

1

Introduction to American Politics

It's a riddle fit for a sphinx:

What is both an inspiring pursuit and a mind-numbing turn-off? A noble calling to serve an interest greater than oneself, and a degrading scramble for personal advantage? A spellbinding spectacle of the human passion for excellence, and a tedious litany of scandal and corruption?

The newest reality show on TV? Hardly. It's *politics* . . . the oldest reality show on earth.

How can politics embody so many contradictions? Politics is a reflection of human nature, itself a strange brew of opposites and incongruities. After all, politics is the process by which we distribute scarce resources like power and influence. Everybody wants them, but not everybody can have them. The stakes are high, and the methods are often cutthroat. But politics is also the means by which we come together to do what we cannot do alone—to build governments, construct highway systems, feed the poor, work for peace, and explore the skies. The same process of politics exploits our worst nature, and embraces our best nature.

As such, politics is a distinctively human activity, and in many ways it is our saving grace. Watch the family dogs when they want the same bone—they bite and snarl and pull each other away by the throat. Never once do they stop, call a meeting, attempt to reason or compromise or share. The strongest wins by violence and intimidation—every time. Human beings sometimes resort to the same tactics, but politics offers us an alternative—a way to resolve disputes without fighting and without coercion. Politics is the process of making decisions about who should get what valued resources, through discussion and debate, compromise and cooperation, bargaining, trade-offs, even bribery and graft sometimes, but always through human interaction that offers the possibility of a peaceful resolution.

American Government: The Democratic Experiment

In the United States we are fortunate to be living in the midst of a grand democratic experiment. In democracies, the people who are governed have rights that government cannot infringe upon, and what's more, they have a voice in the way they are governed. To the extent that they make their voice heard through the political process, their rights are expanded and protected. To the extent that they keep silent, they are often ignored by the system. Their rights can shrink or be trumped by the demands and concerns of more vocal citizens.

The United States is the first case of democracy being practiced for such a long time, on such a large scale. We call it an experiment because, like all experiments, we really do not know how it will turn out, although we have hopes and expectations. It is tempting to think that it will last for all time—that human beings, in America anyway, have solved the myriad problems that have afflicted societies through the ages and discovered the key to living in freedom and peace forever. But that is not likely. The founders themselves warned that they had put together a system requiring careful maintenance. Benjamin Franklin adjured a woman outside Constitution Hall that they had created a republic, “if you can keep it.”

Democracies take time and effort, and lots of it, if they are to survive. They require that those who live in them be vigilant and careful, that they know something about how the system works, that they keep an eye on their leaders, that they be jealous of their rights and conscious of their obligations—that they be, in short, good citizens. Political philosopher Benjamin Barber notes that “the price of liberty is citizenship,” and that “free societies are sustained only by hard work.”¹

A Civic Crisis?

And yet, at least until recently, many observers of American politics have argued that we are in a crisis of citizenship—a civic crisis manifested by vast public ignorance about the political system and by something worse, an indifference and cynicism that leave citizens cold, untouched, and uninterested in learning who their leaders are and how they lead. In an important book about this problem, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne warns that “[a] nation that hates politics will not long survive as a democracy.”²

Political apathy and low levels of political knowledge are not spread equally throughout the population—there are decided generational effects. Those raised during the Great Depression and World War II are far more likely to see government in a positive light and are far more likely to vote for the things they want. Baby boomers raised in the fifties, sixties, and seventies may have lived through the disillusionment of the Watergate scandal, but they also had the positive political experiences of working for civil rights, protesting the Vietnam War, and supporting early environmental efforts in this country. They too vote in fairly large numbers. As they get ready to retire, they are lobbying government to protect Social Security, to build up Medicare, and to look after the interests of an aging but politically active cohort.

It is the generation of young Americans who scholars and pundits have worried about being most truly lost politically. Generation X, Generation Y, Generation

Next—poll after poll of people from their teens to their thirties tell us that most young people have not seen government as relevant to their lives, responsive to their concerns, or worth their time and trouble. Although these same generations volunteer in churches, neighborhoods, and schools in record numbers, their interest in community life has not extended to government life. And in a giant self-fulfilling prophecy, most politicians continue to respond to the issues of the middle-aged and elderly people who vote, and not the young people who have become ever more cynical about the process.

