



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2008 Volume III: Democracy in Theory and Practice

I'll Vote for That, but Why? The United States Constitution and Presidential Elections

Curriculum Unit 08.03.02, published September 2008
by Lisa Lee

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a term that is taught as early as elementary school, but what does it really mean? Many Americans consider it to be the founding principal of the United States, but it is hardly a new idea, nor is it original to this country. Derived from the ancient Greek *dimokratia* (*demos* meaning the people or masses, *kratos* meaning rule, power, or strength,) the connotation is basically government rule by the people. Democracy involves the belief that people are capable of governing themselves. A commitment to the belief that all members of a society have inherent human rights to life and liberty are core principles of a democratic society. American democracy evolved from the exercise of political power by the American colonists in managing their own affairs. When the King of England attempted to interrupt this local control, the colonists resisted, the Revolutionary War was fought, and the United States was born. ¹ The United States is a representative democracy; instead of ruling directly, people elect those who will represent and make decisions for them. During the Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln stated that we were a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." What better time than an election year to explore and debate these concepts with my seventh and eighth graders, who will be of voting age in four or five years?

Today we live in a world in which everyone believes in democracy. Liberal, conservative, it doesn't matter - EVERYONE believes in democracy. ² When the United States of America was created, there was no government. Finally, over a decade later, forty men created a system which they thought would work. As English subjects, these "Framers of the Constitution" were fully aware of the significance of the Magna Carta of 1215, which became the centerpiece of the English system of constitutional government. When they wrote the Constitution, the Framers were mindful of the excesses and abuses by the British Crown. Only 4300 words long, based on republican principles, the United States Constitution established a federal system of government that had never been before been successful when ruling such a large territory. It is the oldest functioning democracy, and one of the oldest governments. Since that time this country has experienced multiple presidential administrations, participated in numerous wars, economic depressions, and been confronted with polarizing social issues. ³ Yet the system of government which was put in place in 1787 has endured and stood the test of time.

Because of the ideals in the Constitution which give the power to the citizens, in any government election the

most important players are not the candidates themselves, their advisors, the media, or other elected officials. The attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of the American people are the most critical and important component of any election. As an educator, I believe it is essential for me to teach my students the importance of their participation in the electoral process. Our political structure anticipates and expects the equal involvement of its citizens, with no person's vote counting more than another's. Ethnic background, economic status, and gender do not impact the weight of a vote - voter equality ensures that each citizen's voice is heard as loudly as anyone else's.

A successful democracy involves individual citizens being able to do several things. Citizens must be willing to accept the will of the majority. The outcome of elections must be respected. A democratic society requires that there be no laws established which limit the freedoms of any one group of people. Minorities must be protected. The citizens of a successful democracy must obey all laws, with no group receiving special favors or exemptions. Citizens need to get involved in the process, exercising their right to speak out on issues that matter to them. Finally, in order for a democracy to function at its highest potential, citizens need to vote. ⁴ Providing this foundation for my middle school

students gives them an awareness of the type of citizens they can strive to become once they are the leaders of our society.

I intend for this unit to be one which engages my students in the study of the democratic process. Many Americans are not familiar with what powers are granted directly to the president by the Constitution. The beginning of this unit will explore these issues in depth beginning with the weaknesses of the Articles of the Confederation, and the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Then, as we study the Republican and Democratic platforms, students will learn the importance of knowing where they personally stand on the issues in order to make an informed decision about which candidate to endorse. My students will explore the history of the Electoral College, an institution which has been widely criticized and debated since its inception. My students are well aware of the controversy which arose in 2000 in the presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. As a result of studying, discussing, analyzing and absorbing this information, students will then focus on voter participation and the importance of encouraging all eligible citizens to have a voice by voting. This unit will culminate with a school wide election sponsored and run by my eighth graders. I want my students to learn the difference it makes when they become informed citizens. The critical thinking skills developed as they define the issues and determine where they stand on them are lessons that will benefit them for the rest of their lives.

The school in which I teach, Chamblee Middle School, is located in DeKalb County, Georgia, approximately 10 miles from downtown Atlanta. It serves grades six through eight, with a total population of nearly 1,000 students. Our school features a resident program as well as a magnet program. Students who are in the magnet program are bused from all over the county, while it is the neighborhood school for the resident population. There is great diversity among our students, in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and academic ability. I teach social studies to students in grades six, seven, and eight. The curriculum for sixth and seventh graders in our county is world studies, with a focus on history, culture, political structures, and geography. Eighth graders are required to take an entire year of Georgia studies, in which they learn about the political structure and makeup of our national and state governments. They also study the founding of the United States, beginning with the original colonies. This unit will meet numerous state and national standards, which are listed in the lesson plans section.

OBJECTIVES: WHAT DO I WANT MY STUDENTS TO LEARN?

The beginning of this study of the electoral process will start with the Constitutional Convention of 1787. What were the perceived weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation which the Framers of the Constitution wished to improve? The Articles were written when the patriotic cause of the American Revolution stood in opposition to a strong monarch, such as King George II. Therefore the Articles did not make provisions for a leader, one who would serve as the nation's executive servant. The Articles granted powers to the federal government, but there were significant areas in which they had no power. Congress could not levy taxes, regulate trade and commerce between the states, or interfere with the powers granted to the states. There was also a unicameral congress, and no national court system. Such weaknesses were obvious, but the national government was designed to be weak, with no specific leader. ⁵ By the time the Framers met in 1787, they understood the need for a chief executive. This resulted in the creation of the presidency of the United States. While the Framers differed in their vision of the president's job, they uniformly supported the concept of a representative democracy - one in which the people would rule and make laws for the nation. The Framers eventually agreed on six key components for the Constitution:

1. All people had the natural rights to life, liberty, and property.
2. The powers of government would be controlled by law.
3. The government was to get its power from the people, the concept of popular sovereignty. The citizens would vote for their lawmakers and leaders.
4. The powers of government were to be divided into the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches, thus creating a balance of power.
5. Each branch of government would balance the powers of the others through a system of checks and balances.
6. A central, or federal, government would share power with state governments, with both governments having different powers. ⁶

The Constitution - Article II, the Executive Branch: What Powers Does the President Have?

