.

Resources

Bojar, Karen. *Green Shoots of Democracy: Within the Philadelphia Democratic Party*. She Writes Press. 2016.

This book, written by a former Committeeperson, describes the functioning of the Ward system in Philadelphia, and efforts in recent years to make this system more democratic. This book wrestles with whether progressives can succeed by trying to work within big city political machines. As someone who once saw electoral politics and social movements as mutually exclusive, Bojar came to recognize the connection between the two and ultimately decided to engage in the process as a Committeeperson for nearly 30 years. She recognizes the importance of movements pushing from the outside while having allies working inside the political system.

Millenson, Daniel, et al. *Making Civics Relevant, Making Citizens Effective: Action Civics in the Classroom*. International Debate Educational Association, 2014.

This text walks through Generation Citizen's Action Civics curriculum and its origins. It will be a helpful resource as I consider how Action Civics will impact my curriculum design. The curriculum is broken down into four units: Identifying Our Issue, Planning Our Action, Taking Action, and Taking the Next Step. Each unit is broken down into a series of lessons, which can be easily implemented in the classroom. The book also includes a tactic toolkit with helpful templates for taking action.

Committee of Seventy Resources

In exploring topics around politics in Philadelphia, I find the work of the Committee of Seventy to be particularly useful. I plan on using several of their resources as I create this unit, and on presenting selections from these texts as readings for students.

[Guide for committee people](#)

This guide, updated for 2022, provides a solid resource explaining how the Ward system works in Philadelphia, as well as the process for running for Committeeperson. At this point, my unit does not intend to dive deeply into the process for running for Committeeperson. I could possibly see the unit shifting in that direction as it evolves, or including this as a supplement to the completed unit.

[Ward System 101](#)

This is a web-based version of information presented in the Guide for committee people. I will likely use this in class to present students with the basics.

https://codeforphilly.org/blog/civic_engagement_launchpad--power-politics_and_civic_tech

Additional Resources

[Philadelphia Democratic Party Rules & Philadelphia Republican Party Rules](#)

These are the rules that govern the functioning of the ward system in each political party. This could be a reference for the teacher, or excerpts could be used in student instructions.

[City of Philadelphia Atlas - Finding Ward, Division, District Councilmember](#)

As a part of this unit, students will need to identify their Ward, Division, and District Councilmember. This Atlas from the City of Philadelphia is the most accessible resource for doing this that I have found. Students should search for their address, then click “Voting” and see their Ward, Division, and District Councilmember.

[Philly Ward Leaders Website](#)

Students can then use this website to identify and learn about their Democratic and Republican Ward Leaders.

[Finding Committee People](#)

Students can also use the resources provided here to help them find their committee people. It is likely that a more accessible resource will be provided as the election comes closer.

[Open Wards Philly](#)

Depending on how deep I decide to dive into the topic of Wards and Committees, it may be worth discussing the concept of open and closed wards, and having students debate the merits of each. This depends on the final direction of the unit.

News Articles

With a very local unit like this, news articles are going to be a key resource in developing a deeper understanding of the topic. Many of the articles I will be using will be drawn from the Philadelphia Inquirer, our city's paper of record. I will also be incorporating resources from WHYY, the Philadelphia Citizen, and other local sources as needed.

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Brennan, Chris. "State Rep. Martina White Elected New Chair of Philadelphia's Republican City Committee." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 Nov. 2019, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-republican-city-committee-vote-chairman-mike-meehan-martina-white-20191113.html>.

Brennan, Chris. "Meet Comcast-NBC's Newest Lobbyist in Washington: Former U.S. Rep. Bob Brady." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 Apr. 2020, <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/clout/bob-brady-lobbyist-comcast-nbc-universal-congress-nancy-pelosi-rivers-casino-20200414.html>.

Brennan, Chris. "Who's behind Mailers Attacking Philly Progressives? We Found Ties to Trump - and City's Democratic Party." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/clout/chris-rabb-elizabeth-fiedler-rick-krajewski-democratic-primary-dark-money-mailers-20220511.html>.

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Appendix

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

I decided to use these standards, referenced in the work of Educating for American Democracy, to ground my curriculum unit. They feel more applicable than the Common Core to this particular unit. The standards below are the C3 standards referenced in this unit.

- D1.5.9-12. Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of view represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.
- D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

- D2.Civ.6.9-12. Critique relationships among governments, civil societies, and economic markets.
- D2.Civ.7.9-12. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.
- D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights
- D3.1.9-12. Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- D3.3.9-12. Identify evidence that draws information directly and substantively from multiple sources to detect inconsistencies in evidence in order to revise or strengthen claims.
- D4.3.9-12. Present adaptations of arguments and explanations that feature evocative ideas and perspectives on issues and topics to reach a range of audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, reports, and maps) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).
- D4.7.9-12. Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.
- D4.8.9-12. Apply a range of deliberative and democratic strategies and procedures to make decisions and take action in their classrooms, schools, and out-of-school civic contexts.