The Readings in This Chapter

The first two readings in this chapter suggest that the presidential election in 2008 gave observers reason to hope that younger generations of Americans might be reengaging in the political system. In the first, the *Washington Post*'s Ezra Klein, only 24 himself in 2008, discusses the policy changes that occurred in the country in the four years following Barack Obama's first election. In the second reading, political scientist Robert Putnam, writing in the *Boston Globe*, suggests that younger voters are members of a generation shaped by 9/11 and captured by the idea of national service. Finally, President John F. Kennedy presents a classic American view of patriotism and national service. As he notes, his election represented the passing of the torch to a new political generation, much as would President Obama's election nearly fifty years later. What views of national service and political engagement are likely to hold sway with the newest generation of citizens?

Notes

1. Benjamin R. Barber, "Foreword." In *Education for Citizenship*, edited by Grant Reeher and Joseph Cammarano, ix. Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.
2. E. J. Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, 355. New York: Touchstone Books, 1991.

1.1 A Remarkable, Historic Period of Change

Ezra Klein, *Washington Post*

Why We Chose This Piece

Cynics like to argue that democratic politics in the United States doesn't matter, that people coming together collectively cannot effect change because the corridors of power in Washington are filled with rich lobbyists and corrupt politicians. This piece, by Ezra Klein, suggests otherwise—that at some periods in our history, democratic politics can be a powerful tool indeed. We thought it was a fitting (and hopeful) start to a critical thinking reader about American government.

Five days isn't a long time to digest a presidential election, all that came before it, and all that's likely to come after. But it's long enough to get a bit of perspective.

Selection published: November 11, 2012

Max Weber wrote that “politics is the strong and slow boring of hard boards.” It is not a vocation that rewards impatience. Progress is slow. It’s tough. It requires compromises and is marked by disappointments. It’s incremental even when it needs to be transformational. At least, that’s how it usually is.

But step back and take an accounting of these last few years: The United States of America, a land where slaves were kept 150 years ago and bathrooms were segregated as recently as 50 years ago, elected and reelected our first black president. We passed and ratified a universal health-care system. We saw the first female Speaker of the House, the first Hispanic Supreme Court Justice, and the first openly gay member of the Senate. We stopped a Great Depression, rewrote the nation’s financial regulations, and nearly defaulted on our debt for the first time in our history. Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, Maine, Maryland, Washington and the District of Columbia legalized gay marriage, and the president and the vice president both proclaimed their support. Colorado and Washington legalized marijuana. We killed the most dangerous terrorist in the world and managed two wars. We’ve seen inequality and debt skyrocket to some of the highest levels in American history. We passed a stimulus and investment bill that will transform everything from medical records to education and began a drone campaign that will likely be seen as an epochal shift in the way the United States conducts war.

Americans of good faith disagree over the worth of these initiatives and the nature of these milestones. None of us know the verdict that history will render. But we can say with certainty that the pace of change has been breathlessly fast. We have toppled so many barriers, passed so many reforms, completed so many long quests, begun so many experiments, that even those of us who’ve been paying attention have become inured to how much has happened.

It is common, for instance, to hear pundits wonder why the president didn’t invest in long-term infrastructure after the financial crisis or move Medicare beyond fee-for-service as a way to cut the debt, either forgetting or never knowing the stimulus was one of the largest one-time infrastructure investments in the nation’s history and that the Affordable Care Act is the most ambitious effort to move American health care towards a pay-for-quality paradigm ever mounted.

The even more frequent complaint is that the pace and scale of change has been, if anything, insufficient. The stimulus should’ve been bigger, the health reforms more ambitious, the largest banks broken apart, the wars either finished more swiftly or expanded more decisively. All that may be true, but it doesn’t obviate the remarkable pace and scale of the changes that have come.

More troublesome is that even once change has happened, it takes time for it to be felt. The health-care law, for instance, won’t go into effect until 2014. And in some cases, the extraordinary efforts were meant to keep something from happening. Our success in stopping another Great Depression will be studied by economists for years to come, but in real people’s lives, that work meant less change, not more, though we should be thankful for that.

Political journalism, meanwhile, is built to obscure change once it’s happened. The demands of reporting the news require us to focus on what’s being done, rather than what’s been done (notice how, less than a week after the presidential election, we have

already moved on to the Petraeus affair). The focus on conflict elevates voices that argue that we haven't done nearly enough, or that what we've done wasn't worth doing. The internal culture of the media encourages a kind of jaded cynicism—you're always safer pretending to have seen it all before than admitting to never have seen anything like it.

