

## **Election 2008: Increase Public Awareness About Election Topics**

### **Lesson Objectives**

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. View a list of unreported and under reported election topics and discuss reasons why these topics are not being addressed by mainstream media sources.
2. Conduct in-depth research about one of the unreported or under reported topics presented using a fact-based resources.
3. Create research-based scripts for role-plays based upon unreported and underreported topics that voters should understand.
4. Present role-plays as a means of increasing public awareness about unreported and underreported election topics.
5. Discuss out loud and/or in writing three specific things they have learned about the political candidates, system and issues and how this new knowledge affects them as potential and future voters.

### **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**

Two to three 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
- Handout: [Project Guidelines](#) (PDF file)
- Handout: [Project Planning Sheet](#) (PDF file)

## **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. Explain to students that one way to increase voter awareness and encourage voter turnout is by providing potential and future voters with as much knowledge as possible about the election process and important issues related to the candidates, their policies, and the types of decisions they will make when leading the country. While the mainstream media spends a great deal of time covering the candidates and election topics, not all important content related to the election and candidates gets the attention it deserves. The "Burning Questions" section of the NOW website at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/questions.html> provides examples of these types of topics.

2. As a means of teaching students about unreported and under reported issues related to the upcoming election, review the list of "Burning Questions" on the website by simply reading through them as a means of generating student interest. Ask students to respond to a questions such as:

- Why do you think topics like these receive little or no media attention?

3. Explain that to be informed voters means to learn as much as possible about the upcoming election and sharing that knowledge with others. Students will be working on a project that challenges them to conduct an in-depth examination of one of the "Burning Questions" from the NOW website at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/questions.html>.

4. To help students find solid, fact-based information that addresses the "Burning Questions", direct students to NOW's 2008 Election Coverage at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/index.html> and explore the "Democracy Toolkit". Explain that the features within the kit are designed to help voters learn more about the topics receiving little or no media attention and to illustrate why these topics are important. Explain that using the toolkit to find specific facts, examples, and information related to the question being researched will ensure quality sources along with accurate information.

5. Show students some of the specific content that they can locate within the toolkit. Some important links to discuss and demonstrate could include:

- Follow the "Money" links to "Connections Between Candidates and Top Donors" <http://opensecrets.org/pres08/moneyweb.php?cycle=2008> as well as data about "Major Industry Contributions" <http://opensecrets.org/pres08/select.php?cycle=2008> through the

non-partisan site called OpenSecrets.org, illustrating money's influence on U.S. elections and public policy.

- In the “Hold the Spin” box, students can obtain “Analysis of Ads and Statements” from FactCheck.org at <http://www.factcheck.org/>. The website provides a nonpartisan, nonprofit, “consumer advocate” for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics by monitoring the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.
- The “Track Polling” section provides daily updates about the status of the presidential contest from sources such as Rasmussen Reports at [http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/election\\_20082/2008\\_presidential\\_election/daily\\_presidential\\_tracking\\_poll](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/election_20082/2008_presidential_election/daily_presidential_tracking_poll).
- Using “The Basics” menu, students can learn specific information about the Electoral College at <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/faq.html> and voting in the U.S. at [http://www.declareyourself.com/voting\\_faq/voting\\_faq.html](http://www.declareyourself.com/voting_faq/voting_faq.html) by reviewing lists of Frequently Asked Questions.

6. Distribute the **Project Guidelines** and review the requirements as a group. Allow students to work in pairs to complete the project as a means of learning more about one of the “Burning Questions” posed on the NOW website <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/questions.html>.

7. Once students have completed their role-plays, they must be prepared to share them with others in a forum or some other public display that encourages potential and future voters to learn more about election issues not routinely reported on by mainstream news sources.

8. Provide each group with time to share what they have learned with classmates through acting out their role-play and fielding questions from classmates about the topic of the role-play.

9. As a follow-up to the presentation, facilitate a class discussion or have students respond in writing, on a blog, in a podcast, etc. to questions such as:

- How did conducting your research and presenting it to others help you to become more informed about the election process and/or the presidential candidates and what shapes their political philosophies and policymaking?
- Based on your learning, how were you changed as a voter in terms of:
  - The candidate(s) you support/identify with?
  - The way you will make future voting decisions?
  - Your involvement in the political process (i.e. interest in doing more than just voting in elections)
- After hearing all of the presentations, what is your opinion about
  - Specific candidates
  - The political process used to elect our leaders
  - The type coverage mainstream media provides to voters about election topics and candidates
- The political agenda in the U.S.

## **Assessment Recommendations**

Consider the following assessment ideas:

1. Give students completion grades for participating in class discussions and group work activities.
2. Utilize a scoring guide to assess the effectiveness of the role-play at increasing public awareness about the assigned “Burning Question” and the ability to field related audience questions.
3. Utilize verbal or written peer feedback about what was learned from a specific role-play.
4. Assign completion or letter grades for the oral/written response activity at the end of the lesson.

