



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2012 Volume III: The American Presidency

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## **I think, therefore I do? Conscious and unconscious factors influencing our choice for President of the United States**

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"The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth." –Thomas Paine Common Sense, 1776

### **Objective**

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Using the upcoming presidential election as the vehicle, this unit seeks to help students train their brains to work beyond their visceral, emotional reactions to form reasoned judgments.

### **Introduction**

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It was the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The date for student council elections was just announced. Megan thought she might want to be student council president. For one of her teacher nominations, Megan asked Ms. Smith. Before completing the nomination form, Ms. Smith asked Megan why she thought she was qualified for the position of president. Megan thought for a second and replied, "Well, I am pretty, popular, and I am captain of the cheerleading squad." Fast forward to election day, Megan is on the stage giving a speech about how much fun it would be to be student council president. As her visual aid, she brought out a fellow student who proceeded to dance like the movie character Napoleon Dynamite. Megan won the election by a landslide.

Let's look at another situation. It is 1899 at the Globe Hotel in Richwood, Ohio. Two men are having their shoes shined. One is a lawyer and a lobbyist. The other was a newspaper editor and soon to be an Ohio state senator. The lobbyist observed the other man to have a courteous and generous good nature, a resonating voice, an impression of grace and virility, and a well-proportioned physique. The lobbyist's first thought was, "Wouldn't that man make a great-looking President?" <sup>1</sup> Indeed, the newspaper editor did eventually become President of the United States – President Warren G. Harding, generally agreed upon to be one of the worst Presidents in American history. <sup>2</sup>

What factors lead "we the people" to make that ultimate choice? The Founding Fathers were early Enlightenment thinkers. They believed human life could be improved through the employment of logic and reason. <sup>3</sup> The concept of deliberative democracy <sup>4</sup> is based upon the idea that "we the people" are adroit at making a rational decision about the qualifications and aptitude of the presidential candidates and can ascertain whether the candidates' views are congruent with our own <sup>5</sup> as long as we keep a balance between reason and emotion. <sup>6</sup> Fast forward to election day. You are at your polling place standing in the voting area. You are staring at the ballot, pen in hand. What goes through your mind? What factors or issues do you consider when making your choice? Do you weigh the issues like the Founding Fathers intended or do you go with your gut choice? While the physical act of checking the box appears reasonable and straight-forward, the developmental and emotional influences can serve as an impediment to an otherwise reasonable choice. Whichever man is victorious, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney, history will be made. Our lives, our children's lives, will be directly and indirectly affected by the decisions and policies of this one man. Is there a more important decision?

## Rationale

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Eighth graders are such amazing creatures. On the one hand, their bodies are really beginning to assume their adult-like form yet their brains (and thus their decisions) are far from being fully formed. When I allow myself to contemplate the fact that in four short years these "works in progress" will have the same power to vote that I possess, I become scared out of my wits because their decision-making ability seems woefully inadequate to contemplate something as important as voting for the next leader of the free world. Could I help them become more aware of their choices/decisions and the subsequent ramifications? Voting for President of the United States is a weighty responsibility. For 236 years, Americans have fought for the right to get to "choose" who is charged with executing the laws of our country. Yet, many in our country are concerned that the nation's students are not prepared or inclined to make this weighty decision. Tony Wagner, co-director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education says, "What I have seen in some of our best public schools over the past decade is that while Johnny and Juan and Leticia are learning how to read, at least at a basic level, they are not learning how to think or care about what they read; nor are they learning to clearly communicate ideas orally and in writing." <sup>7</sup> Would it not be in all of our best interests to help these future citizens learn how to think and reason and understand the factors that influence how they make decisions and how they can make better decisions?

## Curricular Plan

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This unit is a part of a yearlong thematic unit centered around the concept of choice. The unit will encompass all of the first quarter and two weeks in the second quarter. Utilizing brain-based learning strategies, students will begin the school year by declaring their gut choice for President immediately upon entering the classroom on the first day of school. They will engage in whole-group, small-group, and individual reading and writing reflection pertaining to the job and qualities of a president. The students will engage in activities that are designed to help them question their choices and beliefs. Students will be asked to investigate the source of

their beliefs after eleven weeks of activities, the students will cast their final vote for President. They will compare and reflect upon the first vote and underlying reasons with the second. The eventual goal is for the students to become cognizant of their decision-making process, the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence their decisions, and the long-term consequences.

## Brain-based Learning

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Brain-based learning utilizes the current research from the work of cognitive sciences the disciplines of neurobiology, biology, psychology, and education. The focus of brain-based learning is to enhance teacher instruction and develop the student's ability to learn in the way that neurologically works best for their brain. <sup>8</sup>

## Context

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This will be my thirteenth year teaching at Thoreau Demonstration Academy in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Thoreau's macrocurriculum is predicated upon brain-based learning. If students are in my class, they have either not passed the previous year's state test and/or are reading below grade level as designated on a district-wide reading inventory. There are some general defining characteristics that are true for the majority of my students. Homework is inconsistent; supplies are rarely brought to class; and emotional outbursts are frequent. What is particularly endemic in my students is their inability to think past their immediate wants and needs. They operate on a rudimentary level. By-and-large my students do not know how to make reasoned judgments; their brains operate on emotional default.

