The National Conference of State Legislatures serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths, and territories. NCSL is a bipartisan organization with three objectives:

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures,
- To foster interstate communication and cooperation,
- To ensure states a strong cohesive voice in the federal system.

The Conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado, and Washington, D.C.

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PREFACE

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the American Political Science Association (APSA) and the Center for Civic Education (CCE) are embarking on a multi-year project to enhance civic education on representative democracy for students and citizens of all ages. The project is based on "a new public perspective" on legislatures and offers strategies for discovering and understanding this perspective. The objective is to counter the cynicism and distrust that prevails among the public today by offering a more positive and accurate view of elected officials, the people who work with them, and the legislative institutions in which they serve.

A New Public Perspective on Representative Democracy: A Guide for Legislative Interns initiates the project. Four political scientists—Alan Rosenthal of Rutgers University, John Hibbing of the University of Nebraska, Karl Kurtz of NCSL, and Burdett Loomis of the University of Kansas—have collaborated on this guide for students who are interns in state legislatures. The authors' perspective is grounded in the ideas of the framers of the U.S. Constitution and reflects the prevailing view of legislatures, the legislative process and legislators among political scientists.

A New Public Perspective on Representative Democracy describes the core features of representative democracy in the states and provides exercises that enable interns to make effective use of their legislative placements. On-line resource materials on NCSL's web site at www.ncsl.org/public/civiced.htm augment this guide. Additional references for studying politics and government can be found on the APSA's web site at www.apsanet.org. The guide is designed for use by interns individually or in classes or seminars with legislative or faculty coordinators.

This version of the guide is an initial draft designed for field testing by graduate and undergraduate legislative interns. It is intended to be a resource to enable interns, who often work in a single legislator's office for a limited period of time, to gain a broader perspective on the legislative process, politics and representative democracy. Since interns are intensely involved in the legislative process, they have unique opportunities to inform us as to whether the new perspective on representative democracy that frames this guide is useful and compelling and to provide feedback on the content and exercises in the guide. In the course of testing the guide with interns, the authors will also discuss it with legislators, legislative staff, political scientists and civics teachers.

The responses to this guide, particularly from interns, will shape future editions that will be adapted for other student audiences and citizens who are interested in government. A comprehensive curriculum that includes multimedia simulations and videos to support the text will be
developed. Teachers around the country will be trained to use the curriculum. The revised guide will be adapted for use by community groups and organizations and students who are involved in service learning related to government and politics.

Many civic education initiatives are under way across the United States today. Considerable attention is being devoted to increasing civic knowledge, which is at low levels, especially among younger generations. Even more attention is being given to encouraging civic engagement, whereby people vote and participate in government between elections. Our effort complements these two thrusts. It focuses on civic perspective—how citizens view the political institutions, processes and people that are fundamental to representative democracy in America.
About the Organizations and Authors

The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation’s 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. NCSL believes that state legislatures need to bring about better public understanding of the concepts of representative democracy. This guide is part of a comprehensive package of civic education programs offered by NCSL about the institutions that are central to American democracy.

The American Political Science Association is the major professional society for people who study politics, government and public policies in the United States and around the world. Education for civic engagement and responsive governance were founding objectives of the political science profession at the beginning of the 20th century, and APSA believes that they remain essential for the 21st century. APSA maintains a civic education network, working closely with university institutes of government.

The Center for Civic Education’s sole mission is to promote informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy. In pursuing its mission, the Center administers a wide range of curricular, teacher-training and community-based programs. One of the Center’s programs is Project Citizen, a middle school civic education program designed to develop interest in public policymaking and the ability to participate competently and responsibly in state and local government.

Alan Rosenthal teaches at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University and has written numerous books and articles about state legislatures.

John Hibbing, professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has written about Congress and currently is exploring public attitudes toward the political system.

Karl T. Kurtz directs civic education programs at the National Conference of State Legislatures and writes about state legislatures.

Burdett Loomis, acting director of the Dole Institute and a professor of political science at the University of Kansas, writes about interest groups, state legislatures and Congress.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Americans like the idea of representative democracy, but they have little liking for the practices, institutions and politicians that make representative democracy work. Nor are they tolerant of the processes, which require debate (viewed as bickering), compromise (viewed as selling out), conflict (viewed as posturing) and stalemate (viewed as obstructionism). They do not trust government to do the right thing, they are cynical about elected public officials who are supposed to represent their interests, and they feel that the legislative system as it operates is wide open to special interests but not to the public. The political system gets low marks from most Americans.

