Elected officials, your representation at the local, state, and national level of government, have numerous considerations to take into account when they make policy decisions for their *constituents*, that is, the people they represent. In a representative democracy, such as our constitutional republic, elected officials are tasked with not only making the best decisions on how to address issues for their community, their state, or the nation as a whole, but voting in a way that best represents the people that elected them to office in the first place.

Most challenges faced by a community, state, or the nation are resolved by policies aimed at addressing the perceived issue. A policy is a rule, law, or course of action, set by a government, outlining how an issue will be addressed. When the government decides there is a problem that needs addressing, they turn to public policy solutions to try and resolve the problem. This can mean creating a new policy, changing or eliminating an existing one, or changing how an existing policy is enforced. Of course, a lack of policy is a decision too: a decision to not deal with the perceived issue. Local, state, and national leaders set policies that affect every aspect of our lives: defense, land use and conservation, education, economic growth, crime, helping individuals who are struggling or in need, transportation and other infrastructure, healthcare, the environment, and many more.

When elected officials are sworn into national offices, they take an oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution. For state officials, their oath includes an affirmation to uphold both the U.S. Constitution and the state constitution. When making policy decisions, these important documents play a crucial role. Elected officials must first determine if they have the authority to even address a particular public issue given the functions and powers they are granted through the respective constitutions. They spend time researching and evaluating existing laws, past precedents, and judicial decisions related to the public issue at hand. Then, they must return to the Constitution when proposing public policy solutions to ensure alignment. For state elected officials, they must remember Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, commonly referred to as the Supremacy Clause, in that the U.S. Constitution and national laws take precedence over state laws and state constitutions.

Analyzing the constitutional and legal side of public policy decision-making is a tough job for elected officials. But that is not the only factor that goes into their final decision. There are numerous additional outside influences encouraging them to make their decision a certain way. The **public opinion** of the citizens they represent is a huge influence. Polling and interactions with their constituents allow representatives to gauge public opinion on various issues. Another influence are **interest groups**- a group of people or companies who are concerned with a particular issue and who try to influence legislators to act in their favor. Interest groups can leverage the size of their group to try and sway elected officials towards one outcome or another. Sometimes interest groups hire **lobbyists** to represent them, and try to convince politicians why their preferences are the right one. Yet another influence is the **media**, which can both reflect and shape public opinion. Of course, you cannot please everyone all the time, and often, elected officials have to make difficult decisions knowing some group or another might not be happy with the outcome- and may feel so strongly about it that they vote against that official at the next election. Overall, there are a lot of factors to take into consideration and try to balance.