## Developmental Influences on Decision Making

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### Associative Architecture of the Brain

Before exploring why voters ultimately choose a particular candidate, it is necessary to first explore how the brain is structured and how the parts function together when a choice, or decision, is being made. The human brain is undeniably the most complex machine in the known universe, responsible for every action, thought and feeling ever had <sup>9</sup> Dean Buonomano, author of *Brain Bugs: How the brain's flaws shape our lives*, refers to the brain's construction as "associative architecture. <sup>10</sup> The brain, like a computer starts off with the same basic software (the neurons and synapses). It was designed to acquire, analyze and process data from the outside world (from experience) and then generate an output through action and behavior. <sup>11</sup> The brain is a product of natural selection – able to consistently change and adapt to its evolving environment. The modern brain is a patchwork of circuits, each one spliced onto the next. During each redesign phase, nature has added new structures onto the old within the brain. <sup>12</sup>

All four major parts of the brain (the brain stem, cerebellum, diencephalon, and cerebrum) have their own role to play; their own function to perform. Higher level thinking skills such as reason, language, and creativity are part of the cerebrum<sup>13</sup> particularly the corticostriatal network. This is where decisions are made. When new information comes in, the striatum acts as a switchboard sending the message to the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex then makes the decision about where to catalog and store the new information as well as determine what action needs to be undertaken.<sup>14</sup>

The computational power of the brain comes from its ability to link new information to old, catalog the new information and then store it for future use.<sup>15</sup> The manner in which the information is categorized, grouped, and stored reflects our experiences.<sup>16</sup> The brain's associative architecture ensures that not only are the experiences categorized, grouped, and stored but the meanings associated with the experiences are also forming an implicit association.<sup>17</sup> Buonomano asserts that the implicit-association is a consequence of both nature and nurture. Nature ensures that no matter the experience (big/small, monumental/forgettable), the information is stored in a neural file cabinet. Nurture determines in which drawer in the file cabinet the information will be stored. What does all of this have to do with voting in a presidential election? The very structure of the brain ensures that as we pick up the pen to mark our choice on the ballot, all of our previous experiences are with us and playing both a conscious and unconscious role in determining whose name we check.

## **Unconscious brain**

As humans we believe we are in charge of our minds; we are telling the brain what to do. We (particularly Americans) pride ourselves on being deliberately rational—able to make a decision and provide justification for the decision. We would argue that our decision-making lies largely within the realm of conscious thought.<sup>18</sup> Recent brain research, however, asserts the unconscious brain actually leads the decision making.<sup>19</sup> In reality, most of our thoughts are unconscious. This is not meaning a repressed unconscious in the Freudian sense but rather a lack of being a consciously aware participant in the decision-making process.<sup>20</sup> In fact, often times the hidden part of the brain will simply address the new information without informing the conscious part that any action was necessary.<sup>21</sup> As Americans we are "innately suspicious of this type of rapid cognition. We live [and have been brought up] in a world that assumes that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making the decision."<sup>22</sup> We inundate ourselves with idioms such as Look before you leap and Haste makes waste. We are raised to believe that a conscious effort to gather information will lead to a better outcome. However, brain research has shown that due to the sheer volume of information being processed the brain takes thin-slices of information in order to make quick decisions without extensive deliberation.<sup>23</sup> The brain finds patterns in the new experience; it uses this pattern to find old information in which to attach the new. When we have a 'hunch' about a situation, the brain is "thin-slicing" the new information to the old information and coming to a conclusion even if the person is not fully conscious of why.

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The issue in regards to voting is that how the brain decides to catalog and store the information can create an unconscious bias influencing our decisions without the full awareness, recognition, and cooperation of our conscious mind. "The job of the hidden brain is to leap to conclusions. This is why people cannot tell you why one politician looks more competent than another, or why one job candidate seems more qualified than another. They just have a feeling, an intuition."<sup>25</sup> When you vote, are you consciously aware of the influence of your hidden brain? Me either.

## Emotional Brain

Recent brain research has shown that the brain was not designed to lead with reason but rather by emotion <sup>26</sup> a fact the founding fathers instinctively knew. The orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) is responsible for assimilating emotions into the decision-making process. <sup>27</sup> In 1982, neurologist Antonio Damasio was the first to discover the emotion/reason connection. He had a patient named Elliot who had a small tumor removed from his prefrontal cortex. From his observations of Elliot, Damasio discovered that by removing the tumor from the prefrontal cortex region of the brain, Elliot's ability to feel emotion was permanently damaged and thus his reasoning capabilities were impaired. Antoine Buchara, a neuroscientist at the University of Southern California found "that most of the [brain's] computation is done at an emotional, unconscious level, and not at a logical level" <sup>28</sup> The conscious brain is unaware of all the neural activity taking place. In other words, emotions force attention, generate meaning, control behaviors and help us to systematize the world in which we live. Emotions are the instinctive representations of all the information that is processed but not perceived. <sup>29</sup> Even when a person attempts to be reasonable, the emotional impulses will secretly manipulate judgment. <sup>30</sup>

## Cognitive Dissonance

The brain faces a dilemma between reason and emotion which creates a cognitive dissonance. <sup>31</sup> Cognition simply refers to the processing occurring within the brain. <sup>32</sup> Dissonance alludes to the inharmonious state of trying to match the new information with the old. When we find ourselves in this state of cognitive dissonance, when our brain determines that the new information is contradictory to information already processed, catalogued, and stored, our brains find ways to make the new evidence consistent with our previous schema. To exemplify this state of cognitive dissonance, let's look at a study conducted by Drew Westen, a psychologist at Emory University.