As stated above, one thing that the Articles of Confederation lacked which became a glaring weakness, was the omission of a leader. Article II of the Constitution details the lawmaking power of the president. The concept of a strong chief executive is evident in Article II, which is entitled "Duties and Powers of the President." This article states, "The executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America." This is known as the Executive Power Clause. Article II also states that the president shall "take care that the laws be faithfully executed." This is known as the Take Care Clause. When the Framers created the U.S. Presidency, they invented a new type of leader, one who did not hold all power, but still operated from a position of strength. ⁷

The presidency and vice presidency are the only offices which are elected by the entire nation. Hence, the president is accountable to every citizen of the nation, not just a single Congressional district or one state. The American presidency has grown in power over the years to become the world's most important job. However, the Framers of the Constitution did not intend for that role to be the most powerful; indeed, they meant for *Congress* to 'carry the biggest stick.' Under their system, the president would be the nation's leader, but with limited power. ⁸

Although specific roles and responsibilities are detailed in this Article, "political scientists have long understood that Article II of the Constitution does not clearly define presidential powers and that its provisions remain underdefined and ambiguous or even silent at key points." ⁹ It has been suggested that perhaps one reason for the lack of specifics within the Constitution regarding presidential power may have been due to the fact that the Framers knew George Washington would be their choice. They trusted his integrity, and believed he would never abuse the power that the office of the president represented. ¹⁰ I will address the powers vested to the president alone, rather than those which are shared with the Senate and both houses of Congress.

One exclusive power granted to the president in Article II is to serve as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In this role, the president oversees top military commanders, declares war with approval of Congress, and approves the use of military forces overseas. The president can send troops into action anywhere in the world for sixty days without the approval of Congress. This issue has seen tremendous debate over the years since the Constitution was ratified, around the question of how far presidential authority extends under the commander-in-chief clause.

". . . the Founders did not intent to grant presidents exclusive authority in war powers. The belief that Congress should not get in the president's way when national security matters arise is clearly popular, but the Constitution contradicts this." ¹¹

The truth is that the Constitution gives more broad powers to Congress than the president in matters relating to war powers. Congress is granted the powers to raise and support armies, provide and maintain a navy, and declare war. So, the Constitution originally endowed and empowered Congress in military matters. ¹² Obviously, the controversy as to whether or not constitutional restraints can be superseded in times of crisis continues to generate debate today.

As the "Take Care Clause" states, as chief executive the president is to take care to see that laws are carried out. It is the duty of Congress to create and legislate new laws, but the president is the actual enforcer of the laws. However, even during the term of George Washington, the complexities of the job required him to rely on advisors for assistance. Today's presidential cabinet fills that role. They provide the day-to-day enforcement and administration of federal laws. The president also has the constitutional power to sign bills into law, veto bills, and grant pardons and reprieves for crimes. ¹³

PARTY TIME!! POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR PLATFORMS

If political debate, and media coverage are any indication, interest in politics on the part of today's citizens is on the rise. The growing numbers among active political parties may point to that trend as well. "Political parties can best be defined as organizations devoted to maintaining or increasing their own opportunities to exercise political power primarily through sponsoring candidates for public office." ¹⁴ The concept of political parties has been part of the American citizenry since ratification of the Constitution. The population has always been polarized into various camps, defined by the stands they take on political issues. However, the concept of political parties is not written into the

Constitution. The Framers viewed them as unhealthy, special interest groups, "based on petty politics." ¹⁵ Within the Federalist papers, Hamilton speaks negatively of such parties or 'factions.' ¹⁶ Although our country has a number of third parties, this unit will focus on the two major ones, Democrats and Republicans. The two

parties pull their electoral support from different groups in the population, but no party has total support from any one group. Because the American population is so tremendously diverse, it is difficult for those running for political office, Republican or Democrat, to make specific policy commitments without alienating voters. Today the four core functions of political parties are:

1. . Raising money
2. . Recruiting candidates
3. . Mobilizing volunteers
4. Providing a message that will appeal to voters and help the party's candidates
5. in election. ¹⁷

The following information is a general description of the core principles associated with each party.

Democrats

Founded in 1792 by Thomas Jefferson, Party members were called "Republicans" or "Democratic Republicans." In 1830 the Party adopted the shorter name, Democrats. "The Party's basic vision is based on the strength and power of economically empowered, socially diverse and politically active Americans in which wealth and social status were not an entitlement to rule." ¹⁸ A belief in and commitment to hardworking American families is a core component of the Democratic Party. The Party believes that by helping the disenfranchised and poor to have a chance at the American Dream, the country is strengthened. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, Democrats have been identified as the more progressive of the two parties. Historically, Democrats tend to draw votes from Southerners, citizens of industrialized metropolitan areas, union members, minority ethnic groups, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Jews. Democrats tend to support a more active government role in protecting the environment, public health, and public education. The Party also tends to support abortion rights, some forms of gun control, and believes in ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens. ¹⁹

