

## Creating and Challenging the Status Quo

### Suggested Citation:

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### Abstract:

Rules that sustain many forms of domination are typically created and imposed by the state. Laws can be used to stabilize power, especially by means of the state's bureaucratic apparatus and by means of its coercive resources for monitoring and enforcing compliance. But domination and effects of rules are never total--people have agency and can resist. In this activity the class will be challenged to find ways to both support and resist a law of the class's choosing. Suggested assessments of student learning are included in the resource.

### Details:

<b>Resource Types</b>	Class Activity
<b>Authors</b>	DaShanne Stokes University of Pittsburgh
<b>Date Published</b>	5/31/2012
<b>Subject Area</b>	Political Sociology
<b>Class Level</b>	College 400
<b>Class Size</b>	Medium
<b>Language</b>	English

### Usage Notes:

My students loved this activity. I found it helpful to distribute flyers describing the activity (using the first two pages of the activity as a hand-out or "flyer") beforehand so that students would be aware of what we were doing and so they could ask questions before starting.

### Learning Goals and Assessments:

<b>Goal</b>	Students will learn to compare and contrast different theories of political sociology concerning rule making, rule breaking, and power.
<b>Assessment</b>	Instructors assess student understanding through in-class discussion during the activity, drawing upon student questions and responses as indicators of understanding and analytical ability, and through essay exam questions. Samples included.
<b>Goal</b>	

**Assessment  
Goal  
Assessment**

**Resource Files:**

ChallengeStatusQuo.docx

## *Creating and Challenging the Status Quo*

As we've seen, rules that sustain many forms of domination are typically created and imposed by the state. Laws can be used to stabilize power, especially by means of the state's bureaucratic apparatus, and by means of its coercive resources for monitoring and enforcing compliance. But domination and effects of rules are never total--people have agency and can resist.

In this activity the class will be challenged to find ways to both support and resist a law of the class's choosing.

The class will be divided into two groups (the "U.S. Federal Government," and "the U.S. citizens" or general populace). Within this larger division students are broken into smaller sub-groups of five or six people so as to facilitate active discussion. This may result in several sub-groups operating separately as the "Federal Government" or as the "citizens."

Once everyone is broken up into groups, the class will be invited to suggest a number of laws, serious or whimsical, which will be voted upon for use in the activity. The law with the most votes will be used in the activity. Once the law has been voted upon and symbolically "ratified," the Federal Government will be charged to find ways to support and enforce the law, and the citizens will be charged with finding ways to challenge and possibly overturn the law. Both the federal government and the citizens must draw upon theories and concepts presented in our class readings and discussions to make build their cases or strategies.

### *The Federal Government*

For purposes of this activity, you are the U.S. Federal Government. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to draw upon the reading for this week and to conceive of ways to support and enforce the law we've voted upon in class. You might think of many things in this goal, such as how to make the law appear legitimate, how to monitor compliance with the law, punishments to impose against those breaking the law, the potential uses of police and/or military, how to garner public support for the law, how to insulate your government from influence from average citizens, use of the courts to create legal precedent for the law, what resources you will need to ensure or carry out enforcement, etc. As a government, you may draw upon existing laws and practices to ensure compliance, or you may create additional new laws or new branches of the government, etc., to further your goal, even if they are quirky or whimsical (Please feel free to have some fun with this!)

### *The Citizens*

For purposes of this activity, you are the people of the United States. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to draw upon the reading for this week and to conceive of a means to challenge (and, if possible, overturn) the law being enforced by the U.S. Federal Government. You might think of many things to assist you in this goal, such as how to make the law appear illegitimate, how to evade compliance with the law, how to survive or evade punishments for non-compliance with the law, the potential uses of protests and social movements, what resources you will need to get the law changed, how you might go about getting the law changed, use of the courts, how the federal government depends on you for its existence and how you might draw upon this dependency to get the law overturned, how you might appeal to sympathetic and influential members of the government to further your cause, etc. As citizens you may draw upon existing laws and practices, such as those outlined in the article, to further your goal, or you may create new ones, even if they are quirky or whimsical (Please feel free to have some fun with this!)

### *The Playing Field*

On Friday I will ask representatives from groups comprising the “Federal Government” to present what they’ve come up with. The “Citizens” will then be invited to respond, presenting how they would challenge the status quo and overturn the law. The floor will then be opened to allow groups to go back and forth with how they would respond to the other’s actions to variously support and enforce the law or to challenge and overturn the law.