There is a theory in evolutionary biology called “punctuated equilibrium.” It holds that most species don't change much for long periods of time, but then they change dramatically, in rapid bursts, over geologically short periods of time.

Political scientists Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones have argued that “punctuated equilibrium” describes the path of political systems, too. Typically, politics is held in stasis, with little progress being made in the slow boring of those hard boards. But when change does come, it's not a steady process of incremental advances but a breathless flurry in which the boards give all at once.

Whether we intended to or not, whether it was sufficient or not, whether we liked it or not, we have been living through a remarkable period of political change in these last few years. We have bored through so many hard boards that we're no longer surprised when we reach the other side, and we mainly wonder why we haven't gotten through more of them, or why we didn't choose different ones. But viewed against most other eras in American life, the pace of policy change in these last few years has been incredibly fast. Historians, looking back from more quiescent periods, will marvel at all that we have lived through. Activists, frustrated at their inability to shake their countrymen out of their tranquility, will wish they'd been born in a moment when things were actually getting done, a moment like this one.

Consider the source and the audience

- Ezra Klein is a relatively young (born in 1984) writer who has a blog called *Wonkblog* at the *Washington Post* website. His work appears in the *Post* and other political outlets, and he frequently appears on MSNBC, a liberal cable station. While his politics are clearly left of center, his passion, and the passion of his blog, is for the nitty-gritty details of policy. Knowing all that about him, how would you expect him to think about the question of political change?
- For whom is he writing? Who would be likely to read a blog called *Wonkblog*, anyway?

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions

- Writing right after Obama's reelection in 2012, Klein notes a number of policy changes that took place during his first administration. How does Klein think political change normally takes place, and what is different about the period he discusses?
- What is the theory of punctuated equilibrium, and how does it apply to policy?
- Does Klein suggest that the policy changes he writes about are good or bad things? What forces work to obscure the pace of change?

Uncover the evidence

- Klein provides lots of examples to support his claim that the four years he is discussing have been a time of unusual policy change. Is that enough for you to evaluate his argument that this change is unusual?
- What else would it be helpful for you to know?

Evaluate the conclusion

- Klein suggests that the first Obama administration was a time of great and good change, but he acknowledges that there are those who think it was a time of great and bad change as well. Is it possible to disagree with the conclusion that it was a time of great change?

Sort out the political significance

- Klein says that future activists will wish they had lived during the times he discusses because so many things got done. Does he help you to think about what those future activists could do to replicate the success of activists from 2008–2012?
- What kinds of political change would you like to see, and what could you do to bring them about?

1.2 The Rebirth of American Civic Life

Robert D. Putnam, *Boston Globe*

Why We Chose This Piece

In 1995 political scientist Robert Putnam wrote a book called Bowling Alone about declining civic life and community in America. In this 2008 article he changes his tune, talking about a “rebirth of American civic life,” prompted by the effect of the national tragedy of 9/11 on young people. He is happy to see the excitement as this generation of Americans comes of political age, but he is worried that their enthusiasm for politics will wane if the rules of the game appear to be rigged. His specific concern is with some pretty arcane rules in the Democratic Party that have the potential to overrule the results of the primaries and caucuses by choosing a nominee other than the winner of the most delegates in those contests. Note that his concern here is with the Democrats because (1) Obama had generated unusual levels of enthusiastic support from younger voters and (2) Republicans have different primary rules than the Democrats. John McCain, the winner of the Republican primaries and caucuses, was never in danger of not being selected by his party.

Selection published: March 2, 2008

As you read the article, don't worry too much about the details of the Florida and Michigan primaries or the Democratic "superdelegates"—you will learn more about those topics as you get further into the study of American politics. For now, concentrate on what Putnam has to say about civic engagement and young people—what he calls the "new Greatest Generation"—and the importance of "the simple playground rules of fairness" to keeping people engaged in the system. If you are between eighteen and twenty-four years old, do you think he has accurately described your generation's political experience? If you were a Democratic voter, how would you have felt if party officials had chosen Clinton over Obama?

