

LESSON PLAN – WHAT ARE NATIONAL CONVENTIONS?

Subject: Civics and Government

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, and 12

Standards:

Standard USG.5. Students explain the idea of citizenship in the United States, describe the roles of United States citizens, and identify and explain the rights and responsibilities of United States citizens. They also examine how citizens can participate responsibly and effectively in the civic and political life of the United States.

USG.5.6 Explain and give examples of important citizen actions that can impact local, state, and federal government as individuals and members of interest groups.

USG.5.7 Explain how citizens in the United States participate in public elections as voters and supporters of candidates for public office.

USG.5.8 Describe opportunities available to individuals to contribute to the well-being of their communities and participate responsibly in the political process at local, state and national levels of government.

Standard III.E.4 Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions about the roles of political parties, campaigns, and elections in American politics.

III.E.4.5 To achieve this standard, students should be able to describe the role of political parties in channeling public opinion, allowing people to act jointly, nominating candidates, conducting campaigns, and training future leaders.

III.E.4.8 To achieve this standard, students should be able to evaluate the significance of campaigns and elections in the American political system.

Standard I.A.2 Students should be able to explain the major arguments advanced for the necessity of politics and government.

I.A.2.1 To achieve this standard, students should be able to explain why politics is found wherever people gather together, i.e., it is a process by which a group of people reach collective decisions generally regarded as binding on the group and enforced as common policy.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:

A computer or laptop or a way to show video in class

Students may need headphones

Access to PBS Learning Media

Access to the internet

Learning Objectives:

- Learn how political conventions launch the campaigns of Presidential candidates.
- Understand what happens when primaries and caucuses fail to choose a national candidate before a party's convention.
- Discuss how political conventions could provide more useful information for voters.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Most voters believe the national political conventions have lost any practical value. As TV news commentator Ted Koppel told his audience in 1996, the Republican convention was “more of an infomercial than a news event.” However, conventions introduce a party's platform to the general public and often provide a venue for the debut of new national leaders. If state primaries and caucuses fail to select a nominee, national conventions finalize that choice for the general election.

Body of Lesson:

1. Show the video, “What Are National Conventions?”
2. Before the advent of party conventions, both national political parties nominated their Presidential candidates behind closed doors.
 - a. Party leaders attempted to choose the candidate who would appeal to the largest regional and ethnic segments of the United States population.
 - b. However, this became more difficult as the nation's population grew and diversified.
 - c. Learning Activity
 - i. The first Republican national convention was held in 1856. Read “1856 Republican Convention” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1856_Republican_National_Convention) and “1856 Democratic Convention” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1856_Democratic_National_Convention).
 - ii. Have students write a 2-page essay (approximately 500 words) describing the issues of 1856 that made the conventions more likely to nominate a candidate who would win the general election, compared to letting a few national leaders make this decision.
3. Each party now holds a state caucus or primary to select delegates who pledge to nominate a certain candidate at a national convention. The national party allots each state a certain number of convention delegates, based on its population. At

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the state level, a party then awards its delegates to candidates according to its own rules.

- a. Learning Activity
 - i. Read “How Political Party Convention Delegates Are Chosen” (<https://www.thoughtco.com/how-party-convention-delegates-are-chosen-3320136>).
 - ii. Have students discuss these questions:
 - What are the advantages of the different ways the two major parties determine how many convention delegates will vote for each candidate?
 - What are the pro’s and con’s of the Democratic Party’s decision to invite superdelegates to vote at its conventions?
- b. If one candidate wins a majority of delegate votes on the convention’s first ballot, that person becomes the party’s nominee for President. But if not, delegates are released from their pledges and ballots are cast again until one candidate receives a majority of the convention’s votes. This is called a *contested* convention.
 - i. Learning Activity
 - a. Read the Wikipedia article, “1888 Presidential Election Campaign” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1888_United_States_presidential_election).
 - b. James G. Blaine, Benjamin Harrison’s chief contender, withdrew before the 1888 Democratic convention to promote party unity, yet the convention had to cast eight ballots to nominate Harrison. Have students write a one-page essay (approximately 250 words) explaining why they believe the convention was contested, despite Blaine’s withdrawal.
- c. If the process becomes protracted, the party’s national leaders may strike a bargain to rally enough delegates behind a candidate to carry the convention. This is called a *brokered* convention.
 - i. Learning Activity
 - a. Read the Wikipedia article, “1952 Democratic National Convention” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1952_Democratic_National_Convention). Note that this was the first Democratic convention with national TV coverage.
 - b. Have students write a one-page essay (approximately 250 words) on either of these questions:
 - i. Do you think TV coverage was a factor in the convention’s decision to nominate Stevenson instead of Kefauver, although Kefauver had more delegates at the start of the convention?

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- ii. Do you think TV coverage influenced party leaders to avoid publicly discussing issues that caused them to favor certain candidates?

Summary/Closure

National conventions are festive events with a serious purpose. Major political parties use the conventions to finalize their nominee for President and a platform that summarizes the party's position on crucial issues. By involving many citizens from across the nation, they hope to choose a candidate who is best able to guide the whole nation in times of strife and opportunity.

Extension Activities

Divide your students into two or more small groups. Challenge each group to devise a convention agenda that would give voters more information about a party's platform and Presidential nominee. For reference, distribute the agendas for the 2020 Republican (https://ballotpedia.org/Republican_National_Convention,_2020/Schedule_and_speakers) and Democratic (https://ballotpedia.org/Democratic_National_Convention,_2020/Schedule_and_speakers) national conventions.

About the Author: Joe Allison is a writer living in central Indiana. As reference book editor for Thomas Nelson Publishers, he coordinated publication of several supplemental texts for social studies, including *Choosing the President 1980*, by the League of Women Voters; the *Quick Reference Encyclopedia*, by Calvin Linton et al.; and *Nelson's Encyclopedia for Young Readers*, edited by Laurence Urdang. He served as editorial director of curriculum for Warner Press, Inc., in 2014–2016.

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