

Suspect Sources at the Republican Debate

Summary

If you're looking for a job, you'd better hope you're doing it in the U.S. and not in Europe because job growth is a stunning 17 times higher in America than it is in the old country. Perhaps that's because Americans are all working as tax preparers, something they spend \$140 billion a year on. Those "facts" are according to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and Sen. John McCain of Arizona. And they even had sources for their numbers. Unfortunately, those sources aren't actually very good. In this lesson, students will cross-check the candidates' claims against available data. They will then question whether bias may explain the conflicting data.

Objectives

In this lesson, students will:

- Review and analyze statements made by former Gov. Mitt Romney and Sen. John McCain during a televised presidential debate.
- Examine the sources Romney and McCain offered for their claims, checking those sources against other experts.
- Draw conclusions on the credibility of Romney's and McCain's sources.

Background

With President George W. Bush finishing his second term and Vice President Dick Cheney opting not to run for president, Republicans are facing an open primary. As part of the campaign for the 2008 nomination, 10 candidates squared off in a debate on August 5 moderated by George Stephanopoulos of ABC News and David Yepsen of the Des Moines Register. During the debate, two of the candidates, Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, and Sen. John McCain of Arizona each made a statement that, at first glance, seemed rather surprising. Romney claimed that job growth in the United States had been 17 times higher than job growth in Europe, while McCain maintained that American families spend \$140 billion annually in preparing tax returns. Both men had sources for their statistics, but those sources contradict other publicly available information. Students will examine Romney's and McCain's sources, using objective data to cross-check their accuracy.

Procedure

Create two packets of student handouts. The first packet will contain student handouts #1, #2 and #3. The second packet should include student handouts #4, #5 and #6. Make copies of both packets for each student. You should also make copies of student handout #7. Distribute the first packet at the beginning of the lesson. Save the second packet for distribution at the beginning of Exercise #2. Distribute student handout #7 at the end of Exercise #2.

Materials

1. [Student handout #1](#): Republican Presidential Debate Excerpts.
2. [Student handout #2](#): Joel Kotkin, “America Still Beckons.”
3. [Student handout #3](#): [Tax Foundation](#), “Cost of Tax Compliance.”
4. [Student handout #4](#): [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), U.S. Employment Figures.
5. [Student handout #5](#): OECD, European Union Employment Figures.
6. [Student handout #6](#): IRS, “Estimating the Compliance Cost of the U.S. Individual Income Tax.”
7. [Student handout #7](#): [FactCheck.org](#), “Sunday Morning Missteps.”

Exercises

Exercise #1 – Asking the right questions / Consider the source

To the teacher: Point out to students that to be good critical thinkers, they need to ask questions. It is important to know who is making the statements and the sources of their information. It is also good to ask how the information presented can be proved or disproved. What reasons are being offered for the claims you are being asked to believe? Do those reasons logically support the conclusions? How precise is the language used? Is it based on fact or opinion?

If you have not done so already, pass out the first packet of student handouts. Ask students to read the statements by Romney and McCain in student handout #1. Then ask students to look at the documents that back up each candidate’s claims (student handouts #2 and #3). Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 5 students each and have them discuss the following questions. [Note: The last two questions would require additional research. If students lack Internet access, the final two could be omitted. Those classrooms that do have Internet access should consult the Straight from the Source section of [FactCheckED.org](#).]

- Who stands behind the information?
- Does the source have an ax to grind?
- What method did the source use to obtain the information?
- How old are the data?
- What assumptions did those collecting the information make?
- How much guesswork was involved?

Then hold a general class discussion around the questions. Record the essence of the answers on a blackboard or overhead projector.

Exercise #2 – Cross-checking

To the teacher: It’s important that students review several sources when verifying information. When political ads make statements as fact, these should be verified through different, preferably neutral, sources. Two or three reliable sources independently reporting the same fact is a good indication the information is accurate. If two sources report different information, then more investigation will likely be needed.

Distribute the second packet containing student handouts #4, #5 and #6, and have the students begin their cross-checking by looking for evidence that either confirms or contradicts the information in the first packet. Have the students set up a “T-Chart” with the information from the first packet on the left side and the evidence from the second packet on the right.

Have the students discuss what they’ve found in the research in their small groups. Each group should come to some conclusion about whose information is likely to be accurate. Then bring the class back together as a whole and have someone from each group describe that group’s results. At this point, give each student a copy of the [FactCheck.org](#) article on the fourth Republican presidential debate. Ask the students:

- Based on the evidence you’ve gathered, what are your conclusions about Romney’s and McCain’s sources?
- Read the FactCheck.org debate article and compare your conclusions with those in the piece. How close did you come in your analysis to what FactCheck found? Were there any issues in the FactCheck article that you didn’t have in your conclusions? What about things you found that weren’t mentioned in the FactCheck article? Does the information in the article cause you to change any of your conclusions about Gov. Romney’s or Sen. McCain’s statements on these topics?

About the Author

Joe Miller received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Virginia. He is a staff writer at FactCheck.org, a project of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center. Prior to joining FactCheck, he served as an assistant professor of philosophy at West Point and at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where he taught logic, critical thinking, ethics and political theory. The winner of an Outstanding Teacher award at UNC-Pembroke and an Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant award at the University of Virginia, Joe has more than 10 years of experience developing curricula. He is a member of American Philosophical Association and the Association for Political Theory.

Correlation to National Standards

National Social Studies Standards

X. Civic Ideals and Practices Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

Essential Skills for Social Studies

Acquiring Information

A. Reading Skills

1. Comprehension

2. Vocabulary

B. Study Skills

1. Find Information

2. Arrange Information in Usable Forms

C. Reference & Information-Search Skills

2. Special References

D. Technical Skills Unique to Electronic Devices

1. Computer

Organizing and Using Information

A. Thinking Skills

1. Classify Information

2. Interpret Information

3. Analyze Information

4. Summarize Information

5. Synthesize Information

6. Evaluate Information

B. Decision-Making Skills

C. Metacognitive Skills

Interpersonal Relationships & Social Participation

A. Personal Skills

C. Social and Political Participation Skills

Democratic Beliefs and Values

B. Freedoms of the Individual

C. Responsibilities of the Individual

National Mathematics Standards

Number and Operations Standard

Algebra Standard

Data Analysis and Probability Standard

Process Standards

Problem Solving Standard

Connections Standard

National Educational Technology Standards

Profiles for Technology Literate Students

Performance Indicators

2. Make informed choices among technology systems, resources, and services.

7. Routinely and efficiently use online information resources to meet needs for collaboration, research, publication, communication, and productivity.

8. Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning.

Information Literacy Standards

Information Literacy

Standard 1 accesses information efficiently and effectively.

Standard 2 evaluates information critically and competently.

Standard 3 uses information accurately and creatively.

Social Responsibility

Standard 7 recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8 practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9 participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

English Language Arts Standards

Standard 1 Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment.

Standard 3 Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.

Standard 5 Student employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 6 Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique and discuss print and non-print texts.

Standard 7 Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Standard 8 Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Standard 12 Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).