

# The Better Budget

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Advising a Congressional Representative on How Best to  
Cut Federal Spending



### **About the Buck Institute for Education**

Founded in 1987, the Buck Institute for Education works to expand the effective use of Project Based Learning throughout the world. BIE is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization based in Novato, California and is a beneficiary of the Leonard and Beryl Buck Trust. In addition, BIE has received grant support from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), the US Congress Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) and the US Department of Education Dwight D. Eisenhower Professional Development State Grant Program. BIE provides PBL professional development services and curriculum materials to school districts, state departments of education, foundations, and other clients in the United States and abroad.

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## Foreword

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Students learn more when they care about what they are learning. Students understand concepts better if they see how these concepts apply to the world outside of school. Students retain information longer if they are actively engaged in the discussion and demonstration of what they are learning.

Too many American classrooms never utilize these principles. But *Project Based Government (PBG)* is built upon them. It addresses the concepts and content defined by the *National Standards for Civics and Government* from the Center for Civic Education, grades 9–12, and the *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, developed by the National Council for the Social Studies for high school, in such a way that the material becomes meaningful and engaging to students. *PBG* reverses the traditional method of “teach the concepts first, then give students the opportunity to apply them.” Instead, *PBG* places students in an interesting scenario with an open-ended problem and asks them to arrive at a justifiable solution using civics concepts. The project thus “pulls” students through the content. The teacher’s role is to clarify, facilitate, and guide rather than “push” unmotivated students toward the learning objectives.

Research has shown project-based curricula to have positive effects on student learning. *PBL* methodology helps teachers build valuable interdisciplinary “21st-century skills” in students, including collaboration, critical thinking/problem-solving, and presentation making. Studies have shown that there are important cognitive benefits with the *PBL* methodology. We have found that *PBG* works well for diverse students in a variety of school settings. Skilled teachers in alternative education programs, continuation high schools, and other settings have reported success with these materials.

These units were developed by the Buck Institute for Education and pilot-tested and critiqued by a group of energetic, insightful teachers throughout California. Although too many teachers have been involved to thank each one by name, we are extremely grateful for their time, insight, and contributions to making these units successful. In addition, there have been a number of university professors, nonprofit organization staff, and school district leaders who have contributed to unit development. We have benefited from their observations and suggestions, and we offer a collective “Thank you!”

Please visit the Interact website ([www.teachinteract.com](http://www.teachinteract.com)) to find out about professional development offerings and conference presentations.

John Mergendoller, Ph.D. *Executive Director, Buck Institute for Education*

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# The Better Budget

## Chapter Four

### Purpose and Overview

#### Purpose and Rationale

This unit is designed to teach students about the appropriate role of government at the federal, state, and local levels, and about the responsibility of citizens and community as perceived by liberals and conservatives. The unit illustrates the tensions that exist between individual wants and needs and the collective good. It defines the role of government and its relationship to social and economic policy and introduces the importance of compromise in maintaining a democracy. This unit also helps students develop and define their own views on the role of government.

#### Unit Overview

In this unit, students are asked to serve as members of a focus group for a congresswoman interested in knowing what her constituents would cut from the current federal budget to save the federal government \$1 billion.<sup>1</sup> In addition to suggesting cuts, students are asked to explain who they think should be responsible for programs eliminated by the federal government. The students then receive a memo from the congresswoman claiming that her constituents want to know if liberal and conservative viewpoints were taken into account by the focus group. The congresswoman asks students to identify points of view favored by liberals or conservatives and to indicate which best fits their own point of view. During this exercise, students are instructed about the origin of liberal and conservative thought and how these philosophies have changed over time. After this exercise, students receive a final memo from the congresswoman asking them to craft a series of budget cuts that reflects a compromise between liberal and conservative priorities. Students are broken into groups of four, with members of each group representing both liberals and conservatives. These groups are asked to indicate whether liberals or conservatives will support each of their budget cuts. This final series of budget cuts, and the rationale behind them, serves as the evaluation portion of the project.