During the lead up to the 2004 election, Westen asked a group of ordinary voters, who had shown a strong party affiliation, to participate in a study. He showed each voter a series of obviously contradictory statements made by each candidate (John Kerry - Democrat and George W. Bush - Republican). The voter was then asked to rate the contradictions on a scale of 1-4 with four being the highest level of contradiction. Those voters who claimed strong Democratic affiliation rated Bush's statements with a 4 but were markedly less troubled with Kerry's. Those who declared themselves Republican also rated Kerry's contradictory statements as basically unintelligible yet were less distressed with Bush's inconsistencies. <sup>33</sup> What Westen realized was that the voters, instead of using reason to evaluate the statements, used reason to perpetuate their partisan adherence. Then once the cognitive dissonance had been resolved, the voters left feeling the contradictory evidence with which they had been presented had provided a rationalization for their political beliefs. <sup>34</sup>

In another example, Larry Bartels, a political scientist at Princeton University analyzed survey data from the 1990s. In 1996, he asked so-called high information Republican voters (ones who could name their representatives, consistently read the newspapers and watched the news programs on television) what happened to the deficit under President Clinton's first term. More than 55% said that the deficit had increased when in actuality the deficit had declined by more than 90%. Bartels concluded knowing more about politics did not erase partisan bias. He concluded that voters only tended to assimilate those facts that would confirm what they already believed. "Voters think that they're thinking," Bartels said, "but what they're really doing is inventing facts or ignoring facts so that they can rationalize decisions they've already made." <sup>35</sup> We tend to edit the world to fit with our unconscious schema and pacify the cognitive dissonance through a type of

self-imposed ignorance. <sup>36</sup> Why? It feels good to be right. Certainty begets harmony to the inner cacophony. It lets us pretend that our entire brain agrees with our choices. Do you see the danger?

With adolescents (and quite frankly adults), if they are not taught to anticipate the dissonance and then how to address it so that all of the facets of the new experience are properly processed, catalogued, and stored, the resulting schema could be significantly skewed and thus skew further decisions. This is precisely what the Federalists charged the Anti-Federalists of doing, making their decision to be against the new Constitution before evaluating the evidence." <sup>37</sup> Our brain finds a way to justify what it believes it knows to be true so we have to be careful with the truths we create.

## **Adolescent Brain**

How many times have you asked a student (or your own child), "Why did you do that? It does not make any sense?" I have had to calm myself with the mantra, "Their brains are not yet fully formed," when one of my students does something that does not appear rational. The mantra has become a sort of internal joke; unfortunately, it is literally true, an adolescent's brain is not yet complete which causes them to make all manner of ill-conceived decisions. Adolescence is the time period generally between the ages of 12 and 21. Most people attribute the beginning of adolescence to around the beginning of puberty. According to the Encyclopedia of Children's Health, adolescence, from the Latin verb *adolescere*, means "to grow into the maturity of adulthood." <sup>38</sup> It is the time period in which the child is supposed to be transitioning into adulthood, learning the rational decision-making skills necessary for a successful transition into adulthood. However, there is a significant impediment in this process. In each fully functioning adult person's brain, the cells in the back of the cortex register incoming sensory information and move the information to the front to be processed, catalogued and stored. The neurons in the front of the cortex then process the information in terms of emotions. The issue for adolescents is that their frontal cortex is not yet fully formed and therefore does not possess the capabilities to properly attend to their emotions. <sup>39</sup> Anyone who has taught adolescents can attest to the veracity of this research.

As if being incomplete is not difficult enough, at the start of puberty, the adolescent brain undergoes a chemical and biological transformation. A pruning process takes place in which the brain eliminates brain circuits that are no longer necessary. The pruning eventually helps the brain to operate more efficiently, but in the meantime, can have a negative effect on learning. The amygdala and the hippocampus (responsible for assimilating danger) have a tendency to respond more tensely exacerbating the difficulty with properly assimilating emotions. Dopamine, a brain chemical responsible for feeling good, is circulating at higher levels in the prefrontal cortex, but dopamine levels in the reward center of the brain are decreased. The decreasing levels of dopamine in the reward center indicate that the adolescent requires more excitement and stimulation to achieve the same level of pleasure required by an adult. <sup>40</sup> Lastly, Melatonin, a chemical which aids sleeping, is produced later in the day than in small children or adults which leads to the adolescents being unable to get a full night's sleep during the same time intervals as they did as younger children. All of this biological and chemical cacophony leads to decisions that often just do not make sense to parents, teachers, or even themselves. <sup>41</sup> In other words, in four short years, at 18 years of age, my eighth grade students will be allowed to vote for President of the United States with a brain that is still a biological and chemical construction site. However, all of these changes make adolescence the perfect time to train the brain. <sup>42</sup>

## Train your brain

Until recently (within the last 30 years) the brain's structure and function was thought to be a fixed, static quantity, unable to be changed. What you are born with is all you have to work with. In fact the first standardized IQ tests created by Lewis Terman were based on the notion of heritability and fixed intelligence. <sup>43</sup> Recent brain research, however, has completely disproved this belief. The brain is malleable, capable of growth and change; its wiring can actually be changed – much like opening the cover of your computer's CPU and changing the wires around. Neurologists refer to this malleability of the brain as plasticity. <sup>44</sup> Even more ground-breaking is that all thoughts and actions literally cause parts of the brain to expand or contract based upon their level of usage. The brain self-regulates its real estate, growing areas that have greater use and retarding or pruning areas of disuse. <sup>45</sup>

