

A FILM BY CHRISTI COOPER

YOUTH V GOV

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ARE RISING.
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SEE YOU
IN COURT.



JOURNEYS IN FILM™
educating for global understanding

YOUTH v GOV

Discussion Guide



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Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality; only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that rubs you the wrong way, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

A Letter from Levi

I'm excited to see that you are engaging with *YOUTH v. GOV* and hope that using this guide will help you better understand climate change and why it matters so much to young people like me. Maybe this will inspire you to take action on things that are important to you.

Many people think that climate change is an adult problem that kids and youth either don't understand or can't affect, but that is not true at all. While climate change is a complex issue, it affects everyone on the planet, so it is very important to learn about. Throughout the course of history, youth have fought for what is important to them by coming together, taking action, and getting adults to lend their support. Climate change disproportionately affects young people because we will see more negative effects throughout our lifetimes than previous generations. That means it is even more important that we connect with one another to fight for our future and for future generations.



For over 50 years, the government has known about climate change. Their actions have violated our constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources. Scientists agree that climate change is catastrophic and will eventually get to the point of no return. It affects everyone in so many ways, including droughts, fires, hurricanes and other extreme weather; flooding and sea level rise; negative effects on health; and social and cultural impacts. You'll see these in the film and learn more about them.

The U.S. government has a long history of supporting the fossil fuel industry. We have developed a reliance on fossil fuels, even though they cause great damage to our planet. Moving away from that reliance is the only way to make lasting change. This is one of the reasons why we chose to go through the court system to ask the courts to recognize and protect our constitutional rights and tell the government to end the reliance on fossil fuels and move to clean energy instead. This is both technically and economically feasible. Despite having the best scientists and legal team on our side, navigating the court system is both time consuming and challenging, with lots of ups and downs along the way.

In my lifetime, I have seen the effects of climate change, such as sea level rise, flooding, and damage to my local beaches. I've had to evacuate my home due to hurricanes. We even chose to move off the island I grew up on to try and escape some of these impacts. My friends in the film have also experienced different effects of climate change as have so many people around the world. Maybe climate change has even affected your own life and the lives of people in your community.

Adults don't always listen to kids, but being involved in this case helped me see the importance of speaking up and using my voice. Being educated on what you care about will help you convince others to support you and help build connections. It is important to use your voice to fight for what matters to you. I hope this film and guide help empower you to take action.

Levi
@connectwithlevi



Film Credits

YOUTH v GOV has screened at over 50 film festivals worldwide and is a winner of 24 audience and jury awards. Congratulations to the wonderful team behind this powerful film.

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An Introduction to the Film

Any student who has taken a course on United States history has heard Thomas Jefferson's words about our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What makes them inalienable? Jefferson believed they are part of our very nature as human beings. Today, we are facing a climate crisis that scientists and government leaders have known was coming for a long time; it is only now, in an age of growing and more frequent wildfires, droughts, stronger hurricanes, and rising sea level, that many Americans and others have become aware of the dangers. Some are still in denial, but their numbers are inevitably shrinking as conditions worsen.

The Constitution of the United States includes the Bill of Rights and other amendments that delineate and protect the rights of citizens. If citizens perceive that their rights are being violated by the government, they have the ability to bring a constitutional case to the courts to protect those rights, suing local, state, or even the federal government if necessary, alleging that their constitutionally protected rights are threatened or abridged. (The well-known case of *Brown v. Board of Education* is an example.) *Juliana v. United States* is the first constitutional case pertaining to climate change to win a favorable ruling, and it was brought by a group of youths who contend that the Constitution guarantees an unenumerated fundamental right to a "stable climate system."

Young people are particularly aware of this accelerating emergency, both because they are disproportionately harmed by the climate crisis and because the changes in climate will become ever more pronounced in their lifetimes. Young people around the world have stepped forward to demand that adults — from government leaders to oil and gas company executives — stop their actions that make the climate crisis worse. We see images of Greta Thunberg and others of her generation leading protests

and speaking out. And even before this youth climate movement began, a group of 21 youths decided to use the law to protect their constitutional rights, in essence challenging the ways that the U.S. federal government has supported policies that, while perhaps useful to certain industries like fossil fuels in the short term, spell climate disaster for all. Coming from 10 different states around the country and representing different ethnicities, geographical diversity, and social groups, these young people initiated a lawsuit with the help of the nonprofit legal organization Our Children's Trust. *Juliana v. United States* was filed in 2015, and in the year 2023, it is still making its way through the court system. Today Our Children's Trust continues to assist young people in U.S. states and in countries around the world who are also trying to stop actions taken by their governments that actively make the climate crisis worse and lead to even further climate degradation.

