

Subject: Civics and Government

Grade Level: 9 – 12

Standards:

Indiana DOE

Academic Standards (3):

USG.3.13

Explain the electoral process in terms of election laws and election systems on the national, state, and local level.

USG.5.5

Identify when it is constitutional for our government to limit the rights of individuals and explain the reasons why the government would want to do this.

USG.5.7

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

National

College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Standards

National Standards for Civics and Government (3)

Grades: 9-12 V.B.2

Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues regarding political rights.

Grades: 9-12 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.

Grades: 9-12 III.C.1

Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues regarding the proper relationship between the national government and the state and local governments.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:

- Video, “Simple Civics: Can You Run for President from Prison?”
- Chart, “Restoration of Voting Rights for Felons” (<https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>).
- Optional Video, “The Revolutionist: Eugene V. Debs”

Learning Objectives:

- Know the qualifications to run for President and determine whether a prisoner could meet these qualifications.
- Imagine how a prisoner could mount an effective campaign for national office.
- Explore how state governments limit the political rights of prison inmates and discuss the possible benefits of removing those limits.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Why does the U.S. Constitution permit prisoners to run for national office?

A repressive government can make dissent illegal, imprison those who defy such laws, and silence them from making any further comment—all in the name of patriotism. To thwart this practice, the framers of the U.S. Constitution set forth only three qualifications for national office, based on a candidate’s citizenship, residency, and age.

Body of Lesson:

1. A prisoner’s concerns

Ask students to list several recent national policy decisions that affect the life of a prisoner. What other national policies might a prisoner want to change?

2. A prisoner’s campaign

Have students imagine that a prisoner decides to run for President addressing these policies. Ask them to write a one-page campaign platform for this candidate. Then have them write a one-sentence slogan for the campaign.

3. A prisoner's campaign teams

Divide your group in three small groups: (1) One group will be the prisoner's campaign team. They will brainstorm a series of campaign activities that the prisoner could effectively conduct in prison. (2) Another group will be the candidate's fund-raising committee. They will identify potential donors who support the candidate's platform and devise ways to target these groups with fund-raising appeals. (3) The third group will be the candidate's legal team. They need to prepare a brief that explains how the First Amendment guarantees a prisoner the right to run for President in case anyone challenges this right.

4. A prisoner's suffrage

While the Constitution permits prisoners to run for national office, few states allow them to vote for the candidates in those elections. Distribute the chart, "Restoration of Voting Rights for Felons," and quickly highlight the four ways various states have decided to treat a convict's voting rights: (1) Allow the convict to vote in national elections, even while imprisoned. (2) Allow the convict to vote after finishing parole. (3) Allow the convict to vote after parole and several more years have elapsed. Or, (4) permanently prohibit the convict from voting, unless the governor restores this privilege.

Ask, which of these policies does our state to have? If we disagree with this current policy, what can we do to change it?

Summary/Closure

An American citizen retains the right to protest government policies and the opinions of public leaders, even if imprisoned for a crime. In fact, a prisoner can campaign to become the President, Vice President, or a member of Congress—and several people have!

Extension Activities

Eugene Debs' Campaign for President

LESSON PLAN – CAN YOU RUN FOR PRESIDENT FROM PRISON

If a second class session is available, view the PBS “American Experience” video, “The Revolutionist: Eugene V. Debs,” to see how one prisoner mounted a Presidential campaign while he was incarcerated. Highlight these points for students to research and discuss:

- Debs ran for President four times as a Socialist candidate. What does a Socialist believe? Have any of those ideas become American law today? Why would some American voters distrust Socialist candidates, even when they agree with their beliefs?
- Debs was in prison because he made speeches against the United States’ entry into World War I. Debs was convicted under a new law, which said that any attempt to get people to defy a Federal decision was an act of sedition. Do you think this law infringed on Debs’ right of free speech?
- Other candidates for President in 1920 urged President Wilson to release Debs from prison because the war was over, but he refused. Do you think this affected the outcome of the election?

Assessment

Students in grades 9–12 will soon be eligible to vote in national elections, so they are becoming more aware of political activities and may even begin to serve as volunteers in campaigns. This lesson helps them understand how a citizen can become a candidate for national office, despite a criminal record. It highlights the high priority that our Constitution places on the exercise of free speech, including every citizen’s right to run for public office.

Listen closely to small-group discussions that are part of this lesson. Look for key terms that your students use in writing the campaign platform and legal brief. Are they beginning to grasp how America’s electoral process works?

Coming to Terms

Campaign Platform—a list of policies that a political party and its candidate will enact and/or defend if the candidate is elected.

Legal Brief—a detailed written argument for a certain position on a legal question.

Sedition—inciting people to rebel against the authority of a state or monarch.

Socialism—the belief that all means of production (real estate, factories, equipment, etc.) should be publicly owned and used only for public benefit.

Socialist—a person who advocates and promotes Socialist policies.

Suffrage—the right to vote, especially in a national election.

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