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Which Candidate Should We Elect and Why? An Inquiry Approach to Teaching about Elections

Brett L.M. Levy

These days it's hard not to notice that there's an election going on. Whether glancing at a newspaper, flipping on the TV, or just walking down the street, we see ads and information nearly everywhere. In 2012, my research team's study involving hundreds of adolescents¹ found that the mass media's increased attention to politics can contribute to a substantial spike in political interest during the weeks before and after Election Day. How can teachers leverage that interest into meaningful social studies learning? This article integrates findings from classroom-based research and key principles from the C3 Framework to illustrate how educators can foster students' civic learning and engagement through rigorous inquiry-based activities.

Framing the Inquiry

Although some young people regularly pay attention to politics, many are engaged in more immediate issues and have difficulty seeing how government is relevant to their lives. When politics becomes more ubiquitous during election seasons—through news, social media, advertisements, and local discussions—students become more curious about the issues at hand. For example, in the fall of 2012, one high school senior told me that she paid more attention to politics in the weeks before the election because she heard her peers and parents discussing it and saw it as a lead story on news websites. However, she said, it was her social studies teacher who used this interest to help broaden her understanding of related issues.

This fall, many students will have some background knowledge about the election, so using this as a building block can be a useful way to begin framing the

inquiry-oriented instruction. Because elections are competitive and can generate passionate disagreement, it is important first to clearly establish basic classroom norms of civil discourse and listening (see the Common Core ELA Speaking and Listening Standards).² After that, raising some open-ended questions could surface students' initial conceptions and perspectives. For example, to help students get started, it may be fruitful to start with broad questions and write their accurate responses on the board (Who are the candidates for president and vice president? Have you seen any ads? What facts do you know about the candidates?). If students' responses are one-sided, teachers can invite and perhaps voice minority perspectives (e.g., playing devil's advocate) to help students to consider a different viewpoint. Having students share their understandings and get a general sense of the collective decision we face this

November can help to create energy and enthusiasm around the topic.

After students have spent a few minutes sharing their prior knowledge about the election, teachers can introduce the central compelling question: *Which candidate should we elect and why?* Next, they can introduce the following supporting question: *What role can I play?* Thoroughly answering these questions requires students not only to make a well-informed decision, supported by evidence, but also to consider how they can make a difference. Thus, exploring these timely issues involves several key aspects of the Inquiry Arc embedded in the C3 Framework and various state standards—exploring compelling and supporting questions, using disciplinary knowledge, analyzing data from multiple sources, communicating findings, and taking action.³ Furthermore, students may be motivated to embark on this inquiry when they learn they will have the opportunity to share their perspectives and learning with others in a format of their choice.

Understanding the Presidency and its Relevance

After framing the overall question, it is important for students to consider the president's role. Exploring answers to the following supporting questions will help

students understand how a president's actions can affect their lives and their communities, and will help them determine which candidate would be best for the position: *What powers and limitations does the president have? How does a president's work affect my life? How is a president elected?*

Teachers could spend several class periods on these—letting students identify issues of concern to them and then examine how presidents' efforts can and have affected these issues—but if time is limited, one or two days would suffice.

But first, to help students understand the relevance of the presidency (and the government in general), it would be helpful for them to consider their own political perspectives. Using a chart similar to Table 1, students can consider and discuss (in pairs or with the teacher's guidance) their own positions on current issues, which may also distinguish this year's candidates from one another.⁴ Then, building on students' interests, teachers can explore specific instances of how presidents have been successful and unsuccessful at addressing these

issues, using these examples as a window into the constitutional balance of power. For instance, if many students are interested in gun control, they could explore how and why one president (Bill Clinton) was able to push a strong bill through Congress, while another (Barack Obama) was unable to do so—noting the role of Congress. In addition, they can examine the differing positions of past presidents on various issues, such as immigration, environmental regulations, and abortion—and how their administrations were (or were not) able to meet their goals on those issues, based on the constraints of our system of checks and balances (C3 Standard D2.Civ.4.9-12).