Each group is expected to draw explicitly upon the reading for this week, using terms and ideas from the article to support their goals and to respond to the other groups.

This is meant to be a fun activity to help illustrate many of the dynamics described in the reading for the week.

## NOTES ON USE:

This class activity is meant to center around an interactive back and forth dialog between the students and the instructor, who serves as a facilitator, guide, and mediator. This is meant to illustrate material from the assigned readings (see article below by Piven and Cloward, for example), notably how laws may be used to create and stabilize power (e.g., how laws may be framed to appear legitimate, how laws are enforced, how politicians might garner public support for a law, etc.) as well as how laws can be challenged or changed (e.g., how laws may be framed so as to appear illegitimate, how citizens may evade law enforcement, how citizens might build support to change a law, etc.).

A simple way of generating the back and forth dialog envisioned for this activity is for the instructor to ask representatives from groups comprising the “Federal Government” to briefly present what they’ve come up with in response to one of the factors mentioned above and presented to their group (e.g., how they would make the law appear legitimate) and to then invite the “Citizens” to respond (e.g., how they would make the law appear illegitimate). The instructor may then walk students through each additional factor in turn (e.g., how to monitor compliance with the law/how to evade compliance, punishments to impose against those breaking the law/ how to survive or evade punishments for non-compliance with the law, etc.). In this it helps for the instructor to make brief notes about what the students came up with on a chalkboard or on an overhead transparency so that everyone can see.

Note that the description above is what may be called the “nature” of the discussion or dialog, i.e., to explore and illustrate, drawing upon student responses and the assigned reading, how laws can be used to create and stabilize power (as described above and as presented in the reading used to support this activity). Discussion/dialog questions towards this end that the instructor may pose and use also for assessment of student learning are illustrated in the “ASSESSMENT: SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS” section below.

For purposes of this in-class activity, I find assigning students to read and draw upon the following textbook chapter very useful:

Piven, Frances F. and Richard A. Cloward. 2005. “Rule Making, Rule Breaking, and Power.” Pp. 33-53 in *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*, edited by T. Janoski, R. R. Alford, A. M. Hicks, and M. A. Schwartz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Note: This reading above by Piven and Cloward may be used to support this activity. Also note that the first two pages of the activity (beginning with the title, “Creating and Challenging the Status Quo,” and ending with the section on “The Playing Field”) are intended to be copied and distributed to students as a hand-out or “flyer” for their use in this activity.

## ASSESSMENT: SAMPLE DISCUSSION/DIALOG QUESTIONS

Here is an illustrative sample of discussion/dialog questions that instructors may use to generate discussion and to assess student learning. Student responses reflect their learning and understanding of the assigned material:

“How would your group go about making this law appear legitimate / illegitimate?”

--This question challenges students to think about the ways that politicians may garner support for a law and conversely how citizens may make a law appear illegitimate, such as through their framing of the law, shaping public opinion through the media and ads, publishing op-eds about the law from their particular point of view, etc.

“How would your group go about monitoring compliance with this law / evading compliance with this law?”

--This question challenges students to think about how to monitor compliance with a law as well as how compliance may be evaded. Compliance, for example, can be monitored through police or military personnel, surveillance, etc., and compliance can be evaded by refusing to obey, by various means of protest, by evading police capture, etc.

“What resources you will need to ensure or carry out enforcement / what resources you will need to get the law changed?”

--This question challenges students to think about the nature and importance of resources in rule making and rule breaking as well as how resources (e.g., material goods, financial resources, etc.) can be mobilized to support or oppose a law (as described in the reading by Piven and Cloward, for example).

## ASSESSMENT: SAMPLE ESSAY EXAM QUESTIONS

Here is an illustrative sample of additional in-class or take-home essay exam questions useful for assessing student learning and critical thinking in connection to this activity:

Sample Question One:

Recently the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy banning gays, lesbians, and bisexuals from serving openly in the U.S. military was repealed. Drawing on our class activity as well as the reading by Piven and Cloward, please discuss how the federal government may have been able to originally pass this law and how citizens may have helped to have it repealed.

Sample Question Two:

During our in-class activity on “Creating and Challenging the Status Quo” the class symbolically created a law which was supported by students on the side of the “Federal Government” and was opposed by students on the side of the “Citizens.” Drawing on our discussion during this activity, please write a short essay of three to five pages (double-spaced) discussing which side you personally feel made a better argument and why.