

Are you an Informed Voter?

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About this Lesson

If you were to ask your students their preference for the next President of the United States, most students would not hesitate to give you their opinion. Are they making an informed decision? How much do students truly know about the candidates running for the most important office in the country? This three day lesson allows students to evaluate how informed they are, analyze the value of being an informed voter, and research the candidates and important issues so students become informed voters. In a final assessment, students write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper in support of the candidate of their choice.

Grade(s) Level

Middle School

Classroom Time

Three 60 minute class periods

HandoutsBecoming an Informed Voter
Research Guide
Letter to the Editor Rubric**Constitution Connections**

Article II

Background

The current presidential election cycle may have the largest participation of young people since the passage of the 26th Amendment. The national media has reported a large movement of young people getting more involved in the presidential race, whether old enough to vote or not. What is motivating them to do this?

Candidates are communicating their message in many forms of media. How do our young people understand what they are hearing? Since 2000 and the rise of the Internet there has been a dramatic increase in fact checking by outside and third party organizations. These “fact checks” can help all citizens see beyond the spin of a national campaign. Ultimately by taking a few extra steps everyone can get a straight answer from the candidates and become an informed voter.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the candidates’ stance on important issues facing our country.
- Evaluate and develop an informed opinion as to whom they would vote for in the upcoming election.
- Persuade undecided voters to vote for their candidate of choice using researched information from the candidates’ personal websites.

Standards

From the National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- **IV: Individual Development & Identity:** *Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity.*
- **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*
- **VI: Power, Authority and Governance:** *Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.*

Activity

Day One:

1. Begin by posting the two large sheets of paper on one write: John McCain; and on the other write: Barak Obama. Post in the front of the classroom.
2. Ask students what they know about each candidate.
 - Record the responses on the paper.
 - Do not correct inaccurate student responses.
3. Then ask student what rumors they may have heard about each candidate.
 - Record responses in a second color so you can see the differentiation between the previous responses.
 - Once again, do not correct or comment on the responses.
4. Evaluate and Discuss- Ask students whether they think they are informed voters based on the quality and quantity of information they provided.
 - Were they able to come up with several pieces of information?
 - Are they biased towards one candidate more than the other?
 - If so, why would this be a problem?
 - Which details would be important when making an informed decision for choosing the next President of the United States?
 - Which details are mostly superficial and would not be helpful in making an informed decision?
5. Finally, post a third sheet of paper titled "Important Issues" and ask students which issues are important to them (eg. war in Iraq, rising gas prices, education).
6. Re-Evaluate: Taking into consideration the "Important Issues" responses, and ask students to re-evaluate how informed they are.
 - Did students know the candidates' position on these issues?
 - If not, what does that say about their ability to make an informed decision?

Day Two: Research

1. Fact Check: Assign or allow students to sign up to "fact check" the responses (even the rumors) listed on the candidate sheets.
 - Depending on the number of students in the class and the number of responses, students may need to partner up or take two responses to fact check.
 - Students should be able to complete "fact check" research on the candidates' personal websites: BarakObama.com and johnmccain.com as well as factchecked.org
2. Important Issues: Assign or allow students to select and research the candidates' stance on a topic listed on the "Important Issues" sheet.
 - a. Once again, students may need to be partnered up or take on two issues.
 - b. All research should be completed on the candidates' personal websites.

3. Recording: All information should be recorded on the Becoming an Informed Voter Research Guide.

Day Three: Presentation of Information and Discussion

1. Have students present their findings in front of the class and discuss the following:
 - Fact Check: Discuss:
 - Was the class accurate with the information they thought they knew?
 - If there was inaccurate information, where did those ideas come from?
 - How many rumors proved to be true?
 - What was the source of these rumors?
 - How well informed was the class prior to the research?
 - Important Issues: Ask students if anything surprised them. Did any of them change their preference for either candidate with the new knowledge?
2. Final Evaluation- Ask students whether they now feel like they are an informed voter. Possible discussion topics include:
 - What could students do to become more informed?
 - Did becoming more informed change their view points on the candidates?
 - How can you help others become more informed?
 - Why is it important for citizens to be informed?

Assessment Options

Have students write an informed letter to the editor in support of one candidate using specific researched evidence from their own research and that of their classmates. See the rubric for more detailed information.

Are you an Informed Voter? Data Collection Worksheet

Step One: Fact Check

Proposed Fact:	
My research (check one) Specific researched support:	<input type="checkbox"/> Confirms <input type="checkbox"/> Shoots down this idea
Source(s) Used:	

Step Two: Important Issues

Issue:	
McCain	Obama
Official Stance:	Official Stance:
Relevant Quotes:	Relevant Quotes:
Source(s) Used:	Source(s) Used:

Letter to the Editor Rubric

	Researched Content	Call to Action	Grammar & Organization
4	Student supports letter with at least three researched, specific facts. Information presented considers both candidates (ex. two facts supporting one candidate, one fact critical of the other candidate).	Student presents a clear call to action which is expertly supported by researched facts. There is a logical connection between evidence and the call to action.	Letter contains few, if any, grammatical errors. Writing has a logical flow and expertly transitions between researched facts.
3	Student supports letter with two researched facts. Information presented considers both candidates (at least one fact per candidate).	Student's call to action is somewhat supported by researched facts presented in the letter.	Letter contains several grammatical errors, but errors do not affect readability. Writing has a logical flow transitions adequately between researched facts.
2	Student supports letter with at least two researched facts.	Call to action is not supported by researched fact presented in the letter.	Numerous grammatical errors affect readability. Letter has little flow and few transitions.
1	Student supports letter with at least one researched fact.	No call to action	Letter is difficult to read due to grammatical errors. Writing contains no transitions.