A brain's plasticity does not just refer to physical changes but also to changes in function. The brain can literally reprogram itself in relation to its environment and experience. <sup>46</sup> In a study of patients with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Jeffrey Schwartz, a neuropsychiatrist at UCLA, found that "mental training, practice, and effort can bring about changes in the function of the brain. <sup>47</sup>

## Emotional Influences

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Pulitzer prize-winning American poet, Archibald MacLeish defined freedom as "the right to choose: the right to create for oneself the alternatives of choice." <sup>48</sup> However, as we have already discussed, our choices are innate derivatives of our experiences. <sup>49</sup> Our choices are emotional valuations of those experiences. Many political scientists have operated under the assumption that political votes are selfish votes...which candidate has the most potential to benefit me? Decades of research has reflected this belief. <sup>50</sup> However, when I stand in the voting booth, preparing to make my mark, is my choice truly my choice or actually a manifestation of the wants and needs of my social network?

### *Individualism*

The United States was founded upon the ideal of the right of the individual vote, the role of "I". We remain one of the world's most individualistic societies in the world. <sup>51</sup> In our individualist society, we focus upon individual choice very early in life, asking children to make a choice, Cheerios or Lucky Charms, this toy or that one, Jordans or Adidas? This is a scaffolded approach to teaching decision-making skills. Yet, despite the protracted, concentrated focus on individual choice, studies have shown we tend to make decisions, particularly vote, with regard to our social networks. <sup>52</sup>

### *Collectivism*

Collectivist cultures focus upon the "we" in decision making. Individuals within a collectivist culture view themselves in relation to the groups to which they belong (family, job, church, socio-economic group, race, culture). These individuals are motivated by and give precedence to the priorities of the collective. In fact their identities are shaped by their relationship to the community. The individual is not powerless, but he is willing to sacrifice his own needs for the good of the whole. <sup>53</sup> Duty plays a starring role in a collectivist culture. You

are brought up to do what your parents or elders ask of you because they know better. Christakis and Fowler in *Connected: The surprising power of our social networks and how they shape our lives* maintain that how and why we vote has everything to do with our "embeddedness in groups and with the power of our social networks, whether that group or network be racial, regional, religious, or political." <sup>54</sup> Put another way, birds of a feather, flock together. <sup>55</sup>

The issue the social contract philosophers have not ever fully rectified is that people (no matter age, geography, or socio-economic level) feel a very strong emotional connection and obligation to their particular community. When faced with a dilemma, this connection/obligation forces one to ask themselves where their loyalties lie? With themselves or with their community? <sup>56</sup> Again, anyone who has had experience with adolescents can visualize this dilemma within the children. Do I do what is best for me or what the group wants me to do? Do I vote the way I believe or the way my friends, family and/or church believes?

## Background Information for Unit

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From their observations of human behavior, the ancient Greeks theorized that humans are, at their core, rational beings; when making decisions, humans consciously analyze all aspects of the matter before coming to a rational conclusion. Plato theorized the mind was divided into two separate spheres. The soul, he said, was conflicted between reason and emotion. <sup>57</sup> Pleasures, emotions and senses were necessary evils but man should always strive to be governed by reason. In *Timaeus* Plato pronounced that a man, who was able to master his emotions and live a life of reason and justice, would be reborn into a "celestial heaven of eternal happiness." <sup>58</sup> The famous French philosopher, Rene' Descartes maintained that reason could be utilized to keep the senses, primarily emotion, in their proper place. <sup>59</sup> During the Renaissance, European thinkers rediscovered the philosophical work of the ancient Greeks.

### *Founding Fathers and the Enlightenment*

The Founding Fathers predicated our deliberative democracy on the fact that man is capable of keeping emotion in perspective to make rational decisions. Thomas Jefferson stated on many occasions that reason and sentiment should operate like independent co-rulers. <sup>60</sup> Emphasizing reason over emotion has been the bedrock of American political philosophy; every native born American, from a very young age, is indoctrinated with the belief that one of their duties as a citizen is to strive to make reasoned decisions.

### *Reason and the Founding Fathers*

In a letter to George Mason in 1791, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "My hope [is] that we have not labored in vain, and that our experiment will still prove that men can be governed by reason." <sup>61</sup> Jefferson, along with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Alexander Hamilton fashioned themselves philosophical, Enlightenment type thinkers with a dispassionate view of the mind. <sup>62</sup> "Knowledge, the Enlightenment thinkers saw, could set men and women free. Reason could come to the rescue of the oppressed." <sup>63</sup> The founders believed themselves to be making a social contract with the people, creating a just society for a rational populous. <sup>64</sup> They believed that by creating a deliberative democracy, verses a direct democracy, the citizenry could reason, or deliberate through their representatives. <sup>65</sup> Creating a deliberate democracy was a conscious



choice on the part of the founding Fathers. <sup>66</sup> The general populace, they believed, did not have the time or inclination to truly devote to "cool and sedate reflection". <sup>67</sup> Their representatives would have the necessary time.