After developing a basic understanding of the president's powers and limitations, students will be better equipped to consider the criteria we should use to choose a president. Indeed, there are an unlimited number of ways to judge a candidate's qualifications, but it is valuable to explore this uncertainty and reach conclusions by discussing the following supporting question: What makes a good president? Most likely, students will

mention criteria that fit into one of a few categories—issues (i.e., policy positions), values, skills, and personal traits. Based on these, students can make their own charts reflecting what they care about most, perhaps assigning different point values to indicate the importance of certain categories or specific elements (see Table 2 for an example). Once students have established their criteria (which can be adjusted later if they so choose), they can work either individually or with peers to gather information on how the candidates compare.

Examining and Evaluating Multiple Information Sources

In today's world of proliferating digital media, it is vital for young people to learn how to gather and analyze information from multiple sources (C3 Standard D3.1.9-12), and examining presidential candidates can provide useful practice and experience with this skill. Using the sources in Table 3 as a starting point (see p. 204), students can spend several class periods (perhaps including some homework time) gathering, sharing, and

Table 1. Political Identity Worksheet*

Where do I stand on SOCIAL ISSUES?		Where do I stand on ECONOMIC ISSUES?	
Government should be able to censor speech, press, media, or the Internet.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	The government should assist corporations so that they can succeed.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
A woman should have a legal right to choose to have an abortion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	The government should play a large role in regulating international trade.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
Same-sex couples should have access to the same rights as heterosexual couples.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	Social Security is a necessary public program that should be expanded and strengthened.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
The government should strictly enforce laws prohibiting adult possession and use of drugs.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	Public welfare programs are necessary and an appropriate use of tax dollars.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
The government should ensure that all individuals have access to quality health care.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	Cutting taxes and reducing government spending by 50% or more would do more harm than good.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree

*This was adapted with permission from the Elections in Action Curriculum produced by Mikva Challenge.

Table 2. Candidate Criteria Chart Template*

Criteria Category	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Issue 1: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:
Issue 2: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:
Issue 3: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:
Skill 1: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:
Skill 2: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:
Character Trait 1: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:
Character Trait 2: Points:	Position:	Position:
	Sources:	Sources:

*This is a potential template that can be expanded or adjusted and certainly can include columns for more than the two major party candidates.

evaluating information from various places, considering and documenting how these data relate to their (potentially evolving) criteria. If students have limited experience assessing media bias, teachers should discuss this with them early during their research—providing examples of articles that have implicit but unstated underlying beliefs (e.g., using terms such as “aliens” rather than “undocumented immigrants,” or statements such as “healthcare is a human right”). Indeed assessing a source’s slant can be challenging, but may become more evident upon comparing sources. Table 2 includes space where students can list at least two sources for each criterion they explore.

Each of the suggested sites in Table 3 has benefits and limitations. Candidates’ own sites are carefully constructed to promote the candidate, and in some cases only feature positions on a few issues. These can, however, be good places to learn about the candidates’ high-priority goals. Traditional news sites can be excel-

lent sources of information, but may be overwhelming. Searching a candidate’s name followed by the criterion (e.g., “Hillary Clinton climate change plan,” or “Donald Trump terrorism”) will provide more focused results. Whereas these and alternative news sites can provide rich background on candidates’ views and policy proposals, a few nonprofit organizations, such as votesmart.org, have neatly compiled profiles on each candidate highlighting their implied positions on a wide range of issues. Meanwhile, interest groups that students might trust may offer endorsements or other perspectives on the candidates. Exploring and developing an awareness of these different types of sources and their limitations can help students develop greater critical media literacy.

As students wade through some of these materials, including text, videos, graphs, statistics, and links, educators can help to both interpret and contextualize the results. For example, if students explore information questioning candi-

dates’ integrity (e.g., Trump University, Clinton’s email server) or their views on international trade, they may benefit from a short or extended lesson on these topics, and being referred to helpful fact-checking sources (e.g., politifact.org). Indeed, many political issues are quite complex; educators can demonstrate how to explore candidates’ positions by modeling careful research and how to keep an open mind.