## **Extension Ideas**

1. Invite local media representatives into the classroom to discuss the “Burning Questions” that students used as the topic for their projects and learn more about why the mainstream media is not presenting this information in their coverage. Students could encourage media representatives to address these issues by teaching them about the specific topics they researched as they present their projects to the group.
2. Ask the school newspaper or televised news broadcast to share what students have learned about little reported election topics by inviting the students to be guests on the program and present “fast facts” about what they have learned in stories that range from 1-2 minutes in length.
3. 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.

## Project Guidelines

- Mainstream news coverage does not address every issue important to voters. In fact, many issues go unreported or under reported, despite the fact that they directly affect vast numbers of Americans or have a direct link to the political decisions made by our leaders or the way the political process in our country is carried out.
- As a means of increasing voter awareness and encouraging voter turnout, it will be your job to provide potential and future voters with as much knowledge as possible about the election process and important issues related to the candidates, their policies, and the types of decisions they will make when leading the country.
- With a partner, thoroughly examine a “Burning Question” assigned to you by your teacher from the NOW 2008 Election Coverage at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/questions.html>. Be sure to utilize the Tool Kit at <http://www.pbs.org/now/election-2008/voter-tools.html> to locate information related to the question you are researching. Take the time to delve deeply into the content by studying as much information as possible. Be sure to work closely together when conducting research so that as you construct your role-play activity, both of you will have the information required to create the questions and answers necessary to act out your interview. The goal of the role-play interview is to increase awareness about your topic and to help voters see how this question can effect them as voters and once a new president has been elected.
- For your project, one of you will play the role of a journalist, the other the role of a politician. Decide which of you will have the specified roles in your project. Each role is outlined below.  
**Journalist:** Your job is to ask the difficult questions related to the topic you have researched. Don’t just stick to who, what, when, where, why and how. Instead, explore more deeply and take time to ask about why this topic is not frequently discussed in the media, why voters should know more about the topic, how the topic affects voters directly and indirectly, what role this topic could play in the election process and/or once the new president is selected, etc.  
**Politician:** Your job is to answer these difficult questions using as much information as you have available. You want to make sure that you provide solid, fact-based answers that will clearly answer the questions asked by the reporter. Your goal is to make this issue crystal clear for voters so that they will be well informed and will ultimately decide to support you in the election.
- Working together, complete the following steps:
  - Research as much information as you can find about the assigned “Burning Question”, making sure you utilize reputable sources such as those listed on the NOW website and other PBS program sites. Record these on the **Project Planning Sheet** on the following page.

Below you will find specific links from the NOW 2008 Election Coverage “Toolbox” that will be helpful as you complete your research.

- Follow the “Money” links to “Connections Between Candidates and Top Donors” <http://opensecrets.org/pres08/moneyweb.php?cycle=2008> as well as data about “Major Industry Contributions” <http://opensecrets.org/pres08/select.php?cycle=2008> through the non-partisan site called OpenSecrets.org, illustrating money’s influence on U.s. elections and public policy.
- In the “Hold the Spin” box, students can obtain “Analysis of Ads and Statements” from FactCheck.org at <http://www.factcheck.org/>. The website provides a nonpartisan, nonprofit, "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics by monitoring the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.
- The “Track Polling” section provides daily updates about the status of the presidential contest from sources such as Rasmussen Reports at

[http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/election\\_20082/2008\\_presidential\\_election/daily\\_presidential\\_tracking\\_poll](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/election_20082/2008_presidential_election/daily_presidential_tracking_poll).

- Using “The Basics” menu, students can learn specific information about the Electoral College at <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/faq.html> and voting in the U.S. at [http://www.declareyourself.com/voting\\_faq/voting\\_faq.html](http://www.declareyourself.com/voting_faq/voting_faq.html) by reviewing lists of Frequently Asked Questions.

- Document your sources accurately as you complete your research using the table on the **Project Planning Sheet**.

- Together, write a script for a mock interview about your “Burning Question”. This should be similar to the interviews you see conducted on NOW and other news-type programs. The goal of the interview is to help your classmates learn as much as possible about the question you have researched through listening to the interview. The tone of your interview can be as mild or spirited as you would like. Just remember that the main goal that both of you have in playing your role is to educate potential voters about the topic through insightful questions and answers that explain the significance of the topic during this election year. By following the steps on the **Project Planning Sheet**, you will have the information required to create the script. Be sure to utilize your own personal style when playing the role of the reporter or the politician.

- Practice your role-play script so you are prepared to perform the interview for classmates

- Present your role-play to the class and be prepared to address their specific questions about your topic in a short question and answer session following your role-play.

## Project Planning Sheet

- Our “Burning Question” is: \_\_\_\_\_
- The resources used for learning about this topic are documented below.

<b>Name of Resource</b>	<b>Internet Address</b>	<b>Facts Learned</b>
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Plan your script by answering the questions below.

1. Briefly describe the factual content you believe should be included in the interview based on the 5 W's and the H of basic reporting.

- Who:
- What:
- When:
- Where:
- Why:
- How:

2. How will you summarize the main ideas presented in the interview and give closure to the viewer?

3. What specific facts do you want to cite in the interview, and how will viewers know these are accurate?

4. What specific quotes or statistics will you use to....

- add to the credibility of the interview?
- make the interview more interesting?
- present differing points of view about the topic during the interview?