



Manufactured Consensus

Persuasion & Influence · Tier 3 · Component 2 — instructor overview

Grades: 11–12 **Time:** ~50 min (flexible) **Format:** whole-class reading, then individual or pairs

Social proof, industrialized. This component teaches students how the *appearance* of broad, spontaneous agreement is engineered — astroturfing, bots, coordinated messaging, funded front groups — and how to distinguish it from genuine grassroots consensus.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Define astroturfing and contrast it with an authentic grassroots movement.
- Identify the tells of manufactured consensus: uniform language, coordinated timing, thin histories, concealed funding.
- Explain the self-reinforcing loop by which a fake majority recruits a real one.
- Investigate who funds and coordinates an apparent movement.

WHY IT MATTERS

A funded campaign can now simulate a movement convincingly, and a manufactured majority reshapes what feels normal, sayable, and true. For citizens about to enter public life, telling a real consensus from a purchased one is foundational — it underlies how they'll read polling, petitions, product reviews, and political momentum.

The running example, **Citizens for Affordable Energy**, is a front group: grassroots in costume, funded by the industry it defends. It lets students practice "follow the money and the timing" on a realistic case.

PACING

SEGMENT	TIME	WHAT HAPPENS
Reading	12 min	Read the Student pages; the Citizens example.
Grassroots or astroturf	12–15 min	Activity Part A in pairs.
Follow the money	12 min	Activity Parts B–C.
Debrief	10 min	Discussion prompts (Instructor p. 4).

MATERIALS

The 4 Student pages per student or pair. Optional: a real "citizens' group" site to investigate together.



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The mechanism in depth — part 1 of 2

Astroturfing is the manufacture of fake grassroots support: a coordinated, usually funded effort dressed as spontaneous public opinion. (The name is a joke — fake grass.) It exploits the same instincts as ordinary social proof, but at industrial scale and with intent. The running example is **Citizens for Affordable Energy**, a slick "grassroots coalition" that opposes a clean-energy rule and is quietly financed by the utilities the rule would regulate.

WHY THE APPEARANCE IS ENOUGH

We copy the apparent majority (bandwagon effect) and treat wide agreement as evidence of correctness (consensus-as-truth). Once we believe "everyone thinks this," we further assume others agree more than they actually do (false-consensus assumption). These combine into a loop: a manufactured majority makes real people join and makes critics fall silent, so the fake consensus bootstraps itself toward a real one. The point of Citizens for Affordable Energy is not to win an argument — it's to make opposition to the rule *look* like the popular, common-sense position, so that lawmakers and neighbors quietly assume that's where the public already is.

THE TELLS

Uniformity: many accounts, near-identical phrasing and talking points. **Timing:** a "spontaneous" surge that materializes all at once, on cue. **Thin histories:** new or anonymous accounts, profiles with no life outside the campaign. **Concealed funding:** a "citizens' group" whose money traces back to the interest it serves. Genuine movements are messy, varied, sustained over time, and traceable to real people who existed before the issue did.



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The mechanism in depth — part 2 of 2

APPLYING IT TO CITIZENS FOR AFFORDABLE ENERGY

Run the tells against the front group and it comes apart. Its social posts share suspiciously uniform language ("hardworking families can't afford this energy tax") across accounts that were created the same month. Its "membership surge" coincides exactly with the bill's introduction. Its website lists no local chapters, no named organizers with histories, no meeting minutes — only a donate button and a media kit. And a little digging into filings shows the funding flows from a utility trade association. Every marker of authenticity is missing; every marker of a campaign is present.

Crucially, the group may make some true points — front groups often do. The distortion isn't necessarily in the claims; it's in the *false impression of who holds them*. "Ordinary citizens spontaneously oppose this" is the actual message, and that message is manufactured even if some argument attached to it is sound.

THE QUESTION THAT CUTS THROUGH

Who is "everyone," and how did they get here? A real majority is many people reaching a view independently, over time. A manufactured one is a few actors making a little look like a lot. Follow the money and the timing: authentic movements have a history and diverse, traceable people; manufactured ones have funding and coordination.

ONE LINE TO CARRY

Volume isn't consensus. When agreement is being shown to you as proof, ask who is amplifying it and who benefits from you believing it's already the majority.



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Discussion guide — modular; assemble to fit your period

These blocks are timed so you can build a lesson from them: a single period, or a full unit day. Run the activity with an opener before and a debrief after — pick what fits.