In 1870, political cartoonist Thomas Nast drew a cartoon called "A Live Jackass Kicking a Dead Lion." This is the first time the donkey was used to represent the Democratic party. It has been widely used by the Party ever since, but has never been officially adopted as the Party's logo. During the 1920's, several Midwestern states used the rooster as the traditional symbol of the Democratic Party. In fact, Indiana and Kentucky still feature a rooster on their ballots. ²⁰

Republicans

The Federalists, who came together during George Washington's presidency, later became the Whigs, and were eventually incorporated into the Republican Party under President Lincoln. The Republican Party was established in the 1850's by those who believed the government should open up the western lands to settlers free of charge, as well as those who wanted the institution of slavery to be abolished. Republicans generally advocate a limited role for the federal government in societal issues such as poverty, education, and housing. Historically, Republicans represent whites, Protestants, small rural areas, suburban voters, and non-union workers. They also tend to support cuts in domestic programs such as social welfare and environmental protection. While the Republican Party generally supports lower taxes, it believes in increasing spending for defense. Opposition to abortion rights and gun control are also trademarks of the Republican Party. The Party is considered to be the more conservative of the two. ²¹

During the mid-term election of 1874, the Democratic Party was attempting to convince voters that the

Republican president, Ulysses Grant, would seek an unprecedented third term. Thomas Nast drew a cartoon in *Harper's Weekly* depicting a Democratic jackass trying to frighten a Republican elephant. The elephant was officially adopted as the Party symbol, and has been widely used ever since. Most Americans believe that the Party's nickname, G.O.P., stands for "Grand Old Party." However, the original acronym, dating to 1875, was "Gallant Old Party." ²²

Can you stand on a political platform?

A political platform is a document stating the aims and principles of a political party. ²³ One way to understand this concept is to imagine that each aim, principle, or idea of a candidate serves as a "plank" to reinforce and stabilize a party and its candidate's campaign. The goal is for the planks to be strong enough to support a candidate into office. Political platforms serve five important functions. First, they set goals for the nation. Second, political parties must be involved in the election process in order to carry out the platform. Third, the American people become informed about the candidates and their platforms through speeches, advertising, and letters, as the candidates tell voters about their suggestions for solving various problems. Fourth, when political parties get their members into Congress, they are then able to implement their platform ideas. Finally, the competition that exists between the parties ensures that each party checks on the other, making sure that the platform ideas are being carried out, once a person is elected to a political office. ²⁴

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE: HOW DOES IT WORK AND WHAT'S THE CONTROVERSY?

During the Constitutional Convention, there was disagreement as to how a president would be chosen. An election directly by the people was proposed by some delegates, while others were doubtful as to the political judgment of the population to elect the president. The Convention delegates decided that the people would not be granted the power to directly elect a president, but solving that problem led to another one. The smaller states were fearful that the election process would be dominated and controlled by the larger states. This led to the establishment of the Electoral College, a group whose sole purpose would be to elect the president and vice-president. Each state is allowed as many electoral votes as it has senators and representatives in Congress, which means that even the smallest states will have at least three electoral votes. Since the number of representatives is determined by the population of each state, a state with a large population such as California has more electoral votes than a more sparsely populated state such as Wyoming. There are 538 members in the Electoral College. In order to win, a candidate must receive one more vote than half of the total electorate votes, or 270. ²⁵

Because of the Electoral College, American presidential elections are not decided by the popular vote, or the votes of the people. Instead, all of the popular votes are collected within each state. The electoral votes are then cast for the candidate who received the most popular votes in the state. At its inception, the Electoral College had a great deal of power over independently electing the president and vice-president. But due to the "unit rule" approach, the only function for today's Electoral College is to confirm the decision made by the voters in their state. The unit rule approach is not detailed in the Constitution, nor is it federal law. Instead, it was adopted in the 1820's, by individual states. It provides that all electors in the state be grouped together "en bloc," on a "general ticket. A vote for one elector on a ticket is a vote for all electors on the ticket. ²⁶ When this policy was being adopted among the states, Senator Thomas Hart Benton observed in 1824, "The general ticket system . . . was the offspring of policy . . . It was adopted by the leading men of [ten states] to enable them to consolidate the vote of the state . . ." ²⁷ Today all states except for Maine and Nebraska use the unit rule. In those two states, the candidate who wins the state's popular vote gets two electoral votes; the others are awarded according to whoever wins each congressional district.

If no presidential candidate receives a majority of the Electoral College vote, the House of Representatives picks the winner from the top three vote getters. Regardless of the size of the state, each gets one vote in this process. If there is still no clear winner (no candidate receives the majority of the vote,) the issue then goes to the Senate, where the top two vote getters are voted on. ²⁸ The 2000 election, however, was decided by the Supreme Court when the presidency came down to the state of Florida. "The presidential election of 2000 showed that the American electoral process is seriously flawed. For the first time in American history, the Supreme Court decided who would be president of the United States. Political democracies do not choose their leaders by judicial fiat. They elect them, usually by political majorities." ²⁹ This election continues to be the subject of lively and heated debate, and is likely to remain a politically sensitive issue for years to come.

