

10 Top Websites for Teaching about Issues in the Election Season

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“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be.” —Thomas Jefferson

1. Annenberg Political Fact Check

Website: www.factcheck.org. This non-partisan organization assesses the accuracy of candidates’ information in ads, speeches, and debates.

Question: How can we acquire reliable knowledge about the candidates’ positions and accomplishments?

Activity: Check out the veracity of claims made in ads, speeches, and debates. Compare to information on candidates’ websites.

2. The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Ads 1952-2008

Website: www.livingroomcandidate.org. Videos of historic ads by year. “Curator’s choice” contains iconic ads, including the “daisy/nuclear war” ad of 1964 and the “laughter at Agnew” ad of 1968. The “For Teachers” section is outstanding and contains eight lessons.

Questions: What makes an ad effective? Is everything we see in political ads accurate?

Activities: Analyze words, music, and visuals of ads on the site to identify their different methods of persuasion. Students use the “Ad Maker” function on the site to edit an ad they select from a past presidential campaign.

3. Comparing Candidates’ Views with Your Own

Use any one of the following three websites (Voter Chooser 2012; Vote Match Quiz; or Candidate Match Game) to compare your positions on issues with those of the candidates.

Website A: www.votechooser.com. Take a 10-question quiz to find out which candidate has views that most closely match your own.

Website B: www.ontheissues.org/Quiz/Quiz2010.asp?quiz=Pres2012. A similar 20-question quiz.

Website C: www.usatoday.com/news/politics/candidate-match-game. A similar 11-question quiz, but this one allows you to assign a weight to each issue.

Questions: Which candidate has taken positions that most closely match your own? About which issues do you care most?

Activities: Take at least two of the quizzes to see which candidate has views that most closely match your own. Compare, contrast, and assess the questions themselves on these three different websites.

4. Daryl Cagle’s Professional Cartoonists Index

Website: www.cagle.com/politicalcartoons. Hundreds of current cartoons on a variety of topics, organized by issue and cartoonist.

Question: What makes a cartoon effective?

Activities:¹ To understand political cartoons, it is necessary to anticipate the issues and people that may be depicted.

- A. Look through the newspaper and brainstorm issues that you think a cartoonist might focus on, about which people may have strong opinions.
- B. Anticipate the people who might appear in cartoons, find a photo of each person, and determine which features of each person cartoonists might emphasize or caricature.
- C. List concepts that often appear as symbols in cartoons (e.g., America, peace, democracy, death, power, justice, liberty, or greed) and draw your own picture (or symbol) to represent each concept.
- D. Analyze cartoons with your students using the steps below:

- What do you see? Identify setting, people, symbols, words, and actions taking place.
- What is the drawing about? Connect what you see to an issue in the news.
- What is the cartoonist's message about the issue portrayed? Look for evidence in the cartoon of how the cartoonist feels about the issue.
- What is your opinion on the issue? Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's position?

E. Draw your own political cartoon, using the questions below to guide your thinking:

- What is your topic/issue? (jobs, the war, immigration, the housing market, climate change, etc.)
- What is your opinion/ position on the topic/issue?
- Who are the people you want to portray?
- Where will the scene take place? (It can be a fanciful place.)
- What symbols can you use to represent the issues and/or concepts?

5. National Priorities Project – Federal Budget Trade-Offs

Website: nationalpriorities.org/en/interactive-data/trade-offs. What could your federal tax dollars provide in your own municipality if these dollars were devoted to various purposes? At this interactive website, you enter data about your own location, and then compare programs in the federal budget with each other: For example, after entering location information and choosing from various programs, we obtained this result: “Taxpayers in Maryland’s 6th Congressional District will pay \$1.4 billion for Enacted Department of Defense for FY2012. For the same amount of money, the following could

be provided: 175,747 Head Start Slots for Children for One Year.”

Question: How should we allocate resources between domestic and military spending?