#### Time Required

5–6 class periods

The first layer of the project = 1 day (a 45- to 60-minute class period)

The three layers = 5 days

1. Budget battles can often involve trillion dollar cuts. Congresswoman Wright's staff is to find \$1 billion in cuts based on the parameters outlined in her memos.

Extended discussions of budget deficits and debt, foreign policy implications, and liberal and conservative philosophy can extend the project to two weeks.

### Placement in Curriculum

*The Better Budget*—especially the first layer—is a good unit to use early in the semester because it addresses questions about the responsibilities of government and the responsibilities of citizens. These are issues that are revisited throughout a semester government course. This unit also complements the *President's Dilemma* unit on fiscal policy, which is a part of the Project Based Economics units from the Buck Institute for Education. The tables under **Content Standards** show the standards addressed by this unit.

### Concepts to be Learned

This unit has been designed to teach the following concepts:

- Liberalism
- Conservatism
- Government Responsibility
- Citizen Responsibility
- Discretionary Expenditures
- Mandatory Expenditures

Although an understanding of the following civics concepts is not essential to complete project tasks, teachers can use the unit to explain:

- Neoclassical Liberals
- Social Welfare Liberals
- Classical Conservatives
- Laissez-Faire (Free-Market) Conservatives
- Social Contract
- Ideas of:
  - Thomas Hobbes
  - John Locke
  - Edmund Burke
  - Thomas Paine



- Federal Expenditures
- Federal Revenues
- Debt and Deficit
- Budget Categories
- Populism
- Libertarianism
- Laissez-Faire

## Objectives

By participating in this unit, students will:

- Understand that tension exists among state, federal, local governments, and citizens over who should take responsibility for particular programs and problems
- Recognize that citizens and elected officials decide what work government should do (public policy), and that funding priorities are set accordingly
- Understand the history of liberal and conservative ideologies

## Content Standards

The decisions that governments make about the use of resources reflect personal beliefs about what responsibilities government has to the people and what responsibilities should remain in the private sector with companies, nonprofits, and individuals. There is never complete agreement about these beliefs, but leaders must reach some consensus in order to govern. Students, as future political participants, need to be cognizant of this dilemma and its resulting compromises.

*The Better Budget* addresses the following National Standards for Civics and Government, Center for Civic Education, 1994, for grades 9 through 12.

### Standard Concept

I.A.	Definition and Purpose of Government	X
II.B	Distinctive American Characteristics	*
II.C.	American Political Culture	*
II.D.	American Constitutional Values and Principles	X

## Purpose and Overview

III.A.	Constitutional Restraints: Shared and Limited Powers	*
III.B.	Organization of the National Government	*
III.C.	Organization of State and Local Governments	*
V. C.	Responsibilities of Citizens	X

*The Better Budget* addresses the following Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, developed by the National Council for the Social Studies for high school.

### Standard Concept

<b>VI.</b>	<b>Power, Authority, and Governance</b>	
VI.B	The Purpose of Government	X
VI.C	Mechanisms Used to Balance Competing Needs and Wants	X
VI.H	Applying Political Science Theories to Issues and Problems	X
VI.I	Evaluating Government Achievement	*
<b>X.</b>	<b>Civic Ideals and Practices</b>	
X.A	Key Democratic Republican Ideals	*
X.C	Evaluating Selected Public Issues	X
X.G	Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy and Decision-Making	*
X.H	Relationship of Policy and Behavior to Democratic Ideals	X
X.J	Participate in Activities for the Common Good	*

X = a standard that is address in this curriculum

\* = a standard that could be addressed in this curriculum

*The Better Budget* addresses the following 21st Century Learning Skills, developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

### Standard Concept

<b>2</b>	<b>Learning and Innovation Skills</b>	
<b>2A</b>	Creativity and Innovation	
	Think Creatively	X

