

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Presidential Election Activities and Resources

The election season is heating up. Every four years, social studies teachers have a special opportunity to teach students about our system of government through the lens of presidential elections. Of course, the actual election of our President won't be until November of 2020, but this school year will see Presidential debates, caucuses and primaries, a variety of stops on the winding road to the White House.

Before I launch into the list of presidential candidates, the differences between Democrats and Republicans, or the nuances of the Electoral College, I like to get students talking about the issues that are important to them. I have done this in the past by asking my Government students to rank Presidential priorities. What do they think are the most important issues facing the nation for a President to tackle?

In the last election cycle of 2016, I created my [Presidential Priorities student handout](#). To prepare I used the [diamond ranking template](#) to create [a Presidential Priorities sheet](#). I duplicated one set of the eight Presidential Priorities for every two students, cutting out each set before the activity.

The next day in class, I asked my Government students to rank the eight Presidential priorities. Each pair of students argued for what they felt should be the top priority, moving this to the top of the diamond organizer. Then partners moved to the second priority, the third, until they had filled in their diamond in rank order. I also asked students to write. When we had a whole class discussion, everyone had a lot to say about presidential priorities in an election year.

Of course, every four years the big issues change. For example, in the current election cycle, you might include the priorities of health care and immigration, gun control and border security, student loan debt, criminal justice reform and abortion. Whatever issues you choose, the diamond ranking activity is an excellent way to engage students before a detailed election discussion. You can adapt this activity, by asking students to brainstorm and prioritize the top qualities that they would want a future President to possess.

Teachers today are lucky because of the vast array of election and political behavior resources available for their classrooms on The World Wide Web. For example, a good lesson starter is to have your students take one of the Pew Research interactive quizzes, such as [What do you know about the US government?](#) Pew's [Political Typology Quiz](#), helps students situate themselves on the US political spectrum. It is a good resource for your student to use before they learn about the differences between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans.

This year have your class use [iSideWith](#), to determine how individual student's political beliefs align with those of the candidates. In addition, they can explore issues in more depth in this website, building up their knowledge of policy. And if you decide to have your students do research on an important election concern, the [Pew Research Center](#) has a huge amount of information on a variety of social and political topics.

No doubt, you'll be talking with students about the role of money in politics and campaign finance. [The Open Secrets](#) website, by the Center for Responsive Politics, is an excellent source for students to learn about fundraising numbers, PACS, and dark money in the elections.

As the horse race develops this year, students can read up-to-date polls on [Real Clear Politics](#) or [FiveThirtyEight](#). In addition, when you explain to your students why "majority rule" doesn't always pick our President because of the Electoral College, have them follow the electoral map with [270 to Win](#).

There is a lot of learning to be had in election years. I hope you find the diamond ranking activity and several of these web resources useful to your classroom with your students. You can find additional civics activities on my [A Veteran Teacher's Lessons Government](#) web page. I hope that the start of the school year is a good one.