Discussing Findings

After students have conducted research on the candidates, they will likely be eager to share their perspectives and learning. In fact, my team’s research in 2012 indicated that students found political discussions, especially those about the election, to be among the most interesting activities of the semester. Furthermore, numerous prior studies indicate that discussing ideas can be an excellent way to refine one’s thinking, especially in an open classroom climate.⁵

How can this be done during a heated election season? This will depend on the classroom, but there are several possible approaches. As noted, regardless of the format, when first opening the floor for discussion, it may be important to remind students of the norms for civil discourse (i.e., focusing on the argument and not the messenger, no name-calling) and to model how to disagree with equanimity and respect. Beyond that, a teacher could structure discussions in various ways—as a full class, in small unstructured groups, through a “talking wheel” format, via a physical “spectrum” lineup, or as a structured academic controversy.⁶

Although many of these formats have been detailed in previous articles,⁷ one that has received little attention is the talking wheel, which, though often noisy, can generate considerable student engagement and interaction. In this activity, half the class circles up (with or without notes) in the middle of the room facing out towards the walls (Group 1), and each person from the other half of the class then stands in front

of a partner in the inner circle (Group 2). The teacher tells the class that they'll each have a certain amount of time to speak (usually about one minute) and starts a stopwatch, as they tell Group 1 to share their learning and perspectives. After that, Group 2 has a chance to share. Once both partners have spoken, Group 2 rotates (e.g., clockwise), and everyone has a new discussion partner. This pattern can continue for many rotations, depending on time constraints. The specific content can vary along the way, perhaps with partners asking questions or sharing what they have learned about an issue, but the goal is to enable them to hear diverse perspectives, practice their communication skills, and get feedback on their ideas. To finish, students can go back to their seats and either write

about or discuss as a full group what they learned. Regardless of how teachers manage discussion—through the talking wheel or another format, the social experience of sharing what one has gained from research can help to build students' interest in the content and reinforce their learning.⁸

Taking Informed Action

Research suggests that taking informed action can help young people develop various pro-civic attitudes, such as political self-efficacy and interest.⁹ Furthermore, when young people develop knowledge about various civic issues, they can contribute to broadening the public's understanding when they share what they have learned.

Table 4 lists a number of ways that students can share their learning—either by aiming to inform or persuade others. If students would like to support a candidate, for example, they could volunteer for a campaign and thereby gain experience persuading others of their perspectives; but if a student is undecided, she or he could make a voter information brochure or PowerPoint presentation to inform peers about the candidates' policy positions and background. Creative students could opt to design an artistic portrayal of the candidates. When choosing which action to undertake, students might benefit from considering the goals of such action and its likely audience and effect. Even small actions, of course, can have an impact—even if only on a few people.¹⁰ Rather than sim-

Table 3. Navigating Internet Sources

Source Type	Specific Source	Potential Slant (e.g., right/left, center, pro-choice, anti-tax)
Candidates' Materials	Hillary Clinton: www.hillaryclinton.com	
	Donald Trump: www.donaldjtrump.com	
	Jill Stein: www.jill2016.com	
	Gary Johnson: www.johnsonweld.com	
Traditional News Media	CNN: www.cnn.com	
	<i>New York Times</i> : www.nytimes.com	
	<i>Wall Street Journal</i> : www.wsj.com	
	<i>Washington Post</i> : www.wpost.com	
	<i>USA Today</i> : www.usatoday.com	
Voter Information Groups	Vote Smart: www.votesmart.org	
	Fact Check: www.factcheck.org	
	PolitiFact: www.politifact.org	
Interest Groups	National Rifle Association: www.nra.org	
	Sierra Club: www.sierraclub.org	
	Christian Coalition: www.cc.org	
	American Association of Retired Persons: www.aarp.org	
Alternative Media	Talking Points Memo: www.talkingpointsmemo.org	
	Red State: www.redstate.com	
	Breitbart: www.breitbart.com	
	Five Thirty Eight: www.fivethirtyeight.com	
	Huffington Post: www.huffingtonpost.com	

ply learning about issues for their own understanding, students may realize that their voices can contribute to our collective democratic decision-making process.