Activity: Watch the animated 3-minute video at www.truemajority.org/oreos, where Ben Cohen (of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream) uses Oreos to show how much the U.S. spends on the military vs. social programs. Students can discuss how they think U.S. federal spending should be allocated.

6. New York Times - Budget Puzzle: You Fix the Budget

Website: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/13/weekinreview/deficits-graphic.html. In this interactive site, you’re in charge of the nation’s finances. Decide how to allocate dollars with respect to specific domestic and defense programs, how to deal with the deficit, and the extent to which tax increases will be part of the solution.

Question: What combination of taxes and spending will result in the most effective budget for the American people and the U.S. economy?

Activity: Select the options in the on-line activity that will address America’s budget shortfalls. Students will recognize that closing deficits requires hard choices, including cutting programs and/or raising revenue.

7. U.S. Presidential Election Results: Popular and Electoral College Data, 1789–2008

Website: uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS. This interactive site shows historical election results by year and state. Popular and electoral votes through U.S. history are listed in a chart and on a map. This unique resource, originally hosted at MIT, is now hosted and maintained by its creator, David Leip.

Questions: How is it possible to win the popular vote and not assume the presidency? What are the pros and cons of the electoral system? (See Leip’s discussion of the debate.) Should the Electoral College be kept or abolished?

What would it take to abolish it? How likely a prospect is it that the Electoral College will be abolished?

Activity: Because the baseball World Series occurs in October, a sports analogy may be helpful. The Electoral College is a winner-take-all system. The chart on **HANDOUT A** shows that you can score more runs overall in the playoffs [popular votes], but unless you win each game [electoral votes], you don’t win the series. But the analogy is not perfect: How is the World Series process different from the Electoral College process? (Hint: States are not pitted against each other sequentially in a presidential election.)

8. Pros and Cons of Controversial Issues

Website: www.procon.org The website lists the candidates’ positions on 61 (at the time of this writing) different issues, A-Z (including particular aspects of the economy, education policy, the environment—and that’s just the E’s!), gathered with the aim of offering a neutral non-partisan comparison. It also includes this information about the minor party candidates. Teachers can select the issues and text that they want to use in a lesson, while avoiding issues that are too complex or developmentally inappropriate.

Question: Which are the most important issues in this election? What data are most important in helping you decide your own stance on issues? Where do the candidates stand on those issues? Do you notice a pattern in the candidates’ stances? Do you notice a pattern in your own stances on the issues?

Activities: The site contains a number of lesson ideas, including having students:

1. Use statements on the site to distinguish between fact and opinion.
2. List all relevant information and supporting evidence that would have to be provided to them before they would agree that one

BASEBALL PLAYOFFS

During the World Series 2002

Handout A

While the Giants scored the most runs overall, the Angels won the majority of games and, thus, won the series.

	Game One	Game Two	Game Three	Game Four	Game Five	Game Six	Game Seven	Total
Anaheim Angels	3	11	10	3	4	6	4	41
San Francisco Giants	4	10	4	4	16	5	1	44

side's claim has been adequately supported.

- Choose a controversial topic and conduct research on the website to get a range of relevant facts, opinions, and perspectives; write editorials or letters using persuasive arguments and effective reasoning and evidence while anticipating criticisms of their opinions; submit writing to school or local newspapers and/or to elected representatives.
- Give speeches espousing either a pro or con position on an important social issue.

9. U.S. Census Data: Participation by Various Groups

Website: www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2008/tables.html. The U.S. Census provides tables of registration and voting data from the 2008 election. The data are sorted by race, gender, age, class education, income, marital status, and veteran status, etc. For example, the "Voting Hot Report" provides charts of registration and participation in elections from 1996–2008 by age, gender, race, and education.

Questions: What are the characteristics of likely voters? What are the characteristics of people at risk of not voting? What discourages people

from voting? What motivates people to vote?

