



## Elections and Campaigns Overview

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The most common form of participation in the political process in the United States is voting. Through this simple act, decisions are made about who will have political power in our country. Ultimately, voting determines how government shapes daily lives. The ballot lies at the heart of American democracy.

Election campaigns consist of competing factions with opposing views attempting to persuade voters about who should govern and the political decisions that need to be made. In campaigns, those running for office and their supporters seek to make a persuasive appeal to fellow citizens about why they should be entrusted to power. Campaigners do this first by highlighting the positive elements of their own views, and second by predicting the possible misfortunes that may result if their opponents come to power.

It is up to the voter to make sense of these competing claims and appeals. This is not easy. While at times campaigns make positive, logic-oriented appeals that can be carefully weighed, more frequently they rely on emotional and inflammatory pleas for our support. Campaigners may also misrepresent their own opinions and distort the political positions of their opponents. Under siege by competing claims, it is challenging for any potential voter to come to a rational decision about the best choice for either their own personal benefit or for the larger community and national well-being.

The purpose of this investigation of elections and campaigns is to provide students with the tools to become effective voters. It is also intended to demystify the political process. We hope that the learning activities provided encourage students to participate in civic life and become politically active in their own communities.

## **Overview of the *Elections and Campaigns Unit***

This curriculum is intended to provide teachers with a framework to deliver an intense examination of the electoral process. The curriculum can be used by an entire school or school district involved with *Student Voices*, or it can be used by a solitary teacher looking for a series of academically rigorous learning activities that students will find highly engaging.

The curriculum relies upon the wealth of resources available on the Internet. At present, there exists a rich array of documents, video clips, archival materials, sound recordings and demographic data accessible online. We make use of these resources here. We also provide teachers with a step-by-step guide to finding and using such materials in class. The curriculum assumes that teachers are moderately familiar with using digital technology, but we provide detailed instructions so that teachers who are novice Web users can gain access to the enhanced learning these resources provide. While these materials are best used by students who have dependable access to computers, we provide suggestions for teachers on how to prepare materials ahead of time for classrooms or schools that lack high-speed Internet access.

*Elections and Campaigns* features four primary modules:

- In the first module, *Voting Matters*, we present a series of goals and performances for students that are exploratory in nature. Learning activities introduce several explanations as to why voting matters collectively and individually. A separate activity turns the wording around and asks students to deliberate about what might be the matter with voting. In addition, the learning activities introduce online resources and skills that will be used in greater depth as the unit proceeds.
- The second module, *The People Who Want Our Votes*, provides opportunities for students to examine the election cycle, analyze recent campaigns and the candidates and issues involved and explore voter participation in greater depth. In addition, students begin to reflect on their own political beliefs and views and consider how those beliefs came into being.
- The third module, *The Modern Political Campaign*, calls for students to acquire an understanding of how elections are conducted in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The lessons in this module require students to be aware of how new

- media and technologies are affecting the manner in which candidates run for office. These new technologies include, but are not limited to, targeted use of television advertising, an increasingly prevalent online campaign presence and “viral” ads that target specific groups of voters. The overarching goal of the module is for students to be savvy consumers of campaign spin and promises.
- The concluding module, *The People Have Spoken—What Did They Say?*, asks students to conduct their own post-mortem on an election. Students are given the opportunity to analyze the results of the election that they followed to determine the overall winners and losers and the possible implications of the results for future public policy. Students also will share insights on voter concerns and voter attitudes that are reflected by the choices made by voters.

### **Learning to Think**

As teachers, most of us require students to utilize a variety of skills. Listening is an essential skill in almost every setting. In the world of politics and government, an additional sense-based skill is looking. Learning to listen and observe carefully—to examine the details of proposals that are being made and the images that are used to persuade—provides necessary information for critical thinking. After careful listening and looking, we are able to make informed analysis of the facts of an issue or the possible consequences of a particular policy; and by using skills of interpretation, understand the importance of a particular political position on our own self, family or culture. We can then use our communication skills (talking and writing) to share our insights with others. Learning to look, listen, analyze and interpret is at the heart of the learning activities in *Student Voices*. Employing communication skills successfully is central to our assessments.

There are a number of valuable online resources on critical thinking, including: [The Critical Thinking Community \(http://www.criticalthinking.org\)](http://www.criticalthinking.org), [Critical Thinking on the Web \(http://www.austhink.org/critical/\)](http://www.austhink.org/critical/), and [The Thinking Classroom \(http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/index.cfm\)](http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/index.cfm).

## Teaching for Understanding

*Elections and Campaigns* is presented using the [Teaching for Understanding](http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/) (<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/>) framework. The Teaching for Understanding framework includes four key ideas—1) generative topics, 2) understanding goals, 3) performances of understanding and 4) ongoing assessment. *Teaching for Understanding* is a set of general guidelines developed by researchers at Harvard University in the 1990s that links pedagogy to planning and instruction. In this framework there are four questions that always need to be asked when teaching:

- What topics are worth understanding?
- What about these topics need to be understood?
- How shall we foster understanding?
- How can students and teacher assess what students understand?

Flowing from these four questions are the essential elements of the *Teaching for Understanding* framework:

1. *Generative Topics*: These topics of exploration have multiple connections to students' interests and experiences and can be learned in a wide variety of ways. They are central to the discipline, engaging to both students and teachers and build on previous topics.
2. *Understanding Goals*: Statements or questions that express what is most important for students to understand during the period of a unit, a course or over a school year.
3. *Performances of Understanding*: Activities that both develop and demonstrate students' understanding of the understanding goals by requiring them to use what they know in new ways.
4. *Ongoing Assessment*: The process by which students get continual feedback about their performances of understanding in order to improve them.

The lessons that follow are organized around this framework.

## Structure of the Lesson Plans

In *Teaching for Understanding* performances of understanding occur throughout the unit from beginning to end. Performances are learning activities that allow students to

reshape, expand on, extrapolate from and apply what they already know. The purpose of performances is to chart students' learning processes. Our lessons (performances) are of three types:

- a) *Exploratory/introductory* - lessons that utilize an introductory performance to introduce a topic and allow for initial student engagement. Frequently, these performances allow the teacher to gain insight into students' current understanding of a topic, and at the same time create a connection between students' personal interests and the topics.
- b) *Guided inquiry* - lessons that require full engagement of the student and lead to students developing an understanding of key problems of the generative topic. Guided inquiry performances typically occur in the middle of units.
- c) *Culminating performances* - lessons that are more complex and provide an opportunity for students to reveal how they have synthesized key concepts and earlier performances of understanding.

We structure our lesson plans so that the connection between the performance and the ongoing assessment is obvious. We also highlight the skill strands that are essential to the performance of understanding. These may be intellectual skills (e.g., crafting a logical argument) or technical skills (creating a blog, collaboratively writing a wiki).