In the mushrooming procedural debate about Democratic superdelegates and the uncontested Florida and Michigan primaries, more is at stake than the identity of the presidential nominee or even the Democrats' chances of victory in November. Primaries and caucuses coast to coast in the last two months have evinced the sharpest increase in civic engagement among American youth in at least a half-century, portending a remarkable revitalization of American democracy. But that rebirth of American civic life would be aborted if the decision rendered by millions of ordinary Americans could be overturned by a backroom deal among political insiders. The issue is not public jurisprudence or obscure party regulations or the alleged "wisdom" of party elders, but simple playground notions of fairness.

Throughout the last four decades of the 20th century, young people's engagement in American civic life declined year after year with depressing regularity. In fall 1966, well before the full flowering of Vietnam War protests, a UCLA poll of college freshmen nationwide found that "keeping up with politics" was a "very important" goal in their lives for fully 60 percent.

Thirty-four years later that figure had plummeted to 28 percent. In 1972, when the vote was first extended to 18-year-olds, turnout in the presidential election among 18- to 24-year-olds was a disappointing 52 percent. But even beginning at that modest level, rates of voting in presidential elections by young people steadily fell throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s, reaching barely 36 percent in 2000. National commissions bemoaned the seemingly inexorable increase in youthful apathy and incivism. The National Commission on Civic Renewal said, "When we assess our country's civic and moral condition, we are deeply troubled. . . . We are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators."

Then came the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, a national tragedy, but also a vivid reminder that we are all in this together. Civic seismometers across the land showed a sharp spike in virtually every measure of community-mindedness. It was, I wrote at the time, not only a tragedy, but also the sort of opportunity for civic revival that comes along once or twice a century. Just as Pearl Harbor had spawned the civic-minded "Greatest Generation," so too Sept. 11 might turn out to produce a more civically engaged generation of young people.

For most Americans the half-life of the civic boomlet after the attacks was barely six months. Within a year measures of civic engagement had returned to the previous levels, from which they have barely budged since. Except among young people.

Among the cohort of Americans caught by 9/11 in their formative years, the effects of the attacks on their civic consciousness were more enduring. The annual UCLA chart of interest in politics jumped upward in 2001 for the first time in decades and has kept rising every year since.

Last month the UCLA researchers reported that “For today’s freshmen, discussing politics is more prevalent now than at any point in the past 41 years.” This and other evidence led us and other observers to speak hopefully of a 9/11 generation, perhaps even a “new Greatest Generation.” In the 2004 and 2006 elections, turnout among young people began at last to climb after decades of decline, reaching the highest point in 20 years in 2006. As we approached the presidential season of 2008, young Americans were, in effect, coiled for civic action, not because of their stage of life, but because of the lingering effects of the unifying national crisis they had experienced in their formative years.

The exceptionally lively presidential nominating contests of this year—and, it must be said, the extraordinary candidacy of Barack Obama—have sparked into white hot flame a pile of youthful kindling that had been stacked and ready to flare for more than six years. The 18-year-olds first eligible to vote in 2008 were in sixth grade when the twin towers fell, and their older sisters and brothers who were college seniors in September 2001 are now 28 or 29. It is precisely this group, above all others in America, that has pushed participation rates in this spring’s caucuses and primaries to record levels. Turnout in this spring’s electoral contests so far has generally been higher than in previous presidential nominating contests, but for twentysomethings the rise has been truly phenomenal—turnout often three or four times greater than ever before measured.

The 2008 elections are thus the coming-out party of this new Greatest Generation. Their grandparents of the original Greatest Generation were the civic pillars of American democracy for more than a half-century, and at long last, just as that generation is leaving the scene, reinforcements are arriving. Americans of every political persuasion should rejoice at this epochal swing of the generational pendulum, for it portends precisely the sort of civic renaissance for which Jeremiahs have been calling for many years.

This, then, is what is at stake in the otherwise inside-baseball controversies about superdelegates and pledged delegates and the uncontested Florida and Michigan primaries—controversies now roiling Democratic party leaders. If the results of the caucuses and primaries are, despite record-breaking rates of popular participation, overturned by unelected (though officially legitimate) superdelegates or by delegates from states that all candidates had previously agreed not to contest, the lesson for the young civic stalwarts would be unmistakable—democratic politics is a sham. Politics is actually controlled by party bosses behind the scenes. Civic engagement is for suckers.