Activity: Who is At Risk of Not Voting?²

- Have students read the profiles of five citizens (**HANDOUT B**). Ask students to guess whether each person seems likely to vote in the upcoming 2012 presidential elections on Tuesday, November 6, 2012.
- Students work individually, then tally their results on the board, recording yes/no (likely to vote) for each potential voter. Students give reasons for their hypotheses ("I think that Carol is unlikely to vote because ..."). The teacher compiles a list of students' hypotheses about the likely behaviors of eligible voters.
- Students can now compare their hypotheses with data about how people (similar to those described on the handout) behaved on Election Day in 2008.

Students work in pairs to analyze the U.S. Census charts and graphs of voting percentages —showing to what degree demographic groups (sorted by age, race and ethnicity, gender, income, education, marital status, region, etc.) participated in

the 2008 presidential election. A screenshot of one U.S. Census webpage is shown below.

- Students report back as to whether their hypotheses were accurate or not. Students then re-examine the profiles of potential voters and re-evaluate their earlier decisions.
- Conclude the activity with a discussion about how people might be encouraged to vote. What might motivate a person (who is discouraged or apathetic) to take the trouble to get to the voting booth – or to mail an "early voting ballot" ahead of Election Day if they will not be able to make it to the polling place?

10. South Africa Votes: Going the Distance

Website: images.google.com (Search on the phrase "South Africa voting lines.") Stunning photos of Black South Africans waiting in long lines to vote in 1994, when they were first legally allowed to vote for president. Some waited for seven hours or more in these lines.

Questions: Why do people in some countries stand on line for seven hours to cast their vote, while a high proportion of U.S. citizens can't be

Who is Likely to Vote? Who is At Risk of Not Voting?

YES = Likely to show up at the polling place on Election Day.
NO = Likely to be at risk of failing to show up at the polling place on Election Day.

Sue is 19 years old. She works as an electrician and lives in Alabama. She has never been to college and is not planning to attend. She does not belong to a trade union. Yes No

Carlos is a lawyer, 52 years old. His family came from Mexico three generations ago. He is a family man and is interested in community affairs. He has four children and owns his own home. Yes No

Martha is an unemployed waitress who did not finish high school. She is 22 years old and lives at home with her parents. Yes No

Charlie is 48 years old and is African American. He lives in Ohio, where he works as a carpenter and has held the same job for the past 25 years. Yes No

Sagar is a teacher in California. He is 39 years old and is active in local PTA meetings. He is working on his master's degree in the evenings. Yes No

bothered to vote? How difficult were struggles for suffrage in America? (For African Americans, for women, and for people of Asian descent?)

Activities: People around the world have struggled and even died for the right to vote. Yet today, some people don't vote out of apathy, or because they believe their vote "won't change anything."

1. Students can read historical fiction about people who fought for the right to vote, including *The Day GoGo Went to Vote* by Elinor Batezat Sisulu. In this multiple-award-winning book, a little girl accompanies Gogo, her hundred-year-old great-grandmother, as she goes to cast a ballot for the first time in her life in South Africa. Though housebound, the great-grandmother is determined to vote and does so with a little help from her community. Examine photos

of the voting lines for this election. Discuss the importance of voting to the previously disenfranchised.

2. Read biographies and other non-fiction sources about struggles for suffrage in the United States, including the disparity between the granting of the constitutional right to vote for African Americans and the actual ability to exercise that right.
3. Examine the online timeline of voting rights in American history at www.fairvote.org/righttovote/timeline.htm to select what you think are the 8 most important advances in voting rights to research, illustrate, act out, etc.
4. Analyze and then draw cartoons about voter apathy, and things that might help overcome apathy.
5. Research current voting rights issues, including the "purging of voter rosters" in Florida, which

was recently halted by a court.

6. Have students make buttons and bumper stickers for "get registered" and "get-out-the-vote" efforts. 🌐

Notes

1. Activities associated with websites numbers 4 and 9 are adapted from Andrea S. Libresco, Jeannette Balantic, and Jonie C. Kipling, *Every Book is a Social Studies Book: How to Meet Standards K-6* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011).
2. Activity adapted from a lesson plan by Professor Lynn O'Brien, Brown University.

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