### *Emotion and the Founding Fathers*

While the Founding Fathers were Enlightenment thinkers and brain construction research did not exist, it is clear the Founding Fathers understood that reasonable decisions could be impeded by passions. It was September 1787. The new Constitution had been sent to the states for ratification. Those opposed to the Constitution (now known as Anti-Federalists) had begun writing essays reproaching the new plan of government. In an effort to thwart the efforts of the Anti-Federalists, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison began writing their own series of essays (known as the Federalist Papers) promoting ratification of this new Constitution. In Federalist #1, Alexander Hamilton says:

"Happy will it be if our choice should be directed by a judicious estimate of our true interests, unperplexed and unbiased by considerations not connected with the public good. But this is a thing more ardently to be wished than seriously to be expected. The plan offered to our deliberations affects too many particular interests, innovates upon too many local institutions, not to involve in its discussion a variety of objects foreign to its merits, and of views, passions and prejudices little favorable to the discovery of truth." <sup>68</sup>

In other words, it would be ideal if people could put aside their personal considerations in favor of the public good. However, Alexander Hamilton realized that this decision is too large in scope not to make allowances for emotion.

Interestingly, in Federalist #37 James Madison attempts to answer questions about how the Constitutional Conventioneers came to propose the type of government proposed in the Constitution. In the second paragraph, he concedes that as part of normal "human affairs", emotions can run high; this was expected. However, what Madison is particularly addressing is that those opposed had predetermined to censure and condemn the new Constitution; they were not open-minded, were not allowing themselves to see reason in the proposed new government. <sup>69</sup> Madison concedes that of course the constitutional plan will have errors because it was created after all by a man who is by his very nature fallible. Madison contends that the errors themselves can be corrected through reasonable deliberation. More importantly, Madison asserts that the purpose of the Convention was so great that the conventioneers were able to forgo the "influence of party animosities...most apt to contaminate their proceedings" <sup>70</sup> in favor of the greater good. In other words, emotion was a visceral, unconscious reaction inherent in all men, but reason was a deliberate, conscious choice.

## **Areas of Presidency to be Addressed Within the Unit**

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### **Why a president?**

Article II of the U.S. Constitution provides that executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America. The decision to vest powers in an executive was not made lightly or hastily. These

Founding Fathers (all but Alexander Hamilton) had been taught to revere their king. <sup>71</sup> The break with their beloved monarch did not come easily <sup>72</sup> So when James Wilson on Friday, June 1, 1787, in the Assembly Room of the State House of Philadelphia moved that the "executive consist of a single person," <sup>73</sup> you could have heard a pin drop. Eleven years ago, they had rejected a monarchy "in principle as well as in person." <sup>74</sup> the delegates to this Constitutional Convention were deeply afraid of subjecting this new country to the excesses of a monarchy. <sup>75</sup> The matter before them, however, was that the current governmental configuration was too weak.

The original Articles of Confederation did not provide for a chief executive. The closest the Articles came to an executive was a "Committee of the States" which consisted of one delegate from each state. <sup>76</sup> In addition, the Articles did not provide a way for the national government to support itself. The U.S. was essentially bankrupt. <sup>77</sup> The government leaders during the Revolution found that meeting and deliberating in committees way too cumbersome when the war demanded efficiency. <sup>78</sup> The war also demanded money and the national Congress had no real power to generate funds other than thru private funding. The states were the only ones able to levy taxes. <sup>79</sup> The issue for the states was that they had become autonomous. The states did not believe one person could truly understand and thus respond to the needs of each individual state. In addition, the states did not completely trust one another and were reluctant for someone from another state to make decisions about their state. It goes without saying the founding fathers were very distrustful of a strong centralized power. However, due to the difficulties the confederation had encountered with just managing the logistics of the American Revolution, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 understood that some power needed to be vested in a federal government if the states were going to be able to function together as a nation. Borrowing from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and the Baron de Montesquieu, the Founding Fathers believed that creating a government with checks and balances built in was the best option for a government system.

### **Issues to be debated**

So, on June 1, 1787, as they are proceeding to take up the 7<sup>th</sup> Resolution of the Virginia Plan proposed by Edmund Randolph that of an executive, they had several critical issues before them. The first was whether the Executive should be one person or many. <sup>80</sup> It took the delegates four days to settle on a single executive and then two more mouths of debating the decision. The second issue before them was the extent of executive power. <sup>81</sup> The committee of the whole was never able to really come to a consensus on this issue. It was not until September when the Committee of Eleven convened that particular executive powers were outlined. <sup>82</sup> The third issue centered around term length. <sup>83</sup> Initially, this seemed a relatively easy issue to resolve and the delegates voted on seven years for a term length. The fourth issue, how to choose the executive, was a particular sticking point. On June 2, James Wilson proposed an electoral system that was soundly defeated. <sup>84</sup> On the surface the delegates all professed to be committed to a government of the people but none wanted to place authority of government operations in direct control of the people <sup>85</sup> because they were too "liable to deceptions." <sup>86</sup> This issue will also not be solved until September when the Committee of Eleven, decided on a single executive with a term of four years and by the indirect vote of the populace for a group of electors. The fifth issue was relatively easy to decide, compensation for the executive. Only Benjamin Franklin strenuously opposed any compensation fearing it would lead to graft and corruption. <sup>87</sup> Likewise, issue six was settled relatively calmly. The question was whether the executive could be removed for mal-practice or neglect of duty. The answer was a resounding yes. The seventh issue went through a bit more debate. Should the executive have any legislative authority. <sup>88</sup> The initial scope of this issue concerned veto power. James Wilson

and Alexander Hamilton favored the executive having an absolute ability to negate any legislation without legislative recourse. This option was soundly voted down. Roger Sherman and Gunning Bedford proposed the executive to have no veto power. This also garnered no real support. The third option, executive with veto but congressional 2/3 override provision, seemed to appeal to the majority. <sup>89</sup>