	Work Creatively with Others	X
	Implement Innovations	X
<b>2B</b>	Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving	
	Reason Effectively	X
	Use Systems Thinking	X
	Make Judgments and Decisions	X
	Solve Problems	X
<b>2C</b>	Communication and Collaboration	
	Communicate Clearly	X
	Collaborate with Others	X
<b>3</b>	<b>Information, Media, and Technology Skills</b>	
<b>3A</b>	Information Literacy	
	Access and Evaluate Information	X
	Use and Manage Information	X
<b>3B</b>	Media Literacy	
	Analyze Media	*
	Create Media Products	*
<b>3C</b>	ITC Literacy	*
<b>4</b>	<b>Life and Career Skills</b>	
<b>4A</b>	Flexibility and Adaptability	
	Adapt to Change	X
	Be Flexible	X
<b>4B</b>	Initiative and Self-Direction	
	Manage Goals and Time	X
	Work Independently	*

	Be Self-Directed Learners	*
<b>4C</b>	Social and Cross-Cultural Skills	
	Interact Effectively with Others	X
	Work Effectively in Diverse Teams	*
<b>4D</b>	Productivity and Accountability	
	Manage Projects	X
	Produce Results	X
<b>4E</b>	Leadership and Responsibility	
	Guide and Lead Others	*
	Responsibility to Others	*

### Resources

Resources are distributed to the students at different points in the project (see the Sequence of the Unit for one example). **All handouts are located in the Student Materials.**

**Assessment guidelines for evaluating student performance on unit products can be found in the Teacher Materials:**

- Scoring guide for the chart on liberal and conservative points of view
- Rubric for the briefing in which each group presents

### Lesson Materials

Because project-based learning is grounded in constructivist learning, several “teachable moments” will arise when students readily see a need to know a particular concept. During these moments, teachers can use several techniques to teach these concepts. For this purpose, lesson materials are included so that more traditional lectures can be used to provide information on more difficult subject matter. Alternatively, a Socratic method, in which the teacher uses questioning strategies to guide students toward knowledge and understanding, may be used.

In this unit we have included lesson material in the following areas for potential mini-lectures:

- Who Can and Will Be Responsible for Programs Cut from the Federal Budget?
- A Brief History of Liberals and Conservatives
- Completed table for “Liberal and Conservative Points of View” (this is the teacher key in the Teacher Materials)

**Lesson materials are located in Teacher Materials.**

***Resources Include:***

- Two memos with instructions from Congresswoman Nancy Wright
- Congresswoman Nancy Wright’s District: Community Profile
- Revenue and expenditures information for the federal budget
- United States debt table
- Revenue and expenditures information for the State of California
- Deficit spending information sheet
- Memo from Congresswoman Nancy Wright regarding six budget categories
- Descriptions of Budget Categories and the Effects of Budget Cuts on Federal Programs
- Table with 1% and 5% budget cuts and rules for making cuts
- Memo from Congresswoman Wright regarding liberal and conservative constituents
- Liberal and Conservative Information Sheet
- Definitions of Liberal and Conservative Groups
- Chart of Liberal and Conservative Points of View
- Memo from Congresswoman Wright regarding compromise budget cuts
- Table with 1% and 5% budget cuts for compromise budget
- Classroom textbook
- Websites

### Sequence of the Unit

Because project-based learning depends to a great extent on how a particular group of students constructs knowledge from real-world applications, the sequence of learning will differ in each class. As a result, it is virtually impossible to describe the exact unfolding of this project, even though it has been tested on several occasions.

What follows is an example of the sequence of the project during one class, using the full first and second parts of the unit. Instructional activities are discussed in more detail in the **Step-by-Step Teaching Guide** (next section). The **bolded** phrases are cross-referenced to the steps in the guide.

#### *Pre-project planning*

0. Prepare for a successful project implementation

#### *Launching the project*

1. Discuss the **memo from Congresswoman Wright** with the whole class

#### *Framing the Inquiry*

2. Develop the **initial “Know” list** with the whole class
3. Develop the **initial Driving Question** with the whole class
4. Develop the **initial “Need to Know” list** with the whole class

#### *Problem-solving and learning activities*

5. Clarifying Lesson: Discuss the **memo, community profile, revenue and expenditure tables, and U.S. debt table**
6. Optional: Discuss **California budget** tables and pie charts
7. Have students make **first project log entry**
8. Review **memo and budget category descriptions** with the whole class
9. **Assign groups of six** to advocate for each category
10. Have group members **meet to review** each category
11. Review **budget cuts table and rules** for making cuts
12. **Revise “Know/Need to Know” lists**
13. Have students make **initial budget cuts** individually
14. Have students determine who will be responsible for cut programs