Over the years, Congress has debated the Electoral College system's effectiveness, as well as changes which have been proposed. In the 1970's a proposal was brought before Congress to eliminate the Electoral College. It was defeated in the Senate, and no other serious legislation of its kind has made it to Capitol Hill. This system is not likely to be changed, because it gives the smaller population states a bigger say in the election than if they were directly voting for the President. ³⁰ This is one of the criticisms of the Electoral College. Voters in these states have more influence than those in more densely populated ones. These smaller states are highly unlikely to settle for less influence by eliminating or modifying the Electoral College. However, it remains the subject of much criticism, controversy, and debate. It may discourage voter turnout because many people feel as if their vote does not make a difference. Another criticism is that third-party and independent candidates rarely receive electoral votes, thus causing some to claim that the Electoral College is biased against such candidates, and that it inhibits debate. ³¹

Because of the "winner take all" nature of this system, a candidate who wins a state by a small percentage of popular votes will receive all of that state's electoral votes. As in 1876, 1888, and more recently in 2000, a candidate who wins the popular vote can still lose the election. Close presidential elections always lead to a renewed discussion about the effectiveness of the Electoral College. Aside from abolishing the system altogether, several alternatives have been debated. One alternative is for the Electoral College makeup to remain the same, but to change the unit rule. Another proposal is for the Electoral College vote to be distributed among each congressional district, with two electoral votes going toward the winner in each state.

³²

VOTING: WHY SHOULD I BOTHER?

In America today, all citizens age 18 and over are eligible to vote. It is a way for the average American to have a voice in matters which can affect social security, health care, education, and national security, just to name a few. However, this is a right which is sometimes taken for granted, even though this privilege is one which was achieved with tremendous work, blood, sweat, and tears, and should never be taken lightly. Today all segments of the population are eligible to vote. Minorities and women, initially not included in the voting process, can now have a say in their government.

When the Constitutional Convention convened, it was comprised of the only Americans who were going to be considered as voters - white males. In spite of the fact that our founders believed in popular sovereignty, they did not believe that all adults should be able to vote. In the early years of our country, state legislatures generally restricted voting to white males who were twenty-one or older. Many states also limited voting rights to those who "had a stake in society." ³³ Just who were those privileged

individuals? Those with property. Governments began to change that stipulation during the 1820's and 1830's.

The list of eligible voters expanded, and by the Civil War, almost all states allowed adult free males (property owners or not) to vote. In most Northern states black males were allowed to vote.

Today, states set the qualifications for voting, but they are not allowed to turn away certain categories of people, thanks to several constitutional amendments. Ratified in 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment ensured that race could not be a basis for denying the right to vote. This amendment is one of three "Reconstruction Amendments" which followed the Civil War, in an attempt to guarantee African Americans equal rights. It did not take into consideration the Native American population, and they were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924. The ratification of 1920's Nineteenth Amendment rewarded those who had been involved in the struggle for equal voting rights for women, led by the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Just four years before, only twelve states allowed female suffrage. This fundamental right was still denied to most American women.³⁴ Until 1971, states had generally restricted the right to vote to those twenty-one and older. The Twenty-sixth Amendment extended the right to vote to all Americans age eighteen and older. Several other constitutional amendments have led to the expansion of eligible voters. In 1961 the Twenty-third amendment allowed residents of the District of Columbia to vote for President. The Twenty-fourth amendment, ratified in 1964, outlawed the poll tax, which discriminated against the poor. This particularly affected African Americans living in Southern states.³⁵

In order to vote, American citizens must meet four requirements, and these hold true in local, state, and national elections. There is the age stipulation mentioned above, of eighteen being the minimum voting age. The second requirement is American citizenship. Citizenship can be achieved through birth or through naturalization. The third requirement is that a person must live in the state for a certain amount of time, usually thirty days. Lastly, all eligible voters must register to vote. This registration ensures that voters do not vote more than once in an election, and prevents those who do not meet the requirements for voting. The only state that does not require registration is North Dakota.³⁶

Shortly after the March 1965 Selma, Alabama protest march, followed by another march and address by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., support for the Voting Rights Act increased significantly. The basic goal of the Voting Rights Act is to make sure that no matter where they live, racial minorities will have the same opportunity to participate in the political life of the nation. It was enacted to call attention to and eliminate the common practices used in the Southern states to restrict African American voting rights. Key provisions of this law include:

- No one can deny an eligible citizen the right to vote or interfere with or intimidate anyone seeking to register to vote.
- No citizen shall be prevented from voting in presidential elections because of length-of-residency requirements.
- Literacy tests and other methods cannot be used as qualifications for voting in any federal, state, local, general, or primary election.³⁷

Seven states and a number of local jurisdictions with a historical pattern of discrimination based on race must submit any changes in their election laws to the U.S. Justice Department for approval. "The Voting Rights Act, adopted initially in 1965 and extended in 1970, 1975, and 1982, is generally considered the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted by the United States Congress. The Act codifies and effectuates the 15th Amendment's permanent guarantee that, throughout the nation, no person shall be denied the right to vote on account of race or color. In addition, the Act contains several special provisions that impose even more stringent requirements in certain jurisdictions throughout the country."³⁸ Congress added provisions to

the act in 1975 for U.S. citizens who cannot read, write, or speak English. This provision stipulates that such citizens cannot be deprived of the right to vote. In 1982 another series of amendments provided that Americans with disabilities are allowed to bring someone else to the polls with them to help them vote. The only stipulations are that person cannot be the voter's employer or union representative. The Voting Rights Act and all of its provisions was given a twenty-five year extension in 2006. ³⁹

On January 1, 1995, the National Voter Registration Act took effect in most states. The purpose of this Act was to make voter registration easier and more convenient. For a number of years, the League of Women Voters and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had advocated for this legislation. The National Voter Registration Act required states to allow citizens to apply to register to vote when they got their driver's licenses. It also required states to offer mail-in voter registration, and registration at offices offering public assistance. Results of this law were evident by the election of 1996, when the number of registered voters reached an all time high, more than 76 percent of the voting-age population. ⁴⁰ Eight states - Minnesota, Wyoming, New Hampshire, Idaho, Maine, North Dakota, Montana, and Wisconsin are exempt from this law. They allow voters to register at the polls on Election Day, except for North Dakota which does not require voter registration, as stated above. ⁴¹