YOUTH v GOV is a powerful documentary produced by Barrelmaker Productions. The film allows viewers to understand one of the ways that young people are working to take a stand against climate change. Through the film, viewers meet the individual students involved in this important legal case and may increase their understanding about the alarming changes in the environment that are already causing significant harm to young people across the United States and around the world.

Finally, "climate anxiety" is very real. Individuals are suffering from depression and anxiety at alarming rates. Sharing this documentary can help individuals struggling with "climate anxiety" to see that there are known solutions for addressing the climate crisis. The film highlights the reality that anyone can get involved, and this counters the sense of helplessness many feel. The film is one of hope and possibility. Thank you for joining us in deeper exploration of it.

Behind the Lawsuit



YOUTH v GOV, a documentary from Barrelmaker Productions, features the story of the landmark constitutional lawsuit *Juliana v. United States of America*, but there's a non-profit organization that is supporting the youth in this film, as well as many other state cases through the United States and youth-led climate cases around the world.

Our Children's Trust is a non-profit public interest law firm that provides strategic, campaign-based legal services to youth from diverse backgrounds to secure their legal rights to a safe climate. They work to protect the Earth's climate system for present and future generations by representing young people in global legal efforts to secure their binding and enforceable legal rights to a healthy atmosphere and a stable climate, based on the best available science. They are the only public interest law firm dedicated exclusively to this work.

Our Children's Trust supports youth clients to amplify their voices before the judicial branch of government in a highly strategic legal campaign that includes targeted media, education, and public engagement work to support the youths' legal actions.

Their legal work — guided by constitutions, public trust, human rights laws, and the laws of nature — aims to ensure systemic and science-based climate recovery planning and remedies at federal, state, and global levels.¹

1. We know that some communities and groups (like children) suffer the most from the devastating impacts of man-made climate change. Why do you think it's important that the communities most affected take a leadership role in creating solutions? What might happen if these communities are not involved in the process?
2. Around the world, children suffer health consequences from the impacts of climate change, including increased heat stroke, low birth weight and premature births, increased asthma, and pulmonary conditions due to wildfire smoke. Do you think people are more motivated to mitigate the effects of climate change when they learn that children bear the brunt of the harm?

¹ [Our Mission: Our Children's Trust](#)

Government Responsibility



One part of the film is focused on the history of government actions and why these young plaintiffs have a constitutional claim that the government has directly harmed them. The film highlights presidential statements over the past 60 years that speak directly to the importance of safeguarding the environment for future generations, while also demonstrating that, as the plaintiffs claim in their lawsuit, government actions are in direct contradiction to many of those statements. There is a long history of a relationship between the fossil fuel industry and the U.S. government. Some of this is depicted in the film. We saw how the fossil fuel industry intervened to help the government in the case and sought to get the case dismissed. Lobbyists actively seek to influence congressional representatives and the executive branch for continued support for the fossil fuel industry, despite the government's own scientists and those of the fossil fuel industry knowing full well the dangers of greenhouse gasses and the impending climate crisis.

YOUTH v GOV is centered on the 21 young Americans who make up *Juliana v. United States*, the landmark constitutional climate lawsuit. As leaders in the youth climate movement, these plaintiffs represent the diversity of American youth impacted by the climate crisis. They hail from 10 states — Florida, Alaska, Hawaii, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Louisiana, and New York — and they encompass cultural, economic, and geographic diversity. Many come from marginalized communities, serving as beacons of hope for those who do not have a platform to share their own stories. They are Black, Brown, Indigenous, white, and LGBTQIA. Their diversity speaks not only to the impacts of climate change, but to the inclusion required if we are to build a better and more just future together. These young people are activists, students, artists, musicians, and farmers, and their stories are universal. This case follows in the footsteps of other landmark cases, also referenced in the film, in which the Supreme Court has stepped in when the executive branch and legislative branch fail to protect the constitutional rights of citizens.

1. What are the government's constitutional obligations to the people it governs? How is this codified in the Constitution and Bill of Rights?
2. *YOUTH v GOV* chronicles the relationship between the government and the fossil fuel industry. Did it surprise you that both parties have worked so hard to keep this industry afloat, despite the known environmental impacts? Did you realize that science in the area of global warming and climate change was not only shared with the government, but also commissioned by the government, as far back as the 1950s?
3. Which landmark constitutional cases highlighted in the film were you familiar with? Have any of these case outcomes personally impacted you or anyone you know?
4. What role do lobbyists play in the relationship between government and private corporations? Do you think the government should support private industries and corporations?
5. There was a chart featured in the film that showed educational spending, military spending, and fossil fuel subsidies, with educational funding receiving much less than the other two. In your opinion, what is the ideal allocation? What impacts can you imagine if the allocation was different?

