

Topic: Candidates, Parties, and Ballot Measures

What the students do: Explore, analyze, and evaluate current interactions between citizens, mass media, and presidential candidates during election campaigns.

[CA History-Social Science Standards](#): 12.6.4, 12.8

[CMS Proven Practices](#): 1, 2, 6

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Where Do the Candidates Stand?

Overview

This lesson allows students to explore where the presidential candidates stand on issues that are important to them. It also allows them to scrutinize informational sources in order to obtain accurate and unbiased data.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of a citizen’s role in an election cycle.
- discuss the role of the media (print, television, Internet, etc.) in a presidential election;
- analyze sources of information for bias versus objectivity;
- discern the essential core of contemporary issues in society;
- use information gathered to develop a position on a contemporary societal issue;
- compare and contrast the positions of presidential candidates on important issues.

Materials/Preparation

Teacher Resources

- Teacher Resource 1
- Teacher Resource 2

Student Resources

- Student Handout 1
- Student Handout 2

Procedure

1. *Introduce the lesson.* Begin the lesson by engaging students in a short discussion based on the following questions:

- What is the role of a citizen during an election cycle?
- How can citizens inform themselves about issues that are important to them or their communities?
- How can citizens learn about where candidates stand on these important issues?
- Are political campaigns important to the democratic process?

2. *What do they care about?* Conduct a brainstorming activity with the class. Write the word ISSUES on the board (or chart paper) and ask students to name any issue they have heard about, think they know about, or is important to them—anything at all that they think fits under the title ISSUES. Post all the responses without comment. Once completed ask students to review the list and: a) categorize the issues as federal, state, or local issues. Some will fall under two or three categories and need to be indicated as such; b) determine which issues, if any, could be directly linked or grouped together under a broader title. Some may fall neatly under an umbrella category. For example, failing schools, a high drop-out rate, etc. could fall under Education. Others may fall under more than one category. For example, funding cuts to colleges and universities could fall under Education or the Economy. If that is the case, place the issue in more than one place. There is no need to get into a lengthy conversation about these issues at this point. Example of some major or broad issues include:

- *Education*
- *The Environment*
- *The Economy*
- *Foreign Policy*
- *Civic Rights*
- *Health Care*

3. *Learning about the issues:* Break the class up into small groups of 3 (a triad). Direct each group to choose an issue and review the sub-categories associated with it. (Because the focus of this unit is the presidential election, the issues should be federal or national in scope. If you choose to apply this to other election races, the issues could be either state or local in nature.) Each triad should choose which subcategory they are most interested in and write up what they think they know about it.

Inform students they are going to complete a two-part activity. Provide them Student Handout 1. Teacher Resource 1 provides a step-by-step description of the entire activity. First, each triad needs to research the topic they chose and find out as much factual information as they can about it. They should compare what they learn to what they thought they already knew and see where differences, if any, may exist. This is a good time to review with students how to be critical readers and researchers. You may choose to use Student Handout 2, which provides tips on how to scrutinize sources of information.

Follow Teacher Resource 1 to complete Part 1 of the activity and lead a class discussion on the issues.

4. *Where do the candidates stand on the issue?* Part 2 of the activity has students try to determine where the presidential candidates stand on their issues. Please review Teacher Resource 1 to complete this activity.
5. *Looking at the larger picture:* Post the completed chart around the classroom. Remind students that they will come back to this information in the weeks to come

before the election. Students should begin to formulate in their minds which candidate they might choose for president based on the information gathered in this lesson. They should also determine what other information they might need to know before making their choice.

Concluding the lesson: Students should reflect upon what they learned about their issues and about where the candidates stand on their issues. Students can share aloud or write an essay about what they learned from this lesson. How has their initial view changed? Where do they stand on this issue and why? Has their stance changed as a result of their research? Do they agree with either of the candidates?

Teacher Resource 1: Fact v. Fiction, Learning about the Issues

This activity has two parts. First, it asks students to research factual information about an issue that is important to them. In the second segment, it has students trying to determine where the presidential candidates stand on that issue.

Part 1: Learning about the Issues

Step 1: Divided the class into small groups of three (triads). As described in the lesson procedure, each triad should choose an issue and determine which subcategory is important to its members and that they want to know more about.

Note: Ideally the triads would reflect a variety of issues and a variety of subcategories. Depending on the size of the class, duplication of subcategories could pose a problem. Upon completion of this lesson, the class will have a chart of issues that contains background information on these issues and where the presidential candidates stand on them. This chart will serve as the foundation for Part 2 of this lesson.

Step 2: When each triad has reached a consensus on an issue's subcategory, employ a form of the K-W-L strategy*, and allow students 5–6 minutes to write down everything they think they know about the issue they have chosen.