So, if voting is important enough that people have fought for years just for the right to have a voice, why don't more eligible Americans participate? In his 2002 book, *The Vanishing Voter*, Harvard professor Thomas Patterson points to a number of important factors that keep people away from polls:

- Negative campaigning turns voters off.
- Media coverage is often critical and cynical.
- The campaign calendar starts before voters are prepared to focus on the campaign. The short rush of primaries, followed by a lull before the party conventions is also problematic.
- A growing number of Americans - non-citizens, convicted felons, and prison inmates are ineligible to vote. ⁴²

Although factors such as a more informed, educated electorate, African Americans being able to vote in all U.S. Elections, and more voter-mobilization efforts would seem likely to boost voter turnout, that has not come to fruition. Patterson has suggested several ways in which this might be reversed. The states with voter registration at the polls had a 15 percent higher turnout than other states in the 2000 election. Offering voters the option of voting earlier than Election Day without stating why is being adopted by more and more states. Civil rights groups advocate changing the laws to restore voting rights to convicted felons who have completed their sentences. Some also argue that abolishing the Electoral College would increase the vote, since all citizens would have a vote that counted equally in the end. ⁴³

"According to the League of Women Voters, the degree to which people feel that the outcome of an election will affect them and their families has a lot to do with whether or not they vote." ⁴⁴ Getting election information out, then, may be the best way to make sure voters have as much possible information about candidates and the issues, and how the election will affect people's lives. The need for volunteers to help educate voters creates an opportunity for citizens to become involved and make a difference in their community.

STRATEGIES

I will use Bloom's Taxonomy to communicate this information to my students. This Taxonomy is comprised of six levels. All levels involve critical thinking, but they progress from the most basic to the most complex. Since my students are in our school's gifted program, I will concentrate more heavily on the top three levels because those are the levels at which I want my students to be functioning. First I will first give a brief overview of Bloom's Taxonomy, progressing from lowest to highest.

Bloom's Taxonomy

1. Knowledge - remembering, memorization, learning terms and facts
2. Comprehension - understanding the uses of the terms, facts, concepts
3. Application - implementation, making use of information in new situations.
4. Analysis - determining how parts relate when material is broken down, evaluate relevancy
5. Synthesis - creating, putting elements together, generating
6. Evaluating - making judgments based on criteria such as rubrics, and standards

The Taxonomy level(s) is/are listed after each activity below.

Socratic Seminars

The purpose of a Socratic Seminar is to answer an essential question, while gaining more of an understanding of issues, ideas, values, principles, etc. through thoughtful dialogue. Participants create an environment in which opinions are shared, refuted, and refined as they engage in discussion with the other members of the group. This technique helps to teach respect and tolerance for other's viewpoints, even if diverse opinions exist among the group. They can also lead to increased problem solving skills, as well as more confidence in public speaking. Participants also learn to practice listening in a Socratic Seminar, a skill that most people could develop to a further extent! The Seminars can also help participants clarify ideas and values, as well as open new avenues into thinking that were not there before. (Bloom's Level 5)

Writing

Students will have an opportunity to practice their writing throughout this unit. They will interpret, research, survey, plan, and revise as they work through the various assignments. Through researching and writing a speech about their candidate of choice students will develop persuasive writing skills as well as awareness of the audience to whom they are writing. Through analysis of graphs, poll results, and various political essays, students will become more discerning readers and writers. As students write creatively, analytically, and persuasively, they will find their voice as writers. (Bloom's Levels 3, 4, 5)

Discussion Continuum

This activity is used for students to determine where they stand on a topic or issue. Using a dry erase board, sidewalk and chalk, or simply an extended piece of yarn on the floor, a line is drawn/made, with agree at one endpoint, and disagree at the other. The teacher will read a statement and students will place a Post-it note somewhere along the continuum. Used early on in the unit, this can help students determine their position on certain issues for themselves. Used later in the unit, students will be aware of the opinions they have formed through the course of the unit. If a discussion continuum is used both at the beginning and end of the unit,

students can discern the ways their views may have changed as they have learned more about the issues. However this is used, it generates interaction and discussion. (Bloom's Level 4)

Note Taking

Students will practice outlining and taking notes from classroom lectures and discussions. These skills are integral to their success in high school and beyond. Purposeful note taking as students listen to a classroom lecture will be stressed because information presented in class will contain the central concepts of the material in the unit. As students learn to take notes on key important points and weed out the trivial, their critical thinking increases. Students will also improve their note taking skills through observation of various political debates. (Bloom's Levels 1, 2)

Think/Pair/Share

The class will be divided into small groups of students, with no more than three per group. Students will be given information about one of the concepts covered in the unit, either verbally or in writing. If it is written information students are to read it silently first. They will then discuss the information with their group, and then all groups will share their observations with the entire class. These discussions will generate debate as well as help students begin to form their opinions on the issues surrounding the office of the president, political parties, and the electoral process. (Bloom's 3, 4, 5)

