

Illinois State University
Department of Politics and Government

POL 214: Political Parties and Interest Groups
Fall 2009

Interest Group Research Project

Thanks to a grant from Illinois State University's Center for Teaching, Learning, & Technology (CTLT), this semester's section of POL 214 will be the trying grounds for an innovative course project model that hopefully can and will be adapted for a wide range of other courses in both political science and other disciplines.

Learning Outcomes Objectives

This project aims at advancing all four of the Politics and Government Department's learning outcomes goals for its undergraduate program in political science:

- The project seeks to contribute to the improvement of your *knowledge and understanding of political institutions and processes* by assigning you to investigate and reflect on the development and operations of various large-scale interest group organizations and their involvement in the American political system. While we'll be taking a "birds-eye view" of the development and activities of interest groups in general in class, this project will provide the opportunity to get more "up close and personal" with a few influential ones.
- The project seeks to contribute to the improvement of your *research skills* by requiring you to investigate the development and operations of specific interest group organizations and translate the knowledge that emerges from your investigations into a variety of written and oral presentation formats.
- The project seeks to contribute to the improvement of your *written and oral communication skills* by providing a hands-on introduction to four different written communication genres, seeing you through rigorous revision processes, and requiring two in-class presentations of your research findings.
- Finally, the project seeks to contribute to the improvement of your *civic engagement skills* by (1) having you join a growing community of contributors to the development of a burgeoning wiki encyclopedia project and encouraging your collaboration in the process of producing and disseminating knowledge in the contemporary information age, and (2) by providing a hands-on introduction to written communication genres such as opinion essays and letters to the editor, which are both well-established media for political and civic engagement in the United States.

How the Project Works

The project consists of four overlapping stages, each devoted to a different genre of written communication:

Stage I: Encyclopedia Entry

During this first stage of the project, you will be assigned to join Citizendium and write an encyclopedia entry about a national interest group organization in the United States. In addition to crafting the main text of your encyclopedia article, you should complete bibliography and external links lists on the appropriate subpages.

I will evaluate and comment on an initial draft of your encyclopedia entry and subpages during the last week in September, at which point you will also give a short (about 5 minutes) in-class presentation about your interest group. In addition, the student assigned to write an opinion essay about the subject of your entry (see Stage II) will peer-review your entry by assessing its usefulness as a springboard for their research. Other members of the Citizendium community might also chime in with suggestions. You have the remainder of the semester to improve your entry and its subpages, which will be re-evaluated during finals week.

A training workshop will be held during the second week of classes (see the course syllabus for details). At this session, you will receive your interest group assignment along with some pointers on research resources and instruction on the conventions of both encyclopedia writing in general and contributing to Citizendium in particular.

All entries nominated by a Citizendium editor for approval on or before Thursday, December 10 will receive a 25-point bonus.

Stage II: Opinion Essay

For the second stage of the project, you will be assigned to write an argumentative essay about any aspect of an assigned interest group organization that is the subject of one of your classmates' encyclopedia entries. Your essay should take the form of an op-ed column. We'll discuss what this entails in class in early October.

An initial draft of your essay should be posted as a Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) attachment on Blackboard no later than Thursday, October 29. The author of the Citizendium entry on the subject of your essay will provide a peer evaluation and suggestions for improvement. In turn, you will provide a peer evaluation and suggestions for improvement of his/her encyclopedia article. You have until Thursday, November 19 to revise and re-post a final draft of your essay on Blackboard. You will also give a short (about 5 minutes) in-class presentation about the argument of your essay during the last week of classes.

Stage III: Letter to the Editor

For this third stage of the project, you're to choose any one of the essays written for Stage II and write a response in the format of a letter to the editor. It should be posted on Blackboard no later than 11:59 PM on Monday, December 7. Your letter should be no more than 250 words and should clearly and pointedly explain your agreement, disagreement, or elaboration on the essay it's responding to.

The Stage II essay that elicits the most Stage III responses will receive a 25-point bonus.

Stage IV: Reflection

The final stage of the project is a brief (2-4 double-spaced pages) composition reflecting on your learning experience in this project. It is due via email to sgelbman@ilstu.edu at 11:59 PM on Thursday, December 10.

Project Calendar

When?	What?	Where and/or How?	Points
Week of Aug. 25	Project training	T: 207 SCH Th: 213C Milner Library Both training sessions will take place during class time (i.e. 2:00-3:15 PM)	---
Week of Sept. 29	First encyclopedia entry evaluation	I'll post comments to your encyclopedia's "talk page" on Citizendium	100
	First presentations	During class time in 207 SCH; you'll be expected to speak (visual aids optional) for about five minutes about the interest group featured in your encyclopedia entry	100
Thursday, Oct. 29 @11:59 PM	Deadline to post first opinion essay draft	Post your essay as a Microsoft Word 2003 file (.doc) attachment on Blackboard	100
	Deadline to peer review the encyclopedia entry for the interest group featured in your opinion essay	Post constructively critical comments to the entry's "talk page" on Citizendium	100
Thursday, Nov. 5 @11:59 PM	Deadline to peer review the opinion essay for the interest group featured in your encyclopedia entry	Post constructively critical comments on Blackboard	100
Thursday, Nov. 19 @11:59 PM	Deadline to post revised opinion essay	Post your essay as a Microsoft Word 2003 file (.doc) attachment on Blackboard along with a brief summary of the changes you made	100
Week of Dec. 1	Second presentations	During class time in 207 SCH; you'll be expected to speak (visual aids optional) for about five minutes about the argument advanced in your opinion essay	100
Monday, Dec. 7 @11:59 PM	Deadline to post letter to the editor	Post your letter as a discussion board posting on Blackboard	100
Thursday, Dec. 10 @11:59 PM	Deadline to submit reflection composition	Email as a Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) file attachment to sgelbman@ilstu.edu	100
	Final encyclopedia entry evaluations	I'll re-evaluate your encyclopedia entry and post comments on its "talk page"	100