

Teaching About Elections During a Presidential Election Year

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What is an “election”?

It’s when grown-ups go to school and vote for someone to be president.

What do you do when you “vote”?

You pick someone, you say, “I want this person to be the boss of everybody.”

Like many seven-year-olds, Sheila has some understanding of what voting is, of its role in an election and of what the role of the elected person will be. Such political understandings develop early.¹ Noted child psychiatrist Robert Coles wrote, “The attitude that children take toward political authority, toward those who rule them, possess power over them, is but one element in their developing lives ... a political inclination has a ‘developmental history.’”²

Coles’ observation that young children have a great interest in the office and in the person who is president of the United States is affirmed by most studies on the topic. Young students tend to know the name of the current president and some of the things he does. To the young, the president is a fascinating and powerful person who is believed to have super powers to get things done. Educators Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman reported that K-3 students described the president as doing difficult work for many hours each day.³ Perhaps it is not surprising that some young students, who value spending time with their families, indicated that they would not want to be president, explaining that the president has little time to spend with his family.

The following activities introduce young learners to some of the main facets of a national election. The activities are designed to be usable in a range of elementary grades. Teachers should take care that classroom activities are nonpartisan—and are perceived that way by students, parents, and the principal. *Modifications for using an activity with students in the earliest grades (K-3) are denoted in italics.*

What is an Opinion Survey?

Conduct a simple class opinion survey. For example, ask children to name their favorite color. Use the findings to determine the most popular colors among students in this classroom. Discuss the definition of a survey as “asking a few people their opinion on a topic.”

Have students conduct a simple opinion survey and discuss the results. Devise a form to be used by the students to collect opinions. Include a list of traits desired in a

President, e.g., honest, smart, loyal, rich, hardworking, wise, friendly, etc. Appropriate questions could then include:

- What kind of a person should be president of the United States?
- What does the president do?
- What are the most important problems facing our next president?
- Where do voters obtain information about the candidates?
- Where do adults go to vote?

These questions foreshadow topics discussed in the activities below.

With regard to desirable character traits, students can help tally the survey results on chart paper. Ask students to suggest reasons that might explain the responses they got.

(K-3) Suggested modifications: Practice taking surveys in the classroom using age-appropriate questions. Relinquish to students the record-keeping aspect of the survey.

What is Democracy?

Ask the children what they think is meant by the term “democracy.” Help them conclude that, in our democracy, people have a say in what the rules will be. Important decisions are made by groups of people who vote.

Tell the students that they are going to follow majority rule in everything they do for one morning. Students must discuss what they think they should do before they vote on any activity. Once the vote is taken, however, the majority’s decision is binding on everyone.

After lunch, ask the students to examine the group’s decisions. Discuss questions such as:

- Did you like this experiment? How did you feel about the decisions that were made?
- How did students feel if they were not a part of the majority opinion?
- Did the students who were not in the majority try harder to influence the group before the next vote?
- Can you disagree with the majority and still be a part of the class?
- Did the majority always make the best choice? (If they were to vote again, would they make the same decisions?)

Now refine the definition of the term “democracy.” It’s not simply “majority rule”—that could just be rule by the mob. In a democracy, the basic rights of all people are protected by law. People who hold a minority opinion still have their rights. Also, in a healthy democracy, citizens learn about the issues before they vote. They cast an informed vote.

(K-3) Shorten the experiment in majority rule to one hour. Votes should be tallied and decisions recorded on chart paper. The simplest questions should be used in the discussion.

What is the President’s Job?

Refine the definition of “democracy” a bit further. As citizens, we hire people to work full time to study the issues, solve problems that face our nation, and run the government. We choose these people when we vote in elections.

One of the people we help to choose is the president. His or her job is to make sure that the rules, the laws, are followed.

The president can suggest new laws to Congress, but his or her main job is to run the country using the laws that are already “on the books.” Congress gets to write the laws. Thus, in a democracy, even the president must obey the law.

President Truman had a plaque on his desk in the White House that said, “The buck stops here,” to remind him that he had to make the final decisions—even very difficult ones—about how the law would be carried out.

How Do We Learn about the Candidates?

Students brainstorm a list of information sources on a candidate. Help them to include all forms of modern media: newspapers, magazines, television, radio, webpages, and Internet discussion forums such as blogs and listserves. Person-to-person conversations with family, friends, and colleagues or classmates are also a source of information.

Conduct a scavenger hunt to collect samples of presidential campaign information. Students may be divided into teams or work independently to locate the following items as they cover one candidate.

- A newspaper story discussing the candidates’ qualifications or beliefs about an issue.
- A news or talk show in which the candidate is discussed or interviewed.
- One other news source about the candidate such as an editorial or cartoon.

In addition to these news sources, there are items produced and paid for by the campaigns themselves.

- A bumper sticker, sign, button, hat, or similar paraphernalia.

- A form letter from a candidate urging an individual to vote for him or provide financial support.
- A newspaper advertisement or a paid television or radio spot about the candidate. (Document the source, day, and time for electronic media.)

