



LESSON PLAN: Analyzing Election Cartoons

Introduction to Teaching Political Cartoons (for teachers)

The use of political cartoons as a way to teach about the upcoming presidential election provides students a unique and fun opportunity to identify and understand the candidates' stance on the issues and to think critically about politics and the election process. The process has strong educational appeal because it can meet a wide range of learning styles and subject matter. It works well in stimulating class discussion, illustrating lectures and presentations, promoting higher level thinking skills, and providing a basis for student evaluation.

The word cartoon means “*an interpretive picture which makes use of symbolism and most often bold and humorous exaggeration to present a message or point of view concerning people, events or situations.*”¹

The requirements for a good political cartoon are the following:

- Wit and humor obtained by exaggeration not just for comic effect but to send a message about the character.
- The cartoon must have a foundation in truth (characters should be recognizable to the viewer and the main point of the drawing must have a basis in fact, even if it conveys a philosophical or ideological bias.
- The cartoon should have a moral purpose. In other words, the cartoon should provide opportunities to inform the viewer about an issue and allow for critical thinking (supporting OR refuting the cartoonist's message.)²

Many educators have stated that interpreting political cartoons can be considered a *basic skill* much like those found in basic literature courses. The mastery of this skill requires a strategy focusing on smaller skills necessary to understanding the cartoons. These include:

- Identifying the subjects presented
- Explaining the caption
- Describing the stereotype used and that this use might not reflect true reality but is an exaggeration intended for purpose
- Comprehending historical references and images

¹ From “The Power of Political Cartoons in a Presidential Year” by Ray Heitzmann for the National Council for History Education online version of *History Matters*, September 1996.

² From “A Century of Political Cartoons” by Allan Nevins and Frank Weitenkampf, Charles Scribner and Sons, 1944

- Explaining the issue in question
- Appreciating the use of humor and exaggeration
- Interpreting the message or viewpoint
- Comparing the messages of two or more cartoons (especially those that depict the same subject or issue)
- Judging the cartoonist's bias in relation to one's own point of view
- Drawing a cartoon using the appropriate techniques to express one's own point of view (stick figures acceptable)
- Recognizing the cartoon's editorial function³

Political cartoons are a valuable primary source for reflecting the thinking of an artist, publisher or reader at a given time period. Teachers in subject areas of social studies, art, journalism and language arts are fortunate to have a rich treasure of colorful political cartoons readily available to them for instructional purposes.

WARM UP ACTIVITY:

Here is a quick warm up activity to help students understand the aspect of caricature:

1. Show students a photo of a well known personality and a caricature of the same person. Ask student to compare the two and identify what aspects of the subject are exaggerated from the real image. (These are usually facial features like ears- size or position on the face, eyebrows, hair - shape, style or color, and noses.)
2. Ask students to determine how the exaggeration shows the subject in a favorable or unfavorable way and what in the illustration makes this so?
3. Ask them to identify and explain the humorous part(s) of the caricature.

NOTE: At some point in this lesson activity, students will be asked to draw their own political cartoons. For some this can be an opportunity to excel in a particular talent. For others, this can be challenging if they have little experience drawing the human form. They may claim "I can't draw!" and possibly decline to participate. Remind students that caricatures of political figures in political cartoons do not have to look exactly like the person, but only resemble them. Cartoonists from Thomas Nast to Gary Trudeau have drawn their caricatures with exaggeration or sometimes just as symbols. (Gary Trudeau represented former Vice-president Dan Quayle as a feather.) To help students gain some confidence in their own drawing ability, have students study the pictures of political personalities found in newspapers and newsmagazines. Have them identify the more pronounced physical features in their faces or body. Have students also review other cartoonists' caricatures and identify what physical features they exaggerate or symbolize to depict these political figures. Then have them take some time to draw just the features, exaggerated and even out of proportion on a piece of paper. Later, they can place a face or body around the features to give the character some physical form. After that they can decide what surrounding or environment they may want to place them in.

³ From "The Power of Political Cartoons in a Presidential Year"