At the beginning of the convention, the delegates held strongly to their class and state loyalties. Stances in regards to the executive were strongly held and strenuously argued for or against. However, as the heat and the length of the summer wore on, reason and compromise became more of the foundation of discourse. In the end, no one delegate achieved all of which they set out, but it was Benjamin Franklin who was able to help the delegates send the Constitution to a vote of the people—"thus I consent Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure, that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the public good..." <sup>90</sup>

### **Requirements to be President**

Article II, Section 1, clause 5 states that only natural born citizens who have lived within the boundaries of the United States for at least 14 years and are at least 35 years old may be president. <sup>91</sup> With the addition of the 22<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the Constitution passed in 1951, no one can be President again if he has already served two complete terms. <sup>92</sup> You do not constitutionally have to be a member of a political party, but no President other than George Washington has been elected to the office without formally declaring their allegiance to some political group. Lastly, the Constitution does not stipulate that a candidate has to have any formal governing experience. <sup>93</sup>

### **Powers of the President**

#### *Explicit*

Chief of State, Chief Executive, Commander-in-Chief, Chief Diplomat, and Chief Legislator are the explicit powers outlined in Article II, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. (Rossiter) The Chief of State is the ceremonial head of the government and the living symbol of the nation. As Chief of State the President is expected to perform any number of public duties that would be relegated to a king or queen in a monarchy such as greeting visiting dignitaries, lighting the nation's Christmas tree, and throwing out the first pitch of baseball season. <sup>94</sup> As Chief Executive, the President is responsible for enforcing the laws of the U.S. and for overseeing the thousands of workers in the Executive branch. <sup>95</sup> As Commander-in-Chief, the President is the literal head of the armed forces responsible for the adjudication of all matters related to the maintenance and conduct the military. <sup>96</sup> As Chief Diplomat the President has sole responsibility for "the formulation of policy and the conduct of affairs" <sup>97</sup> in relation to other countries. The Founding Fathers also granted the some legislative powers such as the power to veto legislation he finds fault with. In addition the Constitution maintained that at least once a year, the President must communicate with Congress and "recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." <sup>98</sup> Also, the president may convene both houses of Congress if he deems it necessary. <sup>99</sup>

#### *Implicit*

Clinton Rossiter, author of *The American Presidency*, contends that the President has five implicit powers: Chief of Party, Voice of the People, Protector of Peace, Manager of Prosperity, and World Leader. The

Presidency has evolved to encompass these roles as they have become necessary. Despite the intention of the Founding Fathers, the President "is at once the least political and most political of all heads of government."<sup>100</sup> As the Voice of the People, the President serves as the moral compass of the nation.<sup>101</sup> As Commander-in-Chief, the President is the defacto Protector of the Peace. While the Founding Fathers did not explicitly spell out "Protector of Peace," incidents before and after the Constitutional Convention reinforced the need to have one person who could quickly marshal troops, equipment, medical supplies, monetary aid, and food in the case of an emergency such as a national disaster.<sup>102</sup> The President has also been saddled with the job of Manager of Prosperity. President Franklin Roosevelt perhaps best understood their role. The Employment Act of 1946 singled out the president as the official who is charged "to foster and promote free competitive enterprise, to avoid economic fluctuations or to diminish the effects thereof, and to maintain employment, production, and purchasing power."<sup>103</sup> Lastly, due to the rise of the Cold War and the United States' economic prosperity, the U.S. President is the one other world leaders look to for counsel.

## **Electoral Process**

Article II, Section 1, Clause 2 of the U.S. Constitution provides that "each state shall appoint a number of electors, equal to the whole number of senators and representatives may be entitled in the Congress..." On election day, when you are marking your ballot, were you aware that when you cast your ballot, you are really voting for your state's group of electors, that when they meet in December you want the electors to cast their vote for your choice? This system is not without its critics (particularly after the election of 2000 when Al Gore actually received the majority of the popular vote but lost the electoral vote and thus lost the election). The Founding Fathers understood they were not creating a direct democracy but rather a deliberative democracy. Their intention was to insulate the election of the President from the immediate desires, and "unwise and possibly unjust inclinations" of the populace.<sup>104</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In their book *You are not your brain: The 4-step solution for changing bad habits, ending unhealthy thinking, and taking control of your life*, Jeffrey Schwartz and Rebecca Gladding contend that just studying the brain and its plasticity by itself is innocuous. The real change occurs when the information is self-directed. "Using the power of focused attention, along with the ability to apply commitment, hard work, and dedication, to direct your choices and actions, thereby rewiring your brain to work for you..."<sup>105</sup>

As I was reading Raphael's book, *Mr. President: How and why the founders created a chief executive*, I became very frustrated with the delegates at the Constitutional Convention. These Founding Fathers espoused a belief in rationality, that if given adequate time to consider all of the options, a rational decision would prevail. Yet, time and again a solution would be put forth and the delegates would dismiss it out of hand for its lack of viability yet only to end up returning to the same suggestion several months later. Why were they being so stubborn with their minds so firmly entrenched in their fears? And then I got it! The battle of reason over emotion is not new. These men suffered the frailties of man just like any other. But when push came to shove, the majority of the delegates at the convention were able to consciously put aside their emotions for the betterment of the cause.