(K-3) Ask students to simply count the number of times a particular candidate appears on a television news report or is mentioned on a page of a newspaper.

What Makes a Good Slogan?

Older students can collect samples of statements made by the candidates. You could assign each student to a specific candidate and medium (candidate Obama on the radio; candidate McCain on the television; etc.). The student can then write down or “capture” a statement made by a candidate.⁴

Examine the collection to identify ways campaign organizers and media inform voters about the candidate’s views and qualifications.

- What do you think are the most effective methods? Why?
- Among the messages that campaigns pay for, which do you believe are most (or least) least expensive?

Examine the collected materials for slogans. What makes a good slogan? Try composing a slogan for a candidate, or research slogans used during the election campaign of students’ favorite presidents.

Who are the Candidates?

Randomly divide the class into two groups, one for each major candidate for president. Each group prepares a scrapbook or fact sheet on its candidate, including biographical information about:

- The candidate’s family (spouse, children, parents), interests, hobbies, pets, etc.
- Residence or home state (include a map and mark the location)
- Educational background
- Work and life experiences, including public service
- Special qualifications
- Awards and honors
- Party affiliation
- Reasons for wanting to be president

Students share what they learn with the class using a talk-show format, a campaign ad, or other creative presentation. Conclude with a discussion on the ways candidates are alike and different in their interests and qualifications. Ask students to decide what sort of information is important for

a voter to know about a candidate before voting.⁵

Is the Election Fair?

In a two-day election simulation, students vote on the candidates of the major political parties. Research tells us that very young children are able to identify their parents' political preferences, so your students may already have strong opinions.

On the first day, students discuss important concepts relating to fair elections:

- One person—one vote
- The secret ballot
- The right to vote
- An accurate count

Ask some questions about how to design a fair election:

- How can we make sure that everyone votes once and only once?
- Do you have to tell who you vote for, or can you keep it secret?
- Why might some persons want to keep their choices a secret?
- What can you do if someone tells you at the polls (the voting place) that you are not allowed to vote?
- Who gets to count the votes at the end of the day?
- How can we check that we have made an accurate count of the votes?

The teacher explains that, in the United States, people usually vote in their own neighborhoods. At the polling place, clerks check your name in a directory of registered voters. You are not allowed to walk to another neighborhood and vote again.

Your ballot is kept secret because nobody watches you as you cast your ballot with paper or on a voting machine. Also, your name is not on the ballot; your vote is anonymous. Often there is a screen or curtain of some sort between voting machines for privacy.

Poll watchers, election lawyers, and judges stand ready on election day to talk to citizens who are denied the vote. These people help sort out whether a citizen has been properly turned away (he forgot to register to vote, for example), or whether he has been unfairly and illegally turned away—and ought to be permitted to vote.

Invite students to create ways to keep their ballot private in a classroom election, and to keep students from voting twice in the simulation. For example, students can “register to vote,” entering their names, signatures, and addresses into a book, with a space for students to sign again on “election day.” At “the polls,” a cardboard wall around the edges of a desk can help keep the student's vote private.

In a voting simulation with young children, we recommend

not using the real candidates' names, but fictional candidates. Teachers use stuffed animals, cartoon characters, or made-up candidate names. Students learn about the voting process, but politicians' names are not part of the activity.

How are Votes Cast and Counted?

On the second day of the simulation, “election day,” assign poll clerks to check that their fellow classmates are registered to vote, sign the book, receive a ballot, vote in the booth, and place their ballots in the box. Also assign students to take turns as poll watchers to insure that clerks do things correctly. One election judge could help resolve any disputes.

At the designated closing time, two clerks (one from each political party) open the ballot box and read the ballots aloud. A third tallies the votes on a large sheet of paper. The clerks must both agree before disqualifying any improperly marked ballots. Two poll watchers observe to see that the votes are counted and recorded correctly. Finally, the three clerks sign a paper to verify that the record of the vote is correct.

The class discusses the voting procedures and any problems that they observed. Many schools serve as polling places so, if possible, students might be able to quietly observe adults as they vote on the real election day.

(K-3) Young children can line up to vote one at a time. For nonreaders, candidates' names may be identified with different colors or icons.

What is a “Platform?”

To understand an election, students should become familiar with the vocabulary of the electoral process. Using analogy to objects students know is helpful when teaching concepts. For example, the teacher writes on the board “The President stands on a political platform.” Students say what they think the term means. The teacher discusses with the children the nature of a platform that people actually stand on (it must be strong and connected together). Ask such questions as:

- Could the president stand on a platform made of chocolate ice cream, which is something everyone likes? Pretty marbles?
- What would be the characteristics of a platform that a person such as the president could stand on?

Compare responses with characteristics of statements expressed in a political platform. A political platform is a declaration of principles and policies. Help students to draw the analogy that a political platform is strong if it speaks to important issues of the country. Platforms are written by a group of citizens in one political party. These people share many beliefs, they support the same ideas, and are willing to work together to get things accomplished. Make a bulletin board illustrating the idea that the president stands on a platform.