Reflection and Assessment

Once students have participated in some or all steps in the outlined sequence, it can be useful for them to reflect on what they have learned—returning to the central question in the title of this article, reflecting meta-cognitively on the inquiry process itself, and perhaps constructing an essay or artifact to demonstrate their learning. It’s fine if some students are still uncertain about which candidate they prefer; that can be a lesson unto itself about the complexity of democracy.

There are many ways to assess students’ learning through these types of inquiry and civic action experiences. With each activity outlined, a teacher might choose to grade certain activities for completion (such as taking informed action) and others for accuracy (research). Regardless of the approach, constructive and encouraging feedback can help sharpen students’ thinking (as long as it does not convey too much political bias).

Ultimately, the inquiry approach can help students deepen their understanding of not only the current election but

also the process of how to thoughtfully, carefully approach decision-making and action on controversial public issues. This is a vital skill for individuals in a democracy, and educators can play an important role in helping to foster it this year and beyond. ●

Notes

1. Brett L.M. Levy, “Teaching about the 2012 Presidential Election in a Swing State: Opportunities and Challenges Related to Fostering Youth Political Interest” (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, Penn., 2014).
2. National Governors Association and the Common Core State Standards Organization, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (2010), 49–50.
3. The C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013)
4. The questions in Table 1 were adapted with permission from the *Elections in Action Curriculum* produced by Mikva Challenge. For more information, visit www.mikvachallenge.org.
5. Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Lynn Brice, “Deliberative Discourse Enacted: Task, Text, and Talk,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 30, no. 1 (2002): 66–87.
6. David Johnson and Roger Johnson, *Creative Controversy: Intellectual Conflict in the Classroom*, 3rd ed. (Edina, Minn.: Interaction, 1995).
7. Brett L.M. Levy, James M.M. Hartwick, Sierra Pope Muñoz, and Scott Gudgel, “What’s Money Got to do With It?: Fostering Productive Discussions about Campaign Finance,” *The Social Studies* 105, no. 5 (2014): 213–221.
8. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, “Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of

- Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78.
9. Ken’ichi Ikeda, Tetsuro Kobayashib, and Maasa Hoshimotoa, “Does Political Participation Make a Difference? The Relationship between Political Choice, Civic Engagement, and Political Efficacy,” *Electoral Studies*, 27 (2008): 77–88; Levy, “Fostering Cautious Political Efficacy through Civic Advocacy Projects: A Mixed Methods Case Study of an Innovative High School Class,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 39, no.2 (2011), 238–77; Levy, “Teaching about the 2012 Presidential Election in a Swing State”; C.L. Hahn, “Citizenship Education: An Empirical Study of Policy, Practices, and Outcomes,” *Oxford Review of Education* 25, no.1-2 (1999): 231–250.
 10. D. Mitra, “Increasing Student Voice and Moving Toward Youth Leadership,” *The Prevention Researcher* 13, no. 1 (2006): 7–10.

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Table 4. Projects for Communicating Political Learning

Possible Content	Project	Ways to Share Learning
Candidates’ Different Perspectives on Issues	School Poster	displayed on hallway wall, presented in class
	Teaching Peers	visiting other classes or community groups, planning school wide debate/event
Persuasive Arguments for One Candidate	Tweet(s)	pithy statements about candidates (ideally with informational links)
	Facebook Post(s) or Page	using status updates to notify others of news, perspectives, or article links
	Campaign Work	canvassing, phone banking, flier distribution, fundraising, planning local rally
Persuasive Arguments or Informational	Youtube Video(s)	sharing via email or social media
	Art (Song, Rap, Skit)	in front of class or assembly, via online video format (distributed via social media)
	Voter Education Guide	in other classes, cafeteria, or community