Evidence of Harm



In order to have a constitutional claim within the U.S. judicial system, a plaintiff has to be able to prove that they have experienced harm, that the government has created that harm, and that the courts can provide the needed relief. The plaintiffs and the legal team in the film *YOUTH v GOV* have a slate of prominent scientific experts who are willing to testify on their behalf that climate change is not only real (which the government has never disputed), but that it is causing real harm and that it has been created and exacerbated by government actions. The legal team has gathered thousands of pages of documents and evidence over 60 years of government actions that are the basis of their lawsuit — some of which can be seen in the historical timelines in the film.

At different points, plaintiffs reference the National Climate Assessment, the Oregon Climate Assessment, National Academy of Science reports, and various United Nations reports, as well as the testimony of climate experts like Jim Hansen of NASA and Gus Speth, who was the head of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality under the Carter administration. Whistleblowers in the case also provided evidence that the government edited scientific reports and suppressed information.

1. After watching the film, were you convinced that the plaintiffs were actively affected by climate change to the extent that it was infringing on their constitutional right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”
2. What has been, or is projected to be, the impact of climate change in your community? What is the local civic conversation around impending changes in water levels, weather intensity, human migration, and other topics of interest?
3. The risks from climate change are disproportionately higher for those that are already vulnerable, including low-income communities, communities of color, children, and the elderly. Can you identify reasons for this disparity? Consider your region if possible.
4. Many of the plaintiffs also referenced climate change as a threat to their culture or way of life. What evidence did you see of this, if any? Have you felt that climate change affects your culture or the culture of those around you? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. Have you ever been directly affected by a natural disaster or climate-related event, such as a hurricane, flooding, or wildfire? If so, explain the event and the emotional impact on you and those around you.

Climate Justice



Alex, one of the plaintiffs in the film, states, “The government’s actions are inconsistent with our most deeply held values.” In this constitutional lawsuit, the plaintiffs are not asking for money, as is often the case in civil lawsuits, but rather for government action in regard to climate change. Lead attorney Julia Olson states, “Liberty and justice cannot exist if we have a destabilized climate system.” These statements reflect some of the reasons the youth involved in the case have taken this particular legal action. We also see the plaintiffs engaged in various other forms of civic action, including climate marches, activism, and raising awareness through media appearances and the use of social media. The film also touches on the history of civil disobedience with regard to environmental justice, and highlights youth who are committed to having their voices heard.

1. Do you feel that you have a voice in the governing of your community? Do you ever feel stuck in an echo chamber of inaction and complaint? Which issues have motivated you to become engaged? Elaborate.
2. Is it a civic responsibility to participate in the political process? If you believe it is, what are some of the most effective ways to get involved?

3. If climate change is an important topic to you, what are some ways you can participate in supporting climate policy reform at the legislative level? How can you push for action by the executive branch? How could you get involved with the judicial branch to support climate action and protect your rights?

4. Do you feel that the government’s actions reflect your values? Or, like Alex, do you feel that the government’s actions are not in line with your values? If so, how does that make you feel? Have you taken any actions in response to those feelings and beliefs?

5. How do you learn about government actions that are out of line with your values (through a news source, social media, word of mouth, during specific times like election season)?

6. If you are under the age of 18 and cannot vote to have your voice heard in the political process, what do you feel is the best form of action that you can take? Do you feel that you can take judicial action to protect your constitutional rights and your future?

Climate Anxiety



Many of the plaintiffs involved in the case spoke openly about how climate change contributes to their feelings of anxiety and increases their fears. Julia Olson also experiences anxiety related to the realities of climate change. This anxiety is exacerbated by government choices and seems to be triggered by climate events when they happen. Additionally, *Nature* published a landmark survey about young people's climate anxiety. The study revealed that 45 percent of the participants reported feelings about climate change affecting their daily lives, and 65 percent of the participants agreed with the statement that governments are failing young people with their responses (or lack thereof) to climate change.²

Kelsey, one of the plaintiffs, states in the opening of the film: "For a lot of young people right now, life is really scary because we've never seen a moment like this in history." This sentiment is echoed later, as other plaintiffs highlight the reality that one's future is determined by choices that youth did not make for themselves.