From Little League to student council races, we all learn to accept defeats we have lost fair and square. But losing in a contest in which the rules can be rigged teaches that the game is not worth the candle. Who can honestly doubt that if the Democratic presidential candidate preferred by a majority of the delegates elected in this spring’s competitive contests (and by the overwhelming majority of young voters) were to be rejected solely by the power of unelected delegates (or those “elected” without any serious competition), the unmistakable civics lesson would be catastrophic for this incipient cadre of super citizens?

So as the superdelegates, the two campaigns, and Democratic Party leaders contemplate how to resolve the procedural issues before them—what to do about Michigan and Florida, and how superdelegates should vote—let’s hope that they weigh the consequences not merely for their own candidates this year, and not merely for the Democratic prospects in the fall, but for the future vitality of American democracy.

Consider the source and the audience

- This article appeared in the *Boston Globe* in March 2008, just as it began to sink in that Barack Obama was going to do better than anyone had guessed in the Democratic nominating contest, but at a time when Hillary Clinton still had a lead in the unelected superdelegate count as well as “victories” in the uncontested and uncounted primaries in Florida and Michigan. Who is Putnam speaking to here—the young people excited about Obama’s candidacy or the Democratic Party officials he feared would “throw” the election to Clinton?

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions

- What does Putnam mean by referring to the “Greatest Generation?” Why does he value civic participation? How does he define “fairness?”
- What is the link between civic engagement and fairness, in his mind?

Uncover the evidence

- What evidence does Putnam provide that today’s young people are a “new Greatest Generation?”
- Does he have empirical evidence to back up his claim that if Democratic officials overrule the result of the Democratic primary process, then “the rebirth of American civic life would be aborted?” Does he need evidence for that claim?

Evaluate the conclusion

- Was Putnam right? Do you think that 18–24-year-olds have been shaped to be more politically active by growing up in the shadow of 9/11?
- What impact would it have had on young Democratic voters you know if Clinton had been made the nominee despite Obama’s primary and caucus victories? How important is it in securing your own investment in a system that the rules be perceived to be “fair”?

Sort out the political implications

- The Democrats eventually decided not to count the Michigan and Florida primary results at full strength, and the superdelegates ended up moving overwhelmingly to Obama. Do you think they and the Democratic officials might have been persuaded by arguments about the probability of disillusioning and alienating a generation of new voters?

1.3 Inaugural Address

John F. Kennedy

Why We Chose This Piece

John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, now more than forty years old, calls on Americans facing a long battle to preserve their ideals and their way of life to exhibit a selfless citizenship and devotion to country. His words to a nation challenged by the Cold War are poignant today, when the same nation is struggling with war of a different but equally destructive kind. One definition of an effective leader may be that a leader holds up a mirror before a nation's citizens and helps them see themselves as a people bound by values and heritage, willing to sacrifice for worthy common goals. How does Kennedy take the opportunity presented by this speech to establish himself as a national leader?

We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning—signifying renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

This much we pledge—and more.

To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do—for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

Selection delivered: January 20, 1961

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge: to convert our good words into good deeds, in a new alliance for progress, to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support—to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective, to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak, and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course—both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind's final war.

So let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us.

Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms, and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

Let both sides unite to heed, in all corners of the earth, the command of Isaiah—to “undo the heavy burdens, and [to] let the oppressed go free.”

And, if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor—not a new balance of power, but a new world of law—where the strong are just, and the weak secure, and the peace preserved.

All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days; nor in the life of this Administration; nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation,” a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.

Consider the source and the audience

- Here you are reading a president’s inaugural address. What are the goals of such a speech? Is it addressed only to Americans?

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions

- Is Kennedy making an argument in this speech? How might the claims made in an inaugural address differ from those in a more traditional argument?
- What is Kennedy’s major point? Who are the new generation of Americans to which the torch is being passed? How does their political experience make them different?
- What is Kennedy’s view of a good government? What is his view of how the world should be ordered? What values are worth fighting for? What is his view of national service?

Uncover the evidence

- What kind of evidence is Kennedy obliged to provide in support of the claims he makes here?
- When can ideals, convictions, and historical tradition substitute for factual evidence?

Evaluate the conclusion

- What does Kennedy see as the fundamental tasks to be done?
- Were there other visions of America and its role in the world that he might have offered then? What values might this role have been based on?

Sort out the political implications

- How effective do you imagine this speech was as a political call to arms and a call “to bear the burden?” How might it have shaped the generations to whom it was addressed?
- How might such a speech be received today?