15. Clarifying Lesson **Optional: Mini-lecture on who will be responsible** for programs cut from the federal budget
16. **Discuss student decisions** regarding program cuts and who will be responsible for these programs with the whole class
17. Have students make **second project log entry**
18. Discuss **memo** from Congresswoman Wright regarding liberals and conservatives
19. Discuss **information sheet, definitions, and chart**
20. **Revise “Know/Need to Know”** list
21. Undertake **mini-lecture on liberal and conservative philosophies**
22. Have students **fill in chart** of liberal and conservative points of view and answer “where do you fit?”
23. Discuss **memo** from Congresswoman Wright
24. **Finalize “Know” list and Driving Question**
25. Have students make **final project log entry**

#### ***Presentation, Assessment, and Debrief***

26. Create student **groups of four**, with mix of liberals and conservatives
27. Have students **create compromise budget cuts** and identify liberal or conservative approval
28. Use scoring guides and rubrics to assess student achievement
29. Use the supplied rubric to assess oral presentations
30. **Wrap-up and debrief** with the entire class
31. Manage student reflection on 21st century skills practiced and the process of PBL
32. Use the supplied multiple choice test to assess individual students' knowledge of key government concepts
33. Make notes about adjustments to the unit to promote student learning for the next time the unit is taught
34. Extensions to the Unit

## Step-by-Step Teaching Guide

The above instructional activities are discussed in more depth below, with tips for successful classroom implementation.

### Pre-project planning

#### 0. Prepare for successful project implementation.

There are a number of issues that must be considered before embarking on a project with students. These include:

- How much time will be devoted to the project?
- What content resources need to be prepared in advance (textbooks, articles, websites, etc.)?
- Do all students have the skills they need to tackle the project—including basic literacy skills as well as the ability to work in teams, make presentations, and conduct research? If not, is it necessary to pre-teach some of these skills, make sure students who need it have adequate support, or deal with these challenges in other ways?
- How will student groups be formed? (*See comments in Chapter Two.*)
- How will groups report on their progress and be held accountable? Do report forms or other tools need to be developed?
- Is it necessary to arrange access to the library/media center or computer lab?
- Do parents or administrators need to be informed about the process of Project Based Learning and be assured that time spent on the project is focused on standards-specific learning goals?

In addition to considering the above issues, be sure student handouts and clarifying lesson/mini-lecture materials are ready. Finally, **decide if the culminating product will be done as a small group, in pairs, or individually.** This will affect how you present the task to students, use time, and assess their learning.

### Launching the project

Meet with the whole class and inform them that in this activity they are asked to serve as members of a focus group for a congresswoman interested in knowing what her constituents would cut from the current federal budget to save the federal government \$1 billion. In addition to suggesting cuts, students are asked to explain who they think should be responsible for programs eliminated by the federal government.



Whole class



**Entry Point:**

**1. Students read a memo from Congresswoman Wright and discuss it as a whole class.**

Students are given the first memo from Congresswoman Wright to the constituent focus group. The congresswoman is asking students, as a focus group representing her constituency, to suggest cuts to the federal budget amounting to \$1 billion. She explains that a chart of funding sources and expenditures for the federal government will be provided.

**Potential Hurdle:** Because this memo sets up the scenario and the problem to be solved, it is essential that the entire class be able to read and comprehend the text. If necessary, employ the same literacy-building strategies you would normally use for this kind of reading material.

**Government Content Note:** The congresswoman’s memo contains a number of government terms, such as deficits, economic forecast, and discretionary expenditures, that many students will either not understand or have misconceptions about. **Do not** explain the meaning of these terms to students at this point. Tell students that any terms that are unfamiliar or confusing should be placed on a list of what they “Need to Know” to solve the problem. Figuring out the meaning of government terms is something students should, as much as possible, do for themselves (with your monitoring and guidance) once they begin working to solve the problem.