Other terms like “ticket,” “front runner,” “spin doctor,” and “landslide” would be appropriate to discuss. Students may make a picture dictionary to reinforce the new terms.

After children have studied words and their meanings, they may enjoy playing the game Election Lingo. The game is played with the same rules for winning as Bingo. Each student makes a card by placing the terms randomly in nine individual squares. However, instead of calling out words, the teacher reads a definition aloud, and students mark the correct term on their cards.

(K-3) With very young children, the teacher might ask: “What things should the president do after he is elected?” After listing the students’ ideas, the teacher tells the children that each candidate tells us ahead of time what he plans to do. These ideas are called the platform. The teacher can indicate how some of the students’ ideas are reflected in the platforms of the current candidates.

What Happens at a National Debate?

Students in the upper elementary grades can observe one of the debates between the presidential candidates, or view short selections from the debate. Ask students to write three to five questions they would like to ask the candidates during the debates. As they listen to the debates, the students record whether and how the candidates answer their questions. Discuss the students’ findings and reactions to the debate.

What are students’ general impressions of the debate? Which questions asked by the reporters did the students think were particularly good questions? Why? Did the candidates stick to the topic, answer the questions, and use facts to support their statements? Were there other aspects of the candidates (how they looked or sounded) that influenced students? Did students learn anything new about the candidates and their positions on the issues that they did not know before? 🌐

Notes

1. Fred Greenstein, *Children and Politics*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969); Robert Hess and Judith Torney, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1967); Fred M. Newmann, *Education for Citizenship Action* (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1975)
2. Robert Coles, *The Political Life of Children* (Boston, MA: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 49.
3. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, “Growing Up to Be President: Interviews with K-3 Students.” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 1 (September/October, 2002): 17-20.
4. Paige Lilley Schulte and Travis Miller, “Making Choices: An Exploration of Political Preferences,” *Middle Level Learning* 32 (June 2008): 10-15.
5. Mary E. Haas, “The Presidency and Presidential Elections in the Elementary Classroom,” *Social Education* 68, no. 5 (September 2004): 340-346.

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Children’s Books About Elections

Barnes, Peter W. and Barnes, Cheryl Shaw. *Woodrow For President: A Tail of Voting, Campaigns and Elections*. Alexandria, VA: VSP Books, 1999.

Written with rhyme, historical references, and humor, this story parallels the U.S. election process, revealing how a mouse becomes president of the mouse nation.

De Capua, Sarah. *Running For Public Office*. New York: Children’s Press, 2002.

Illustrated with photographs from various political campaigns, this book shows what local and national candidates do when running for a political office.

Grandfield, Linda. *American Votes: How Our President Is Elected*. Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press, 2005.

Uses the 2004 election as a backdrop for telling who can vote, the role of political parties, and how campaigning is done.

Sobel, Syl. *Presidential Elections And Other Cool Facts* (2nd ed). Hauppauge, NY: Baron’s, 2001.

Includes descriptions of the electoral process and past presidential elections.

Websites for Students

Many of these websites have multiple classroom activities. Explore them.

PBS Kids: The Democracy Project
pbskids.org/democracy/vote/castvote.html
Inside the Voting Booth. What might be the

best solutions to current national problems? Print your selections and a Future Voter’s Card.

Pearson Education. TeacherVision *
www.teachervision.fen.com/elections/lesson-plan/2707.html?detoured=1
Lesson plan and election vocabulary bingo cards.

Smithsonian Institution
americanhistory.si.viewedu/vote/intro.html
Artifacts and pictorial history of voting in the United States.

Washington Post. Teacher Resources
www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/kidspost/pdf/election010208.pdf

A quick explanation and timeline for the 2008 presidential election.

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/index.html
Information on the Electoral College.

Harry S. Truman Library & Museum
www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/teacher_lessons/democomic_lesson.htm
Lesson plan on the 1948 election of Truman, appropriate for all grades, with teacher help.

Kids Voting USA*
Right To Vote: What is Suffrage?
www.kidsvotingusa.org/page9650.cfm
A sample lesson on suffrage. Grades 6-8.

National Student/Parent Mock Election*
www.nationalmockelection.org/index.html
Enrollment place and project materials for October 30, 2008 mock election day.

HotChalk, Inc.*
www.lessonplanspage.com/Campaign_lesson1.htm
Several lessons on elections are at this website. This one is about polling the class, grades 1-4.

Websites for Teachers

ProCon.org, a nonpartisan organization, summarizes candidates’ perspectives on various public issues, from global warming to the war in Iraq. Select samples for use in the classroom. www.2008electionprocon.org/

The Annenberg Political Fact Check website has interesting analyses of candidate statements. FactCheck.Org.

The League of Women Voters is concerned about fairness, accuracy, and citizen participation in the voting process. www.lwv.org.

Social Education and *Social Studies and the Young Learner* often feature articles on elections in the September issue of a national election year.*
Back issues are available to NCSS members only at www.socialstudies.org/members/.

* These websites require membership at some point to view all of the resources.