There are many reasons for these negative public perceptions. The virtues of representative democracy are not self-evident. The processes in Congress, state legislatures and city councils are messy and difficult to fathom, even to insiders. In their efforts to draw readers, the media focus on conflict and overemphasize negative events. All too often, politicians run against the political system and the people in it. At the same time, significant societal changes have taken place, and culture wars have broken out in American society. While expectations of what government can do have risen, notions about why and how government should perform have become more heterogeneous and conflicting.

The accumulation of negatives fuels public discontent and disenchantment. No particular incident, specific charge, single newspaper story or television portrayal makes a huge difference, but years of battering have eroded support for the political system.

This climate of cynicism is deadly to representative democracy. It hinders the recruitment to elective public office of talented and concerned people, many of whom no longer will risk having their character assailed and their reputations damaged. It makes consensus harder to achieve, because trust is in such short supply. It hinders steady and pragmatic solutions, while encouraging posturing, scapegoating and quick fixes. It erodes the representative assemblies that have served us remarkably well for more than 300 years. It puts our system of representative democracy in peril, even though we have nothing else we would rather have in its place, and nothing that would serve nearly as well.

This book offers undergraduate and graduate interns an alternative way to view representative democracy by providing a more accurate and more positive perspective. It is based on six operating principles of representative democracy as it is practiced throughout the nation. The first two principles focus on representatives as individuals, and the latter four emphasize representation as a system. The treatment of each of the operating principles includes both a discussion of what the public perceives and a discussion of how politicians and institutions work.
The Prevailing Public Perception

1. Legislators are simply out for themselves, lack integrity and act unethically.

2. Legislators do not care what common people think, but are the servants of interest groups and those who contribute to their campaigns.

3. The public agrees on what is right and what is necessary, so there is no good reason for legislators and the legislative system not to implement such consensus.

4. The values and interests of the average individual are not represented.

5. The legislative process is unworkable because of politics, unprincipled deal making and needless conflict.

6. The political system and politicians are unaccountable.

The New Perspective—Operating Principles

Despite a few rotten apples in the legislative barrel, the overwhelming number of legislators are out to promote the public welfare, as they and their constituents see it. Moreover, they are generally ethical, although not everyone agrees on just what is and is not ethical in public life.

Legislators care more about what their constituents want and need than perhaps anything else. No one is denied access or a hearing. But groups that have sizable memberships or are major employers in their districts may have greater clout.

People in our diverse and pluralistic society do not agree on issues except at a general level. It is the job of the legislature to resolve the clash of values, interests and claims.

Americans are well represented directly or indirectly by interest groups as well as by legislators. Legislators are dependent upon the groups' good will and votes. Nearly eight out of every ten Americans are members of an organized group, and many belong to multiple groups.

The process is contentious because it encompasses different and competing values, interests, and constituencies, all of which are making claims on government or one another. Some differences are fought out, but most are negotiated, compromised and settled—at least to a degree and for a while.

Legislators who run every two or four years, who may be subject to recall and whose every vote is on record are as accountable as anyone can be.
About the Exercises

Most of the exercises at the end of each chapter involve you, as interns, interviewing legislators about the issues raised in that chapter. It should be relatively easy for those of you who work for individual legislators to talk to your legislator. You also should try to talk to other legislators about these issues. How can you get access to other legislators? Ask your representative to introduce you to the legislator from the same district in the other chamber. If you track the work of a committee, introduce yourself to some of the legislators who serve on that committee. If you have friends serving as interns with other legislators, sit in with your colleagues when they interview their members about these issues.

If possible, you should also arrange to shadow your legislator for a session day. This involves following the legislator around and observing the legislator in committee and on the floor, and meeting informally with lobbyists, constituents and others. Observation, as well as conversation, can provide a good idea of the job that a legislator does. Shadowing legislators in their districts for a day when they are doing constituent service and political work will provide valuable additional perspective and a chance to explore some of the questions raised here.

Interns who work for central staff offices may have more difficulty obtaining personal access to legislators. The same advice as above about meeting with legislators on a committee that you are familiar with or doing joint interviews with fellow interns may be helpful. Ask your supervisor or faculty intern coordinator to assist you. If you and your fellow interns have seminars or classes that support your internships, invite different legislators to come to your meetings and ask them these questions together.

As important as conducting the interviews is talking with your fellow interns about the issues raised in this guide. By sharing the results of your interviews with others, you will gain a variety of perspectives from different legislators, as well as from your fellow interns.

As the field testing of this guide develops, we expect to revise and improve the exercises and make them available online at www.ncsl.org/public/civiced.htm.