**Framing the inquiry:**

**2. Students develop the Initial “Know” list in whole class discussion.**

The first step is for students to assess what they already know about the problem posed in the Entry Document. This should be done by creating a “What We Know” list on chart paper, an overhead transparency, or a computer projector. The “Know/Need to Know” inventory will differ for each class because students struggle with identifying the knowledge they have and defining the body of knowledge they do not have. After reading the memo from Congresswoman Wright, students, working as a whole class, should be coached to identify all the information the Entry Document provides. Ask students to carefully review the Entry Document and offer items for the list, making sure to only record what is actually stated in the text and not what might be inferred.

The following are examples of statements that might appear on the initial “What We Know” list. Remember that every class will produce a different list, and every idea should be put on the board. Sometimes seemingly strange ideas that come from a “What We Know” discussion result in the most creative solutions to the problem.



Memo from  
Congresswoman  
Wright



Whole class



Initial  
Know List

# Definitions of Liberal and Conservative Groups

There are some features of liberalism and conservatism that have remained the same since the 16th century. However, some aspects of liberalism and conservatism have changed over time. These changes are marked by the different names given to liberal and conservative groups. The following lists show the common features of all liberals and conservatives and the ways in which these groups have changed or expanded their beliefs.

## **All Liberals**

- The purpose of human beings is to seek their individual destiny
- People are essentially rational
- People are capable of improvement
- People can exercise individual freedom
- People should be free to seek their own course
- People make a contract with government
- Government should serve the people

## **Neoclassical Liberals**

- Government is a necessary evil and should be small
- Government should only exist to protect against force and fraud
- Nature intended to remove the weak (Social Darwinists)
- Open competition unfettered by government regulation should exist in the marketplace (laissez-faire economics)

## **All Conservatives**

- People cannot survive as individuals and only cooperative groups can thrive
- The purpose of human beings is to serve their group or community
- People are flawed
- Government is rooted in custom and tradition, and citizens should respect and trust tradition
- People use government, education, family, and the church to conserve the customary way of life and resist drastic change
- Institutions should restrain the passions of the people
- Government should be made up of the natural elite, or those who rise above the masses through their financial success

## **Classical Conservatives**

- Government is good and is necessary to control people
- Government keeps individual greed in check
- Freedom should be kept under control
- People should be free to pursue their goals only if they do not threaten the social order
- Without restraint, people do things that threaten or endanger themselves and society
- Wisdom gained through experience is preferable to using logic or reason
- Distrust innovation and promote reform, not dramatic change
- Defend traditional social hierarchy
- Favor representative government but by the natural aristocracy
- Are willing to share power as long as it is not inclusive or an open democracy that panders to the masses
- Favor landed elite rather than commercial elite, and feel capitalism is dehumanizing
- Support private property

**Social Welfare Liberals**

- Believe governments exist to provide services, regulate industry (and the economy in general), redistribute wealth, and support economic development
- Think those not given privilege by birth should be given special assistance by government to “even the playing field”
- Oppose government attempts to regulate personal behaviors and morals
- Support gay rights legislation, rights to abortion, and fewer curbs on access to information including pornography
- Find value in recognizing cultural differences
- Want to preserve identity of different groups
- Look to the future, believing progress will ensure a better life for all
- Support a strong military and increased military spending
- Are reluctant to accept war as a solution and tend to be less nationalistic

**U.S. Conservatives, Free-Market Conservatives, Laissez-Faire Conservatives**

- Champion commercialism and favor commercial elite rather than landed elite
- Are laissez-faire businesspersons and industrialists
- Are Social Darwinists who defend private property, competitive individualism, and economic progress
- Believe there is too much government interference in the free market
- Favor reducing social welfare and government spending
- Are anti-government regulation of business and industry
- Believe freedom essentially means the right to compete in a free market
- Support a strong military and increased military spending
- Fear communism, socialism, and fringe groups
- Oppose abortion and gay rights legislation, and propose greater curbs on pornography
- Minimize focus on cultural differences
- Believe a dominant cultural tradition creates a stronger group
- Look to the past for guidance in dealing with present problems