**K-W-L strategy: Generally used as a simple three-column chart: K = What I Know (eliciting from students prior knowledge of a subject or topic). W = What do I want to know? (gives students a direction or focus on finding out information on a topic) L = What I Learned.*

Step 3: The group's members should determine what they need (and want) to learn about their issue. Student Handout 1 offers some basic suggestions.

Step 4: The group will need to research the questions and bring its responses to class. (This can be a homework assignment or a research assignment over several days, etc. It is a choice to be made by the individual teacher.) To help students complete this task, it would be helpful to review the importance of finding solid, credible sources for their information. Student Handout 2 could be used at this point.

Step 5: Once the allotted time has elapsed, students meet in their respective triads and share the information they have gathered. They should take note if any of the information they have gathered is different from their original thoughts about the subject.

Step 6: Each group should share its information with the class.

Step 7: Lead the class in a discussion about the issues and the information they uncovered. The following questions may be useful in guiding the discussion:

- What types of sources did you use to gather the information?
- How easy or difficult was it to get specific information?
- If your sources contradicted one another, how did you determine what information was accurate and useful?
- Did any of the information you discovered surprise you? Why?
- What discrepancies did you find between what you thought you knew and what you learned from your research? How might you account for these discrepancies?
- Did your issue have ties to other issues? If so, what were they?
- Many of these issues are viewed and discussed as problems. What possible solutions did you come across?

Part 2: Where Do the Presidential Candidates Stand?

Step 1: Within their triad, students should take a quick poll about where they believe the presidential candidates stand on their issue. Each student should write a sentence or two about why they think the candidate would take the particular position they attribute to them.

Step 2: Share with students the outline of the “Issues Chart” that they will fill out and will be used in other lessons (A sample of the chart is available in Teacher Resource 2).

Step 3: The students within the triad should determine who will do each of the following tasks:

- a) Write the information about their issue into the chart
- b) Explore where President Obama stands on their issue
- c) Explore where Governor Romney stands on their issue

(The teacher must determine how much time it will take to complete task (b) and (c). Task (a) could easily be done as a homework assignment.)

Note: This is also a good time to reiterate how to determine a credible source and how to identify bias in information sources. Remind students to review Student Handout 2, or go over certain aspects with the class as a whole.

Step 4: Groups need to meet and share their findings about the candidates. They should compare what they initially thought with what they found out—or, in some

cases, what they weren't able to find out. Finally, they need to add their new information to the chart.

Step 5: Have the groups share their findings about the candidates' positions with the class. As they share, each group should also indicate if their initial belief of the candidates' positions matches what they learned. Collect each piece of the chart as the groups share out.

Step 6: Conclude with a class discussion about their findings on the candidates. The questions below may be used to guide the discussion.

- Did the candidates line up as you predicted on the issues?
- What difficulties did you encounter in trying to determine a candidate's position on a particular issue?
- Where did you find most of your information on the candidates?
- Were there any issues for which there was no clear position by either candidate? If so, why might you think that is?
- Were there instances of contradictions in either candidate's position?

Student Handout 1: Fact v. Fiction, Learning about the Issues

This activity has two parts. First, you will gather factual information about an issue that is important to you. In the second segment, you will try to determine where the presidential candidates stand on that issue. The information you gather in this activity will also be used in a subsequent lesson.

Part 1: Learning about the Issues

Step 1: The teacher will divide the class into small groups of three (triads). Your group will choose an issue that is important to it. You will then discuss the subcategories of that issue and come to a consensus about which one your group will work on.

Step 2: Once the triad has reached a consensus on an issue's subcategory, each of you should write down everything you know about it. You will be allotted 5–6 minutes to do this. Share with each other what you have written.

Step 3: In this step, your group will determine what it needs (and wants) to learn about its issue. Often, the issues are viewed as a problem. Here are some basic questions you should consider:

- Which branch of government has the authority to deal with this issue?
- What government agency has the authority to deal with this issue? Be sure to include both national and state agencies where applicable.
- What groups of people, i.e., age, race, gender, region of country, etc., are most affected by this issue?
- How widespread is the problem?
- How severe is the problem?
- Are there private entities that could deal with the situation?
- What possible remedies exist?
- What are some of the financial implications of the problem or its possible remedies?
- What are the short term and long term implications if this issue is not positively resolved?
- How does this issue affect you directly? Indirectly?

(You are not limited to these questions and, based on your topic, there may be others that you should consider. Confer with your teacher as you work through this step.)

Step 4: The group will need to research the questions from Step 3 and bring its responses to class. (Your teacher will let you know how much time you have to accomplish this.)

Step 5: Once you have completed the research, you will meet with your group members and share the information you have gathered. Compare the new information with your original thoughts on the subject. Take note of differences that might exist.