TIME BUDGET — MIX AND MATCH

BLOCK	TIME	USE
Opener (before)	5–8 min	Pick one, below.
Activity	20–25 min	The student pages.
Debrief (after)	~5 min each	Pick 1–4 prompts.
Close	3 min	The takeaway.

Single period: opener + activity + one debrief + close. **Full lesson:** opener + activity + two or three debriefs + an extension.

BEFORE — THE OPENER (PICK ONE · 5–8 MIN)

FORMAT: think-pair-share or a quick hands-up. GOAL: surface what students already notice and pose the question. END RESULT: every student has committed to a prediction or named a real example you can return to in the debrief.

- **Predict.** Describe "Citizens for Affordable Energy" — slick, sudden, funded by the industry it defends. Ask: real or manufactured? Hold the read; revisit after the tells.
- **From their world.** Ask for one online "movement" or trend they've seen; keep two to interrogate in the debrief.

THE ACTIVITY (BUDGET 20–25 MIN)

CONCRETE GOAL — STUDENTS CAN: distinguish a genuine grassroots movement from an astroturf one using uniformity, timing, histories, and funding.

AFTER — THE DEBRIEF (PICK 1–4 · ~5 MIN EACH)

FORMAT: whole-class; call on the examples students generated in the opener and activity. END RESULT: students can state the takeaway in their own words and back it with one concrete example from their own life or the activity.

- What separates a real grassroots movement from an astroturf one?
- Why does making something look popular actually make it more popular?
- How can a group be "manufactured consensus" even if some of its claims are true?
- Take one from the board: what evidence points to genuine or manufactured?

CLOSE (3 MIN)

Have a few students state the takeaway in their own words: **A real majority forms independently. A manufactured one is amplified. Follow the money and the timing.**



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Leading the discussion — pacing, redirects, and warm-ups

The previous page is the plan; this page is for running it. Budget the period from the total below, and keep the redirect moves handy — most discussions falter in one of these four ways.

DOES IT FIT THE PERIOD?

ONE PERIOD (~45–50 MIN): opener 6 + activity 20–25 + one debrief 5 + close 3 = **34–39 min.** BLOCK (~90 MIN): add two more debriefs and a differentiation extension from the facilitation page.

WHEN DISCUSSION STALLS OR DERAILS

IF...	MOVE
Silence, or “I don’t know”	Shrink the question: “Just name the first thing you noticed.” Give 30 seconds of silent think-time, then call on a pair, not an individual.
One or two voices dominate	“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t gone yet.” Run it as think-pair-share first, so every student has an answer ready to offer.
It turns personal or heated	Move the trial from the person to the message: “What in the text makes you say that?” Keep the claim on trial, never the classmate.
Answers stay on the surface	Push for evidence: “Where exactly — quote the line.” Then “What would change your mind?” to surface the reasoning underneath.

WARM-UP BANK (SWAP IN FOR ANY OPENER)

Interchangeable with the opener on the previous page. Vary them across a unit so the hook stays fresh.

- **Two-minute hunt.** Find one real example of today’s move on your phone right now; keep the best one for the debrief.
- **Steelman it.** What’s the most honest reason someone would use this technique? Persuasion isn’t always dishonest — name the legitimate version first.
- **Rate and defend.** Put one message on the board; everyone rates it 1–5 for how persuasive, then defends the spread of answers.
- **Odd one out.** Three short examples, one isn’t the move — which, and how can you tell?



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Facilitation, anticipated moves & answer key

ANTICIPATED STUDENT RESPONSES & MISCONCEPTIONS

- **"So every group with funding is fake."** No — real organizations raise money too. The tell is *concealed* funding by the exact interest that benefits, plus the other markers, not funding alone.
- **"If lots of people are saying it, it's real."** Distinguish many *independent* people from many *coordinated* accounts. Volume is easy to manufacture; independence is not.
- **"Astroturf groups must be lying."** Often they make true points — the manufactured part is the impression of *who* holds the view. Separate the claim from the fake grassroots wrapper.
- **Conspiracy overreach.** Some students will see astroturf everywhere. Anchor to evidence: uniformity, timing, histories, funding — not vibes.

DIFFERENTIATION & EXTENSIONS

Support: provide the four tells as an investigation checklist. **Stretch:** students research a real front group or coordinated campaign and document the evidence trail; or examine how platforms detect inauthentic coordinated behavior. **Cross-curricular:** civics and lobbying; digital forensics / OSINT basics.