This unit is designed to enact a paradigm shift with you the teacher and with the students. We became teachers because we wanted to make a difference. We became teachers because we wanted to help mold better people and citizens. As teachers we have the opportunity and power to affect how our students turn out, what kind of people they become. A key part of this process is teaching them how to make better

decisions; how to put aside their emotions for the greater good. Teaching the students how to recognize and evaluate their unconscious in order to make conscious decisions is not an easy task, but it is worth it and what better way than through the greatest of all civic responsibilities – the vote. The Founding Fathers understood that emotion was "inseparable from human affairs" <sup>106</sup> but they maintained that man could keep emotion in perspective in order to make a logical, rational decision. We must strive to understand the unconscious influences upon our brain and how those influences are processed within our brain so that we may make better decisions and not be fooled by someone just because he 'looks' like he might make a great president.

## Basic Structure of Class Time

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My classes are arranged in an A/B block scheduling format except on Friday. Every Friday I see all of my students in 45 minute segments. On Monday and Wednesday, I see group A and group B on Tuesday and Thursday for 90 – 100 minute blocks. Friday is utilized for whole group discussion and activities. On Monday through Thursday, the students are divided into groups of three to five. Each group rotates through four–twenty minute stations: whole–group, small–group, independent, and computer. The computer station is part of a prescribed reading program. This unit will be implemented during the whole group, small–group, and independent stations.

## Strategies

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Three research–based strategies will form the backbone of this unit: journal writing, cooperative learning, and inquiry–based instruction.

### Journal Writing

Each class period will begin with a journal question. The student responds to the question in his /her journal. The journal question will be thought–provoking and thematic in nature. The purpose of the journal question is to provide the student with a safe arena in which to reflect and respond. I will only read their responses if they give me permission. When I have previously utilized the journal writing strategy, I found that once students found they could trust me, their journal responses lengthened in quantity and deepened in quality. The journal prompts will progress from superficial (get–to–know–you type) to reflective. The journal writing strategy is key to beginning and enriching the dialogue between the student and me and within the student's internal dialogue.

### Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a broad term referring to the various methods of grouping students. Research has shown grouping students heterogeneously at least once a week has a positive impact upon learning. Cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, face–to–face promotive interaction, and interpersonal skills. In forming the groups, I need to be cognizant of not grouping strictly by ability but use other criteria as well. I will have no more than fifteen students in each class, therefore I will divide the

students into three groups of no more than five. I will use a reading inventory, an attitude inventory, and personal interviews and observations as vehicles to determine the base long-term groups. I will use a variety of innocuous methods (birthday months, hair color, etc...) to form the formal and informal groups necessary in implementing the daily and weekly lesson plans. <sup>107</sup>

### **Inquiry-based Instruction**

In inquiry-based instruction, the teacher acts as a facilitator of the activity versus the disseminator of information. Students seek out the knowledge and then present their knowledge for assessment in a way that best fits their learning style. The purpose of an inquiry is to enable the students to develop mental programs for applying their new-found knowledge and to wire the knowledge into their long term memory. <sup>108</sup>

## **Activities**

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### **Preliminary Vote**

On the first day of school the students will be given a ballot and asked to vote for Obama or Romney. The students will be asked to provide three reasons supporting their vote. The ballots will be individually sealed in an envelope with the student's name and date written on the outside. The envelopes will not be opened until the class period after the Presidential election. The purpose of this activity is to activate any prior knowledge. The students will not be restricted as to talking out their decisions with other classmates. I am giving them the opportunity to speak to see if they vote like the others at their table. My hypothesis is that they will confer with others and that they will have maybe one reason (if any at all) for their vote. After sealing the envelopes, we will have a class discussion as to choice and their decision-making strategies.

### **Reading the Constitution**

The students will be given a copy of Article II of the U.S. Constitution. Article II will be printed in a columnar fashion on the left side of the paper leaving the right column blank. Reading a clause at a time, and working in small-groups, the students will write each clause in their own words. The purpose of this activity is multifold. The students will have to look at and discuss key words such as "vested" in Section 1, Clause 1, or "appoint" in Section 1, Clause 2 in order to comprehend and adequately summarize each clause. The length of each clause provides an excellent opportunity to practice chunking difficult material to derive meaning. This activity is foundational in nature. Journal topics and other reading and activities (such as presidential powers and electoral college) will derive directly from this activity.

### **Characteristics of an Effective President**

As a whole group, the students will be asked to brainstorm the qualities they think a President of the United States should possess. We will create a class list. From the class list, a matrix will be created. The students will then be given some qualities of an unknown someone. In small-groups, the students will use the matrix to evaluate the qualities of the simulation. One student from each small-group will present their findings to group as a whole. A whole-group reflection will then ensue to discuss their findings.

Each student will then be given the names of two previous Presidents. The students will research the qualities

of each president and complete the matrix. Each student will then create a poster sized matrix comparing the two assigned Presidents and how they fared using the matrix. I will then present to the class how each of their President's are rated throughout history as to their effectiveness. The class will then have a reflection as to the matrix. Does the matrix need some amendment? My hypothesis is that the students will initially generate a list of superficial qualities, however, after doing their own investigation and subsequent discussion they will see the need to amend their list of qualities. After making revisions to the matrix, the activity begins anew but using the new paradigm. Eventually the matrix will be applied to President Obama and candidate Romney.

I will continue to introduce elements into the discussion such as print and non-print propaganda materials. Each time, we will reflect upon our matrix and whether it truly exemplifies the characteristics we think constitute an effective President.