1. Can you relate to the feelings of "eco-anxiety" referenced in the survey? If so, what specific factors contribute to your anxiety around climate change?
2. Is there a connection between robust community action and eco-anxiety (in terms of reducing anxiety or increasing it)?
3. Levi mentions that he visits a special tree that "cushions his falls" when he feels low. Julia and her colleagues sing and dance as they prepare for trial to calm their nerves and focus. What activities help you manage concerns, fears, and anxiety?

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02582-8>

Intergenerational and Intersectional Justice



Throughout history, social justice movements have required visionaries and activists. Many of the most meaningful social changes have been sparked by the actions of young people. Today, youth are rising up and demanding change, from gun reform to racial justice to climate justice. While young people around the world are taking to the streets and fighting for their rights, the youth plaintiffs featured in this film are fighting for their futures in our country's highest courts.

YOUTH v GOV challenges viewers to look past their daily concerns to consider how government actions and societal inaction will affect our children, grandchildren, and beyond.

Throughout the film we see not only the young people at the heart of the story who so beautifully articulate the intersectionality of the climate crisis, but also the older generations who have been in this fight for decades: Dr. James Hansen, who first testified before Congress in 1988 about the dangers of greenhouse gasses and the impending environmental catastrophe; Gus Speth, who tried to make policies aimed at addressing the climate crisis a priority during the Carter administration; Nicky Sundt, who has been collecting evidence for decades in her basement, hoping it could all be put to use at some point; and Dr. Michael MacCracken, who worked for decades within the government as a climate scientist and was sounding the alarm bells. The lawsuit is a testimony to the power of these generations coming together for a single cause, and using the power, knowledge, and expertise of their combined wisdom to fight for a better future.

1. What do you love about the natural world? What do you love about the place you call home? If there are things you don't love about the place you live, what would you add or take away to make it a place that supports you and your family's health and happiness?
2. Ask an elder in your family or community about their experiences in nature and how they feel about the environment. How does the landscape today differ from their youth? What sort of natural disasters do they recall experiencing or hearing about? Ask them to recall any public dialogue about environmental issues and how they were framed.
3. The film begins with vignettes of the plaintiffs growing up over time and developing their interests. What are the unique experiences that children of this generation are going through? (Challenge yourself to come up with both positive and negative examples.)
4. How can individuals encourage governments to take actions that are not only focused on acute issues, but also consider the impact of actions on future generations? How can we encourage our communities to value long-term solutions as well? To perhaps be "inconvenienced" now, but invest in our future, because it will benefit our communities long-term?

What Can You Do?

Community Action and Engagement



Young people all over the world are holding their governments accountable with regard to climate change. This film and constitutional lawsuit serve as an example and model of one powerful form of action for addressing this complex and challenging issue. At the end of the film, we see that the ninth circuit court agreed that the plaintiffs indeed experienced harm and they agreed that the government was responsible for causing that harm; however, they did not agree (2–1 decision) that the court could address the issue. The case was returned to the district court (Judge Aiken), where the youth plaintiffs then filed a motion to amend their complaint, seeking for the remedy from the courts to be focused on declaratory relief

rather than injunctive relief. They are asking the courts to simply state that they have a constitutional right to a stable climate system and a livable future. As of April 2023, the *Juliana* case is still very much alive and the plaintiffs are awaiting a ruling from Judge Aiken. A favorable ruling would put them back on path to go to trial.

Despite the ups and downs of this case and the various challenges that the youth plaintiffs experienced, they are still in this fight... as are youth around the world, as depicted in the final scenes of the film, which closes with youth from 20 other countries holding their governments accountable.

1. What is the value of telling this story? How might you frame the court's decision as a step forward? Could this case be used as a model for similar cases?
2. Are there community stakeholders (in your local community or elsewhere) who feel personally or economically threatened by climate action? How can those who might be challenged by shifts in energy policy be supported by a just transition to an economy that is not based on fossil fuels? How might you get them involved in solution-based conversations?
3. Environmental concerns and climate action are often highly visible in politicians' speeches. Why does speech not translate to action more fully and effectively? What do you think explains the disconnect between rhetoric and policy? Do you feel that youth can hold their government accountable, as the film calls us all to do at the end?
4. What methods of civic engagement shown in the film (climate litigation, marches, media appearances, social media posts, musical performances, art) were most inspirational? Why?
5. There are many other ways to support climate justice: education, elevating the voices of impacted communities, holding your representatives and leaders accountable, boycotting, etc. Do any of these options feel viable to you? Are there other ways you would like to be involved in the work of climate justice?
6. Discuss the difference between personal actions that everyone can take to decrease carbon outputs vs. the responsibilities of governments and businesses to make the systemic changes that are needed. In public discourse, where is the responsibility generally placed? On individuals? On communities? On government? On businesses? Where do you think the responsibility should be placed?