ANSWER KEY — ACTIVITY

ITEM	SAMPLE RESPONSE
A1 5,000 near-identical posts in an hour	<i>Astroturf — uniform language, coordinated timing.</i>
A2 named local cleanup, growing over years	<i>Grassroots — messy, traceable, independent.</i>
A3 "concerned citizens" funded by the firm it defends	<i>Astroturf — follow the money.</i>
A4 week-old anonymous accounts pushing one hashtag	<i>Astroturf — thin histories, coordination.</i>
B (Parents for Safe Snacks)	<i>Investigate funding source and whether members/organizers are real and pre-existing.</i>



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When a movement is actually an operation

A polished campaign appears online: **Citizens for Affordable Energy**, "a grassroots coalition of hardworking families" fighting a new clean-energy rule. Thousands of posts, a sleek site, a groundswell of ordinary people who just want lower bills. Except the accounts were all made last month, they use suspiciously identical wording, the "surge" started the day the bill was introduced, and the funding — if you dig — traces back to the utilities the rule would regulate. It's not a movement. It's an operation wearing a movement's clothes.

"Everyone agrees" is one of the most powerful forces in persuasion — so people manufacture it. **Astrourfing** (the name mocks fake grass) is coordinated, funded persuasion disguised as spontaneous public opinion. It works because a majority, real or fake, changes what feels true, normal, and safe to say.

WHY THE FAKE VERSION WORKS

We copy the apparent majority and treat wide agreement as proof. Once something *looks* like the popular view, real people join it and critics go quiet — so a manufactured majority can bootstrap itself into a real one. That's the actual goal of Citizens for Affordable Energy: not to win a debate, but to make opposing the rule *look* like where the public already is, so lawmakers and neighbors assume it and fall in line.

THE TELLS

Uniformity: tons of accounts using the exact same phrases. **Timing:** a "spontaneous" wave that all arrives at once, right on cue. **Thin histories:** brand-new or anonymous accounts with no life outside this one campaign. **Concealed funding:** a "citizens' group" quietly paid for by whoever benefits. Real movements are messy, spread over time, full of named people who existed before the issue did.



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Following the money — and the question that catches it

RUNNING THE TELLS ON CITIZENS FOR AFFORDABLE ENERGY

Put the group under the four tests and it falls apart. The posts repeat oddly identical lines — "hardworking families can't afford this energy tax" — across accounts created the same month. The "membership surge" lines up precisely with the bill's introduction. The website has no local chapters, no named organizers with real histories, no record of anything happening — just a donate button and a press kit. And the money, traced through public filings, comes from a utility trade group. Every sign of a real movement is missing; every sign of a campaign is there.

One subtlety worth holding: the group might make some true points — front groups usually do. The lie isn't necessarily in the arguments. It's in the *impression of who holds them*. "Ordinary people spontaneously believe this" is the real message, and that's manufactured even when an attached argument is fair. So don't just evaluate the claim — evaluate the crowd being presented as proof of it.

THE QUESTION THAT CUTS THROUGH

You don't have to investigate everything. Ask: **who is "everyone," and how did they get here?** A real majority is many people arriving at a view independently, over time. A manufactured one is a few actors making a little look like a lot. Follow the money and follow the timing — authentic movements have a history and diverse, traceable people; manufactured ones have funding and coordination.

THE ONE LINE

Volume isn't consensus. When agreement is handed to you as proof, ask who is amplifying it, when it appeared, and who benefits from you believing it's already the majority.



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Name: _____ Date: _____

The tells: Uniform language · Coordinated timing · Thin/anonymous accounts · Concealed funding

PART A — GRASSROOTS OR ASTROTURF?

Mark each **G** or **A**, and name the tell.

WHAT YOU OBSERVE	G / A · TELL
1. 5,000 near-identical posts appear within one hour.	
2. A local cleanup with named organizers, growing over two years.	
3. A "concerned citizens" site funded by the company it defends.	
4. Hundreds of week-old anonymous accounts pushing one hashtag.	

PART B — FOLLOW THE MONEY

You find a slick "Parents for Safe Snacks" campaign. List two things you'd investigate to learn whether it's genuine.

**PART C — DESIGN & DETECT**

Imagine you were hired to astroturf support for a new mall. Describe two moves you'd make — then, next to each, the method that would expose it.

ASTROTURF MOVE	HOW IT GETS CAUGHT
1.	
2.	

PART D — CLAIM VS. CROWD

Citizens for Affordable Energy argues the rule will raise bills — and suppose that's partly true. Explain why the group can still be "manufactured consensus" even if some of its claims are accurate.

PART E — IN THE WILD

Find one online "movement" or trend. What evidence suggests it's genuine, manufactured, or a mix? Point to specific tells.
