

Election 2008: What's in the News?

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Participate in class brainstorming and discussion about their current knowledge of the presidential candidates and election issues based on mainstream media coverage of these topics.
2. Examine and learn about unreported and under reported topics that NOW identifies as "Burning Questions" not reported by mainstream media and the role these topics play in the upcoming election
3. Work in small groups to brainstorm answers to NOW's "Burning Questions" based upon their own prior knowledge and assumptions.
4. Work in small groups to utilize NOW website content to learn the facts associated with the "Burning Questions".
5. Participate in a group discussion about the difference between presumed knowledge and fact-based answers to questions and how knowledge of little reported topics could affect the upcoming election.

Related National Standards

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning), at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Civics

Standard 7: Understands alternative forms of representation and how they serve the purposes of constitutional government.

Standard 17. Understands issues concerning the relationship between state and local governments and the national government and issues pertaining to representation at all three levels of government.

Standard 20: Understands the roles of political parties, campaigns, elections, and associations and groups in American politics.

Standard 29: Understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy.

Language Arts

Writing

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Reading

Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Listening and Speaking

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Viewing

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Media

Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

Thinking and Reasoning

Standard 1: Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.

Standard 2: Understands and applies the basic principles of logic and reasoning.

Standard 6: Applies decision-making techniques.

Working with Others

Standard 1: Contributes to the overall effort of a group.

Standard 4: Displays effective interpersonal communication skills.

Estimated Time to Complete Lesson

One 50-minute class periods

Materials Needed

- Poster board/chart paper (1 piece per small group)
- Markers (at least 1 per small group)
- Internet access for research and viewing broadcasts, transcripts, podcasts, etc. from NOW's 2008 Election Coverage at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/index.html> and other online resources

Backgrounder for Teachers

As the presidential campaign continues to heat up, Americans are bombarded by news of every speech, stop and flub made by the candidates. While this provides interesting coverage and fodder for the late-night talk shows, it does not encourage viewers to delve more deeply into some of the tougher, less publicized issues that voters could benefit from exploring.

Using content and election coverage from the NOW website, this series of lessons offers students and teachers the opportunity to explore questions such as the fairness of the electoral college, the role of various groups in the outcome of the election, voting laws, the effect of money and campaign contributions on political policy, and political spin tactics and political advertising.

Giving students an opportunity to look at the election and focus on issues that are not often part of mainstream news will help broaden their understanding of the political process and foster a greater awareness of the role of democracy in shaping our everyday lives.

Assumed Student Prior Knowledge

Students should be familiar with the major presidential candidates. Knowledge of terms such as

primary, caucus, political poll, Electoral College, delegates, superdelegates, and lobbyists would be helpful in students' ability to understand discussion information and when making decisions about which topics they might be interested in presenting to the class.

Teaching Strategy

1. Ask students to think about the following question:

- When you think about the upcoming election, what topics have you heard most about in the news coverage you have seen and read?

2. As a class, brainstorm the answers to this question on the board or overhead. To add depth to the brainstorming, consider using categories such as:

- What I've heard about the candidates themselves
- Issues that seem to be in the forefront
- Campaign controversies

3. Explain to students that while the topics they have listed may be the focus of news coverage, these are not the only issues in the campaign; they are simply the issues that are receiving the most press. As a class, generate a list of topics that students believe the candidates and the press should be talking about that are currently being neglected by both.

4. Discuss the idea that as the list generated in step 3 illustrates, there are many issues related to the political process that are not a part of mainstream media coverage. Provide additional examples of these and compare the list to the one generated by the class by directing students to the list of "Burning Questions" available at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/questions.html>.

5. Take time to review the list of questions so that students can see that the election is not just about the economy and the war in Iraq. In this election year, we have an opportunity to learn about the process of electing a president as well as special interest groups, the role of the media in the election process, and the unique challenges and perspectives this election offers as America selects its next president.

6. To see what students already know or presume to know about the "Burning Questions", place them into pairs or small groups and assign each one of the questions from the list. On a piece of chart paper, direct each pair/group to write the question assigned to them. Under the question, two columns should be created. On the left, write "What We Think" and label the right-hand column "What We Learned". Provide students with 2 minutes to answer the question using what they already know and to record these ideas in the left-hand column. Next, direct the group to read the answer to the question using the information provided in the overview section of the answer provided for the assigned question. Students should record key facts and information they learned from this short overview in the right-hand column. Provide each group with 1-2 minutes to present their findings to the class.

7. Facilitate a short discussion with the group about the difference between what we presume to know about the less reported topics and the actual facts surrounding these topics. Some points for discussion could include:

- How can making assumptions about topics that are not covered as much by mainstream media cloud one's ability to truly judge issues related to the candidates and the election process?
- Why do you think these topics should/should not receive more press?
- If these topics were more widely covered, what effect, if any, do you believe it would have on voters and potential voters?

Assessment Recommendations

Consider the following assessment ideas:

1. Give students completion grades for participating in class discussions and group work activities.

Extension Ideas

1. Invite local media representatives into the classroom to discuss the "Burning Questions" and learn more about why the mainstream media is not presenting this information in their coverage.
2. Create an interactive website or bulletin board that other students in the school can use to learn information about election issues that are not often reported by the mainstream media. Challenge other students to learn more about issues that interest them and post comments in the form of blogs or facts written on notecards and posted on the bulletin board.

Related Resources

PBS Teachers: PBS Vote 2008

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/vote2008/tools.html>

A collection of resources including items such as Ask Your Lawmaker, Ballotvox, Campaign Audio, Get My Vote, Idea Generators, Interactive Map, Select a Candidate, Vote by the Issue Quiz and You Decide.

NOW's 2008 Election Coverage

<http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/index.html>

Provides a "Democracy Toolkit" and "Burning Questions" related to the 2008 election as well as links to current election news, political cartoons, tracking polls, viewer feedback, and other resources.

Online Newshour: Vote 2008

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/vote2008/>

Access current news stories, a reporter's blog, delegate counts, candidate profiles and more.

American Experience: The Presidents

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/2008/>

This site connects the past to the present by asking voters to consider a number of questions related to the presidency by examining how past presidents have handled similar issues.

P.O.V.: Election Day (airs July 2008)

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2008/electionday/preview.html>

A documentary film that follows 11 different voters on election day 2004 and provides a glimpse into the election process and decisions made by voters.

About the Author

Lisa Proski is an independent educational consultant who taught middle school and high school English, social studies, reading, and technology courses for twelve years. Proski has worked extensively with PBS authoring and editing many lesson plans for various PBS programs and PBS TeacherSource. In addition to conducting workshops for teachers at various state and national meetings, Proski also works with many corporate clients creating training programs and materials, facilitating leadership and operations workshops, and providing instructional support for new program rollouts. Proski has authored one book and also serves as an editor for other writers of instructional materials.