Additional Resources

Books

[*They Knew: The US Federal Government's Fifty-Year Role in Causing the Climate Crisis* by James Gustave Speth](#)

(This compelling book offers evidence supporting the *Juliana* plaintiffs' claims, and presents a devastating account of the United States federal government's role in bringing about today's climate crisis. All proceeds from the sale of this book go to Our Children's Trust.)

[*As the World Burns* by Lee van der Voo](#)

(This book, by investigative reporter Lee van der Voo, follows the plight of the young *Juliana* plaintiffs, chronicling their legal battle as their childhoods are consumed by another year of catastrophic climate events.)

Podcasts

[*Drilled: An Update on the Big U.S. Youth Climate Lawsuit*](#)

(This episode features an interview with chief legal counsel for Our Children's Trust, Julia Olson, and discusses why the *Juliana* plaintiffs are bringing their lawsuit based on the best available climate science.)

[*No Ordinary Lawsuit, Episode: They Knew*](#)

(This episode examines what the U.S. government knew — as far back as 1965 — about the potentially catastrophic effects of a fossil fuel-based energy system.)

[*Amicus with Dahlia Lithwick*](#)

(*Slate* podcast about the law and the nine Supreme Court justices that interpret it.)

Climate Change/Environmental Science

American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognizes climate change as a growing threat to mental health (<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/climate-change-and-mental-health-connections>).

[*Ice melt, sea level rise and superstorms: evidence from paleoclimate data, climate modeling, and modern observations that 2°C global warming could be dangerous*](#) by Dr. James Hansen

[*Assessing "Dangerous Climate Change": Required Reduction of Carbon Emissions to Protect Young People, Future Generations and Nature*](#) by Dr. James Hansen

[*Heat stored in the Earth System: where does the energy go?*](#) By Dr. Karina von Schuckmann and 37 others

[*Coral Reef Ecosystems under Climate Change and Ocean Acidification*](#) by Drs. Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, Elvira S. Poloczanska, William Skirving, and Sophie Dove

[*Sea-Level Rise Due to Polar Ice-Sheet Mass Loss During Past Warm Periods*](#) by Drs. Andrea Dutton, Anders Carlson, Antony Long, Glenn Milne, Peter Clark, Robert DeConto, Ben Horton, Stefan Rahmstorf, and Maureen Raymo

[*Palaeoclimate Constraints on the Impact of 2°C Anthropogenic Warming and Beyond*](#) by Dr. Hubertus Fischer and 58 others

[*As Federal Climate-Fighting Tools Are Taken Away, Cities and States Step Up*](#) *New York Times* article by Maggie Astor

Center for Climate and Energy Solutions: State Climate Policy Maps website (<https://www.c2es.org/content/state-climate-policy/>)

How State and Local Governments Are Leading the Way on Climate Policy (<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2019/how-state-and-local-governments-are-leading-way>)

States at Risk (<https://statesatrisk.org/>)

The 50 States in Climate Crisis (<https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/the-50-states-in-climate-crisis/>)

Environmental Protection Agency Climate Indicator Map (<https://tinyurl.com/98xxhx85>)

Young people's climate anxiety revealed in landmark survey. *Nature* article by Tosin Thompson
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02582-8>

Climate Emergency: Feedback Loops (In this series of five short films, learn why natural warming loops have scientists alarmed — and why we have less time than we think.)

Climate of Trust (This film tells the story about the scientists who developed the scientific prescriptions needed for a climate recovery plan, the attorney who figured out how to apply the Public Trust Doctrine to the atmosphere, and one of the attorneys who is supporting these youth in court.)

Student Voice

Alliance for Climate Education
<https://acespace.org/>

Alliance for Climate Education: Youth Action Network
<https://acespace.org/youth-action-network/?ga=2.251832330.2021594211.1661543753-2058451221.1661543753>

Youth for Climate Action (UNICEF)
<https://www.unicef.org/environment-and-climate-change/youth-action>

Fridays for the Future
<https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/activist-speeches/>

Voices of Youth
<https://www.voicesofyouth.org/>

Future Blue Youth Council
<https://bowseat.org/get-involved/alumni/future-blue-youth-council/>

Meet the Youth Plaintiffs
<https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/federal-plaintiffs/>

Crash Course: US Government and Politics
<https://www.youtube.com/c/crashcourse/search?q=ry=government>

Our Children's Trust: State Legal Actions in all 50 States
<https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/state-legal-actions>

Our Children's Trust: Global Legal Actions
<https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/global-legal-actions>

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