In addition, the students will use their matrix and interview three different family members and three different friends about their views about the characteristics that represent an effective president. The students will bring in their interview results and as a whole class we will aggregate the results and draw some inferences from the results. Discussion and journal writing will ensue based upon the results of the adult interviews with the intent of helping the students differentiate their opinion from those in their social network.

### **Unit Finale**

On election day, the students will vote again. This time they will vote individually. The day after the election, the students will be given their first vote. They will be asked to compare the two votes and to draw some conclusions as to why their vote changed or did not change.

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## Appendix

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The following 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade Common Core standards will be addressed during this unit.

### **Speaking and Listening**

#### *Comprehension and Collaboration*

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

#### *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas*

3. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12**

#### *Key Ideas and Details*

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

#### *Craft and Structure*

3. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.
4. Analyze how a text uses structure (e.g. sequentially, comparatively, causally)?

### **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects 6-12**

#### *Research to Build and Present Knowledge*

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes and audiences.

### **Reading Standards for Informational Text - Grade 8**

#### *Key Ideas and Details*

5. Analyze in detail the structure of a specific paragraph in a text, including the role of a particular sentence in developing and refining a key concept.

## Endnotes

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1. Gladwell, Blink, p. 78
2. Ibid
3. Ferris, Science of Liberty, p. 56-88
4. Bessette, Voices of Reason, p. 1
5. Buonomano, Brain Bugs
6. Hamilton & Rossiter, Federalist Papers, p. 227
7. Wagner, Achievement Gap, p. xxiii
8. Jensen, Teaching with the Brain
9. Buonomano, Brain Bugs
10. Ibid, p. 11
11. Ibid
12. Westen, Political Brain
13. Gibb, Rough Guide to the Brain
14. Iyengar, Art of Choosing
15. Buonomano, Brain Bugs
16. Ibid
17. Ibid
18. Vendantam, Hidden Brain
19. Ibid
20. Lakoff, Moral Politics
21. Vendantam, Hidden Brain
22. Gladwell, Blink, p. 13
23. Ibid
24. Ibid
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26. Gibb, Rough Guide to the Brain; Jensen, Teaching with the Brain
27. Lehrer, How we decide
28. Lehrer, How we decide, p. 199
29. Lehrer, How we decide
30. Ibid
31. Iyengar, Art of Choosing, p. 97; Gladwell, Blink, p. 15
32. Haidt, Righteous Mind, p. 44
33. Lehrer, How we decide, p. 204
34. Ibid
35. Ibid, p. 206
36. Ibid, p. 207
37. Hamilton & Rossiter, Federalist Papers, p. 221
38. Marshall & Neuman, Middle School Mind
39. Ibid
40. Jensen, Teaching with the Brain
41. Marshall & Neuman, Middle School Mind
42. Begley, Train Your Mind, p. 113
43. Shenk, Genius in All, p. 36

44. Begley, Train Your Brain, p. 5; Schwartz & Gladding, Not Your Brain, p. 21
45. Begley, Train Your Brain, p. 7
46. Ibid, p. 129-130
47. Ibid, p. 221
48. Iyengar, Art of Choosing, p. xix
49. Montague, Your Brain is (Almost) Perfect
50. Haidt, Righteous Mind
51. Ibid, p. 34
52. Ibid, p. 34
53. Ibid
54. Christakis & Fowler, Connected, p. 174
55. Haidt, Righteous Mind; Christakis & Fowler, Connected
56. Westen, Political Brain, p. 29
57. Ibid
58. Haidt, Righteous Mind, p. 28
59. Law, Philosophy
60. Haidt, Righteous Mind,
61. Ferris, Science of Liberty, p. 89
62. Westen, Political Brain; Kerrigan, American President
63. Kerrigan, American President, p. 9
64. Law, Philosophy
65. Bessette, Voices of Reason, p. 2
66. Ibid, p. 6
67. Hamilton & Rossiter, Federalist Papers, p. 27
68. Ibid, p. 27
69. Ibid, p. 221
70. Ibid, p. 227
71. Raphael, Mr. President, p. 11
72. Ibid, p. 13
73. Ibid, p. 4
74. Ibid, p. 5
75. Ibid, p. 28
76. Ibid, p. 38
77. Ibid, p. 68
78. Ibid, p. 85
79. Ibid, p. 39
80. Ibid, p. 54
81. Ibid, p. 56
82. Ibid, p. 109
83. Ibid, p. 56
84. Ibid, p. 58
85. Ibid, p. 57
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87. Ibid, p. 59
88. Ibid, p. 63
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90. Ibid, p. 123
91. Aten, Our Living Constitution, p. 59
92. Aten, Our Living Constitution, p. 134
93. Smithsonian, Presidents, p. 9
94. Rossiter, The American Presidency, p. 18-19
95. Ibid, p. 19
96. Ibid, p. 23
97. Ibid, p. 26
98. Aten, Our Living Constitution, p. 71
99. Ibid, p. 71
100. Rossiter, The American Presidency, p. 31
101. Ibid, p. 32
102. Ibid, p. 35
103. Ibid, p. 37
104. Bessette, Voices of Reason, p. 34-35
105. Schwartz & Gladding, Not Your Brain, p. 39
106. Hamilton & Rossiter, Federalist Papers, p. 221
107. Buehl, Classroom Strategies
108. Ibid, p. K.3

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