Debate

Students will be involved in a debate on each of the key themes of this unit. Regardless of their stand on an issue, the political candidates and their respective platforms, students will defend all positions in classroom debates. Students will use information they have learned in the unit on which to build their arguments. Using debate in the classroom helps foster divergent thinking, teamwork, listening skills, and cooperation. A variation of the more well-known form of debate is one that my students and I call "Go to Your Corner!" Debate. Students will listen to a statement, then travel to the corner of the classroom which has the viewpoint that they most adhere to. With their peers in the corner, they write a rationale for why they choose that particular viewpoint. This type of debate will also be incorporated into unit lessons. (Bloom's Levels 4, 5)

Political Cartoons

Students will collect editorial cartoons relating to the upcoming presidential election. Class discussions will involve interpreting the intent of the artist, fallacies found in the pictures, and other possible meanings that could be inferred by the reader. Students will also create their own political cartoons about the presidential election. This type of critical analysis of the issues can promote interest and encourage dialogue among even the more reluctant learners. (Bloom's Level 2, 3, 4)

Conducting a Survey

Students will examine several types of basic polling techniques. Working in groups, students will create a poll aimed at registered voters. They will examine the issues surrounding voter turnout, and create questions based on this examination. Once students have administered the poll to a predetermined number of registered voters, they will write an essay summarizing their findings. (Bloom's Level 5)

Reading, Interpreting, and Creating Graphs

Students will collect, analyze, and discuss graphs that relate directly to the presidential campaign. They will also create two separate graphs from their own research. One will be based on the survey listed above. The other will be a graph of their choice relating to the presidential candidates in which they will poll a predetermined number of their peers as to their preference for president. They will then graph their results and write a summary paragraph. (Bloom's Levels 4, 5)

Voter Participation Initiative

Once students have studied the need for voter participation as well as the percentages of voters who do not vote, they will design a flyer for their neighborhood. The flyer will contain information about where the polling station is located for that area, the date of the election, and the times that the polls open and close. They will also include three sound reasons why it is important for all registered voters should exercise their right to do so. If possible, students will display their flyers in a public location, such as a local business. (Bloom's Levels 2, 3)

Research

Using on-line resources, magazines, television, mailings, and other available media, students will develop an understanding of the platform of the Republican and Democratic candidates. They will watch televised debates between the candidates. They will also analyze current political advertisements for both sides. Students will examine information for examples of hyperbole, inaccurate information, and negative campaigning. This research will culminate in a speech, detailed below. (Bloom's Levels 1-5)

Speech Writing and Delivery

Once students have researched the candidates, and watched the candidates deliver speeches, they will prepare their own three minute speech for their preferred candidate. Speeches will be presented in class, and must be accurate, but persuasive. Those students with the required information and engaging delivery style will be given the opportunity to deliver their speeches to the student body at a get out the vote gala. These speeches will be followed by a school-wide election, detailed below. (Bloom's Levels 1, 5)

School-wide Election

On the day before the actual election, students will conduct an election for the entire student body. Prior to election day, they will have conducted voter registration drives, and campaigned for their respective candidates. Only "registered voters" will be allowed to participate. Students will prepare ballots, open the "polls," and ensure that "voter fraud" does not occur. They will also devise a system based on the Electoral College for determining the winner. Leadership, problem solving, and organizational skills will be developed as students plan and conduct the election. This activity is a culmination of all of the activities covered in this unit.

Lesson Plans

Part I: The Constitutional Convention of 1787 - These plans will take three days, with classes lasting for 55 minutes each.

Georgia Performance Standards: SS8CG1, a., b., c.

Objective: Students will understand why the Framers of the Constitution felt the need to create an executive branch.

Materials: Curriculum unit section detailing the following information, Article II of the Constitution.

Procedures: Day 1 - A. Discuss the history of England's monarchy, and how it affected the attitudes of the colonists. B. Discuss the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.

C. Role play - Divide students into two groups, with $\frac{3}{4}$ of students representing the states, and the other $\frac{1}{4}$ representing Congress. - Give the groups a common problem to solve, with the result being a vote. - Afterwards discuss the problems associated with one group having too much power. Then discuss the ramifications of the group with less power being the central government of a country. D. Discussion - Review and discuss the six key components which the Framers eventually agreed on. Homework: Students write a one paragraph description of what they consider to be the 'perfect ruler.' Day 2 -

A. Students share their homework assignments using Think/Pair/Share. B. Students share the results from Think/Pair/Share with the entire class. C. (Students read Article II of the Constitution silently, then write an interpretation of the information. D. Discuss and take notes on Article II. Homework: Does the modern presidency reflect the ideals listed in Article II? Why or why not? Day 3 - A. Activity (20 minutes) - Students are told that they are to choose a country to live in, after the teacher describes each one. One country is called "Independent Land," the other "Follow the Leader Land." In Independent Land people are free to do what they want. There are no requirements for schooling, working, activities, and no laws exist. The second country is ruled by one person who makes all decisions. Citizens are told where to live, work, what to read, how to dress, etc. They live in safety as long as they obey the leader. Allow students to discuss among themselves and then have them vote on which country they would choose. Discuss the results, and why students made their particular choices. B. Share homework responses as a class.

C. Debate whether or not today's role of the president is what the Framers intended when they wrote the Constitution.

Part II: Political Parties - These lesson plans will take four days, with classes lasting for 55 minutes each.

Georgia Performance Standards: SS8CG 1 c., d., e.

Objectives: Students will be able to list the differences between the Republican and Democratic parties, and state the current platforms for both parties as they pertain to the 2008 election.

