

Activity: Simulated Legislative Hearings

Legislative hearings are held by committees of the United States Congress and other legislative bodies to gather information upon which to base recommendations regarding subjects regulated by law or for which laws are being considered. These hearings are a basic function of legislative branches of government.

A simulated legislative hearing provides participants with an opportunity to gain an increased understanding of the purposes and procedures of such hearings as well as the roles and responsibilities of committee members. Participants also gain experience in identifying and clarifying the ideas, interests, and values associated with the subject being discussed by the legislative hearing.

Preparations

- § Identify, or help students identify, a topic to be discussed in a legislative hearing. The topic should be related to the concept being studied, e.g., a hearing on government data banks and the right to privacy. You may wish to put the topic in the form of a proposed bill. Staff from the office of local legislators could be of assistance in this task.
- § Contact the local legislature, local groups or local chapters of national organizations that might have a concern in the topic you have chosen to serve as resource people. Ask them if they might have members or staff members who would be interested in serving as resource persons.
- § Assign the following roles (divide the class into groups of 4 to 6):
 - Legislative Committee. This Committee will review your proposal. Six legislators is a practical number for a committee but this number may be varied to meet class requirements. One legislator is designated as chairperson.
 - Witnesses. The number and nature of the witnesses will depend upon the topic being discussed. They should represent, however, different points of view including various interests and values. At least one group should be openly opposed to and one group openly supporting the legislation.
 - Recorder. A person or persons selected to keep a record of proceedings and present a review of recommendations.
- § Explain the purpose of the legislative hearing and the procedures to be followed [see below]. Prepare a handout of the student instructions to a legislative hearing if needed.
- § Allow time for participants to prepare for the legislative hearing in accordance with their assigned roles.
- § Arrange to use the hearing or committee room of a local legislative body. Alternatively, set up a table for six legislators, a desk for the recorder, and a desk for the witness in the front of the classroom. Ask for a gavel and prepare nameplates with the students' names and their roles.
- § Conduct the legislative hearing using the outlined procedures.

Follow Up Questions

- § In what ways is testifying before a committee an effective way for Congress to get information? In what ways is it limited?
- § What was the most compelling thing you learned about the General Guidelines from your preparation? From another participant?
- § Do you agree with the committee's recommendation? Why or why not?
- § What would help you to understand this issue more clearly?