

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

STORY

Obama Cabinet Picks Create Open Senate Seats, and Controversy,

12/16/08

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/us/july-dec08/senate_12-16.html

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

Student Worksheet (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

- 1. How long is a Senate term (how many years is a senator in the Senate before he or she needs to run for reelection)?**
- 2. What happens if a senator cannot finish his or her Senate term?**
- 3. What does a governor do?**

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – [Student Worksheet](#)

1. Who is Rod Blagojevich?

ANSWER

The recent arrest of Ill. Gov. Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, illustrates the high stakes of one person choosing a senator. Federal authorities said he tried to sell the appointment to Mr. Obama's vacant Senate seat for a top job or for campaign contributions.

Blagojevich was caught on tape saying that Obama's Senate seat was “**expletive* valuable” and that it wasn't something to be given away for free.

2. How do states fill their open Senate seats?

ANSWER

Every state but Arizona fills open Senate seats by allowing the governor of that state to choose whomever he or she wants.

3. Why are there open Senate seats in Illinois, New York, Delaware and Colorado?

ANSWER

And while there have been no accusations of wrong doing, the governors of New York, Delaware and possibly Colorado will soon be picking replacements for Secretary of State nominee Hillary Clinton, Vice President-elect Joe Biden and potentially for Ken Salazar who is reported to be President-elect Obama's choice for Secretary of the Interior.

4. How were senators chosen before 1913?

ANSWER

Until 1913, senators were chosen by state legislatures, not by a direct vote of the people. The Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution mandated that senators be elected just like members of the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the U.S. Congress.

5. Who is Caroline Kennedy?

ANSWER

Caroline Kennedy, daughter of assassinated U.S. president John F. Kennedy, has asked Paterson to consider her as for Clinton's Senate seat.

Although she campaigned for Barack Obama and helped raise millions of dollars for New York City's school district, Caroline Kennedy has largely stayed out of the public spotlight until now.

Some question whether she deserves to be a senator or whether it's just because she's a famous member of a political dynasty.

"In the current and incoming Senates, at least 16 members are the children or spouses of prominent politicians. Do we really need another?" National Journal columnist John Mercurio wrote.

6. What does Thomas Mann think will happen because of the Blagojevich scandal?

ANSWER

In Delaware, when the governor appointed Vice President-elect Biden's chief of staff to his vacated seat, there was speculation the choice was a "placeholder" until Biden's son returns from Iraq.

However, the younger Biden responded that if he wanted a Senate seat, he would run for it himself.

According to Congressional expert Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution, the Illinois scandal could spur state governments to hold special elections to fill senate seats instead.

"These temporary appointments have often been subject to abuse or tacky behavior," Mr. Mann told the New York Times. "I suspect this will lead a number of states to dispense with the temporary appointments and go directly to a special election."

7. What are some of the incentives the United States is offering Sudan's president to encourage him to end the conflict?

ANSWER

U.S. diplomat to Sudan Richard Williamson discussed lifting sanctions, removing Sudan from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism, and renewing diplomatic relations with the country if it cooperates, according to the Los Angeles Times.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

- 1. Do you think Caroline Kennedy should replace Hillary Clinton?**
- 2. Do you think Rod Blagojevich knew what he was doing was wrong or did he see it as politics as usual? Why do you think Illinois has such a problem with political corruption? Do you think corruption breeds corruption? What does it take to break a cycle of political corruption?**
- 3. Do you think governors should choose who should fill an open Senate seat? If not, how should open Senate seats be filled?**
- 4. What experiences or qualifications make a good senator? Why?**

Extension Activity

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.