Step 6: Each group will share its information with the class.

Step 7: The teacher will lead the class in a discussion of its findings on the issues.

Part 2: Where Do the Presidential Candidates Stand?

Step 1: Within your triad, take a quick poll about where you believe the presidential candidates stand on your issue. Each student should write a sentence or two about why they think the candidate would take the particular position they attribute to them.

Step 2: Your teacher will share an outline of the “Issues Chart” that each group will help to complete. Your group will be given its portion to fill out. This chart will remain in the classroom and will be used in other lessons.

Step 3: Within your triad, each student will need to complete one of three tasks. Determine which member will be responsible to do the following tasks:

- d) Write the information about the issue into the chart
- e) Explore where President Obama stands on the issue
- f) Explore where Governor Romney stands on the issue

(The teacher will let you know how much time you have to complete these tasks.)

Step 4: Once the tasks are completed, the group needs to meet and share its findings about the candidates. Compare what each of you thought the candidates’ positions were with what you found their positions to actually be. Add this information to the chart.

Step 5: Each group will be given the opportunity to share its findings about the candidates’ positions with the class. As you share your findings, include whether or not the candidates’ positions matched your initial speculation. Be sure to hand in your completed piece of the chart.

Step 6: Your teacher will guide you in a discussion about the candidates’ positions.

Teacher Resource 2: Issues Chart

The issues chart created by this lesson will be used in the subsequent lesson on the Presidential Debates and can also be used for the rest of the election cycle.

Designing the Chart

The categories in the chart will be a combination of required categories and those determined by the questions students will explore about their issues. For example:

Issue & Subcategories	What We Know	Background Information	Severity of Issue	How Widespread	Sources	Position of Pres. Obama	Position of Gov. Romney
Environment							
Subcategory A							
Subcategory B							

The columns that reflect the issues and their subcategories (as chosen by the groups), the sources used to gather the information, the position of President Obama, and the position of Governor Romney are required and standard to the chart. The number of columns that will contain the results of the students' research will be organized as the teacher sees fit. There are three shown here. However, teachers could easily include more or fewer, and title them differently. What is key is that the chart be uniform for the entire class.

Producing the Chart

The chart can be created electronically. Each group will receive a template to fill in. When groups have completed their work, they will submit their portion of the template to the teacher, who will combine them all into one comprehensive chart. That chart can be distributed to all students and viewed in class.

Depending on the size of the classroom, the Issues Chart can be tacked onto the walls of the classroom, forming a carousel. Each group receives a template of categories and places its information on the chart paper. All the subcategories of a large issue would be placed side-by-side.

Student Handout 2: Evaluating Information Sources

Introduction

You've heard the old adage, "Don't believe everything you read," a wise warning which is too often ignored. In this day and age of instant access to information, the warning is more important than ever. With sound bites coming from every direction, what should a person believe? Today, more than ever, citizens need to know how to scrutinize information sources and discern between factual articles and opinion pieces. There are a variety of ways to do this. You have probably discussed many of these tips in your classes. This handout is a brief reminder of the various tips you can use when you research issues or topics. Your teacher will review it with you in conjunction with the lesson you're currently involved in.

Fact v. Opinion

Webster's Dictionary defines facts as anything that is done or happens; any statement strictly true; truth; reality, e.g., the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776.

Opinion is defined as: indicating a belief, view, sentiment, conception, e.g., Blue is the prettiest color in the spectrum.

How to Recognize Bias in a News Article

This technique is applicable to any news story in a website, newspaper, magazine, or television program.

1. Read the news article.
2. Identify the five Ws and one H of the article: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How of the article.
3. See if you can rewrite the article, using the same information, to tell a completely different story.
4. Look at how the writer treats the people he is writing about.
5. Pay attention to the overall tone of the article.
6. What is missing from the article?
7. Watch for buzzwords.
8. Does the writer try to identify with you or label you (or others)?
9. Observe the placement of the story.
10. Consider how people are portrayed through pictures.
11. Look for at least two sides to every story.
12. If statistics are provided or studies are mentioned, dig a little deeper.

13. If a headline or chart claims “the worst/best/highest/lowest in X years,” do some research. A comparison to years earlier or immediately following may prove otherwise.
14. Learn to recognize a news release.

How to Evaluate the Credibility of a Source

1. Think about how reliable you need the information to be.
2. Consider the medium with which you are working.
3. Research the author.
4. Check the date.
5. Investigate the publisher.
6. Determine the intended audience.
7. Check the reviews.
8. Evaluate the author’s sources.
9. Identify bias.
10. Evaluate consistency.
11. Investigate the financial or funding sources for sponsored research, websites, etc.