Materials: If possible, the teacher will tape portions of both political conventions, preferably the acceptance speeches of both candidates. Students collect current newspapers, magazines, etc. regarding the presidential

candidates, the conventions, etc., computers/worldwide web,

Procedures: Day 4 - A. Discussion continuum on current issues. Possible topics: Iraq war, poverty, education, health care, environment, nuclear energy, defense spending, immigration, abortion rights, education. B. As students discuss and make notations about where they stand on the issues, they decide which political party their views most reflect. C. Through lecture, the teacher shares the historical development of the two major parties, including the party symbols. D. Homework: Students design their own party symbol for whichever party they most identify, and write a short description. *Day 5 -*

A. Students share their homework. B. Students use the worldwide web, newspaper and magazine articles, and other reputable news sources to learn the current platforms of the presidential candidates. C. As students take notes and discuss the candidates, they begin to write a speech for whichever candidate they choose to support. These persuasive, 3-minute speeches must be based on accurate information. Homework: Students have two days to bring in two editorial cartoons, which depict something about each party's platform. *Day 6 -* A. In pairs, students share their political cartoons. Each student writes their own interpretation of the cartoons provided by their peer. They then compare to see if their interpretations match. B. In pairs, students draw their own cartoons. *Day 7 -*

A. Students share their own political cartoons. B. Using the Socratic Seminar method, students discuss what they have learned about the candidates. C. Students will use the information they have collected as well as what they learned in the Socratic Seminar, and continue to work on their speeches.

Part III: The Electoral College. These plans will take three days.

Objectives: Students will understand why the Framers included the Electoral College in the Constitution, discuss how this method of electing the president has impacted certain elections, and determine whether they personally feel the method is the best system for today's presidential elections.

Georgia Performance Standards: SS8CG3 a., b.

Materials: Computers, worldwide web, maps of electoral votes by state and the results of the 2004 presidential election.

Procedures: Day 8 - A. The teacher gives students a list of five candy bars. The class is divided into four groups, with four students (alerted ahead of time) not placed in a group. Each group decides on the candy bar that the class will receive the next time they earn a reward. The teacher then asks the four non-grouped students to vote for the groups, with each student taking one group. Some of this group will NOT choose what the group they represent chose, and some will. Explain that the Electoral College which elects the president is set up in a similar way. B. Read the sections of Article II of the Constitution, as they pertain to the Electoral College. C. Distribute copies of the Electoral College result maps from the 2004 election as well as a U.S. Map with electoral votes listed in each state (these can be found on numerous websites on the worldwide web.) *Day 9 -* A. Students use the website <http://uselectionatlas.org/> for more election result maps. B. Students take notes as teacher lectures on how the Electoral College is set up. C. Students brainstorm other ways in which a president could be elected, without involving the Electoral College. *Day 10-* A. Students have a formal debate on the pros and cons of the Electoral College. All students will debate both sides, with 20 minutes per each side. B. Debrief for the last ten minutes of class.

Part IV: The Voting Process. These plans will take nine days.

Georgia Performance Standards: SS8CG1 c, d.

Objectives: Students will name the requirements for becoming a registered U.S. voter, discuss the Constitutional Amendments which gave voting rights to minorities, explain the impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the National Voter Registration Act of 1995, examine reasons for lack of voter participation/voter apathy, conduct opinion polls, encourage eligible voters in their communities to vote, conduct a school wide voter registration drive and election.

Materials: Amendments 14, 15, and 19, art supplies, magazines, newspapers, computers, internet access, copies of the Voting Rights Act and the National Voter Registration Act.

Procedures: *Day 11* - A. In groups of two, students list all requirements that they can think of which individuals must meet in order to vote in a U.S. election.. B. Compare lists, and afterwards teacher gives students the actual requirements, including the exceptions. C. Discuss who was eligible to vote when the Constitution was first written.

Day 12 - A. Students read Amendment 15, Section 1, regarding the right of Blacks to vote. They also read Amendment 19, Section I, which gave women the right to vote. Discuss how, although the 14th Amendment made all persons born within the nation citizens, it took until 1948 until some states allowed Native Americans to vote. Homework: Students write an essay about the similarities between the Native American's fight for voting rights and citizenship, and the Civil Rights Movement. *Day 13* - A. The teacher gives the three core components of 1965's Voting Rights Act. Students discuss why these three key ideas were necessary, given the history of African Americans in America. B. The teacher gives students the details behind 1995's National Voter Registration Act. C. Students brainstorm reasons why they feel many eligible American citizens do not exercise their right to vote, especially given the sacrifices many have made so that all may have that privilege. *Day 14* - A. Students locate opinion polls online, in newspapers, magazines, etc., in which citizens responded to their choice for president, the issues that are important to them, etc. B. Discuss the ways in which the questions are phrased, how the results are displayed, etc. C. Students begin designing their own surveys for their peers and registered voters. D. Homework: Individual polls to be completed. *Day 15* - A. Students share their homework. B. Students begin to administer their poll to a predetermined number of people. C. Students design a flyer to distribute/display in their neighborhoods, urging citizens to vote. D. Homework: Students research where their community votes, with the information to be included in their flyer.

Days 16-19 - Students will complete their speeches, present them in class, conduct a "voter registration drive" at school, and sponsor a school-wide election.

Notes

1. Smith, page 18.
2. Shapiro, YNI Seminar, July 14, 2008.
3. Smith, p. 3.

4. Smith, page 19.
5. Milliken Publishing Company, page 17.
6. Bernstein, pages 23 - 25.
7. Milliken Publishing Company, page 55.
8. Piddock, page 18.
9. Kelley, page 13.
10. Milliken, page 54.
11. Kelley, page 201.
12. Kelley, page 201
13. Milliken, page 55.
14. Pilsby and Wildavsky, page 22.
15. Milliken, page 66.
16. Hamilton, Mill, Jay, No. 9, No. 10, No. 39, No. 49.
17. Guldin, page 22.
18. Blevins, page 61.
19. Guldin, page 31.
20. Blevins, page 61.
21. Blevins, pages 151-152.
22. Blevins, pages 153-154.
23. Dictionary.die.net
24. Bernstein, pages 134 - 135.
25. Milliken, page 22.
26. Pilsby and Wildavsky pages 244 - 245.
27. Pilsby and Wildavsky, page 41.
28. Milliken Publishing Company, page 22.
29. Kommers, Finn, and Jacobson, page 380.

30. Guldin, page 159
31. Guldin, pages 157 - 158.
32. Polsby and Wildavsky, pages 244-245.
33. Guldin, page 2.
34. Guldin, pages 2 - 3.
35. Guldin, page 3.
36. Bernstein, page 138.
37. Guldin, page 5.
38. United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Voting Section: Introduction to Federal Voting Laws.
39. Guldin, page 6.
40. Guldin, page 7.
41. Guldin, page 15.
42. Guldin, pages 8 - 9.
43. Guldin, pages 8 - 9.
44. Guldin, pages 12 - 13.

Annotated Teacher Bibliography/Resources

Bernstein, Vivian. *American Government: Freedom, Rights, Responsibilities*. Austin: Steck-Vaughn, 1997.

This book details the way our government came to be. It includes the branches of government and the jobs included in each branch. Election of leaders and citizen participation are also discussed. The Declaration of Independence and Constitution are included in full.

Blevins, Dave. *American Political Parties in the 21st Century*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2006.

More than 180 political parties are described and cataloged in this book. The parties themselves provided most of the information through contact with their representatives and from their websites. Summaries of the parties histories and platforms are also included.

Bloom, Allan, trans. *The Republic of Plato*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books/Perseus,

1991.

Told in the form of dialogue among Plato and his colleagues, this ten-chapter discussion of how to live includes sections on

determining the genuine from the imitation, the roles of each gender in a society, and the limits a government should exercise. Bloom's edition includes extensive notes, line numbers for easy reference, and his own interpretive essay.

Busch, Andrew E. and Ceaser, James W. *Red Over Blue - The 2000 Elections and American Politics*.

This insightful book offers an account of the 2000 election. They examine pre-primary preparations, and follow with post-election proposals for electoral reform.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. New York: Perennial/Harper/Collins, 2000.

In the mid 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in its democratic infancy. The perspective of this Frenchman's view of how our government worked in the early days provides a unique vantage point for the modern American reader.

Graetz, Michael J., and Ian Shapiro. *Death by a Thousand Cuts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Utilizing the analogy of the torture called "death by a thousand cuts," Graetz and Shapiro clearly outline how the death tax in America bleeds citizens of their hard-earned wealth. Specific cases of individuals whose estates have been affected bring life to this account of the unfairness of this tax, what it does to people and their families, and how it came to be.

Guldin, Bob. *Choosing the President 2008*. Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2008.

This Citizen's Guide to the Electoral Process, sponsored by the League of

Women Voters, directs readers to the best political Web sites, suggests what to look for in media/news coverage, as well as at the conventions and debates. It also addresses the issues that are likely to impact the 2008 presidential election.

Hamilton, Alexander, and James Madison and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

This is a compilation of all the numbers published by the authors anonymously in serial form beginning in 1787. With an introduction and notes by Charles R. Kesler and edited by Clinton Rossiter, this edition also includes the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Articles of Confederation.

Marsh, Carole. *Sign on the Dotted Line: The U.S. Constitution*. US: Gallopade International, 2005.

This book includes a timeline of events, from the Declaration of Independence

to the ratification of the Bill of Rights. It details the difficulties, compromises,

and debates that eventually resulted in our Constitution.

McNeese, Tim. *The U.S. Constitution*. Lisa Marty. Dayton: Milliken, 2001.

This book covers the methods and history of our American government, from its very inception. It includes the entire constitution as well as the amendments, including the most recent ones.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1978.

Mill's five-chapter work expounds on the definitions and meanings of *liberty*, citing examples and posing hypothetical situations in which government intervention should be imposed.

Piddock, Charles. *How Our Government Works*. USA: Weekly Reader,

Literacy skills are taught in this volume, through its lessons on citizenship and readers are introduced to different concepts of government, the evolution of democracy in the U.S., the three branches of government, and the modern legislative process.

Polsby, Nelson W., and Aaron Wildavsky. *Presidential Elections: Strategies of American Electoral Politics*, fifth edition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980.

This book examines the strategies of presidential campaigns, and key decisions which have determined who actually made it to the Oval Office. It includes many first-hand accounts. There is strong emphasis on the importance of civic education.

Poor, Scott. *The U.S. Government*. Arizona: Remedia Publications, Inc., 200

This book gives a close-up look at the inner workings of the American government in action. It includes information on the Constitution, the judicial system, the legislatures, the elective process, and the military.

Smith, Robert. *Spotlight on America: Elections - Vote*. California: Teacher Created Resources, Inc, 2004

This book is from the *Spotlight on America* series. These books allow students to experience in-depth views of specific events or historical eras. The lessons reinforce nonfiction reading skills while connecting social studies to other areas of the curriculum.

Tamblyn, Catherine. *Democracy in Action: Hold a Mock Election! USA: Weekly Reader*, 2008.

This book is comprised of 8 learning centers that provide students with independent

learning activities to reinforce their understanding and knowledge of how the United

States government works. It includes the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the functions of the three branches of the government, state and local government responsibilities, the Electoral College, and presidential campaigns.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use