

LESSON PLAN – HOW DO PRIMARIES WORK?

Subject: Civics and Government

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, and 12

Standards:

Standard 1: Students identify, define, compare, and contrast ideas regarding the nature of government, politics and civic life, and explain how these ideas have influenced contemporary political and legal systems. Students also explain the importance of government, politics and civic engagement in a democratic republic, and demonstrate how citizens participate in civic and political life in their own communities.

USG.1.1 Define civic life, political life, and private life and describe the activities of individuals in each of these spheres.

USG.3.15 Examine the progression of political parties and their ideologies and the broad political spectrum in the American governmental system and analyze their functions in elections and government at national, state, and local levels of the federal system.

USG.3.21 Describe the influence of the media and technology on public opinion and public policy.

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.

LH.1: Read and comprehend history/social studies texts independently and proficiently, and write effectively for a variety of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

LH.2: Extract and construct meaning from history/social studies texts using a variety of comprehension skills.

LH.3: Build understanding of history/social studies texts, using knowledge, structural organization, and author's purpose.

LH.4: Build understanding of history/social studies texts by synthesizing and connecting ideas and evaluating specific claims.

LH.5: Write for different purposes and to specific audiences or people.

LH.6: Produce coherent and legible documents by planning, drafting, revising, editing, and collaborating with others.

LH.7: Build knowledge about the research process and the topic under study by conducting short or more sustained research.

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:

- Understand how political parties use primary elections to nominate their candidates for President.
- Review the elections of 1860 and 1968 to identify problems with the primary process.
- Identify the difference between a caucus and a primary.
- Debate the value of a caucus for nominating Presidential candidates.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Imagine nominating a President from a field of 29 candidates. That's how many major candidates tried to win the Democratic nomination in 2020, creating the largest slate since 1972. Voters would have found it difficult to compare the positions of so many contenders, but primary elections narrowed the field. Unable to invest the time, money, and required by these widely scattered contests, 18 of the candidates dropped out before primary season began or the Presidential debates were broadcast. How do primaries work? How does a candidate make the best showing in a primary? And might there be better ways to test a candidate's viability before the real Presidential election rolls around?

Body of Lesson:

1. Show the video, "How Do Primaries Work?"
2. Explore how Presidential primary elections work.
 - a. Each major political party chooses its Presidential candidate at a national convention held the summer of an election year.
 - b. Each party holds a primary election in each state to choose delegates to the convention. Each delegate pledges to vote for a specific candidate.
 - c. Generally, someone who wants to appear on the primary ballot must submit a petition to the state's political party, signed by several thousand registered voters in that state.
 - i. Each political party determines the minimum number of signatures needed to qualify for its primary ballot.

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- ii. Petition signers can come from either political party.
- d. A Presidential primary selects delegates that will represent the state at a party's nominating convention, so every state must have a primary.
 - i. Nominating conventions are held in the summer of an election year.
 - ii. This means that 50 primaries must be held in the 6-month period before a party's convention.
 - iii. Therefore, candidates must campaign throughout the country in a brief period of time. This demands substantial amounts of money and labor that would otherwise be available for the general election.
- e. Primary elections are held in February—June of the election year.
 - i. A candidate must get at least 15% of the primary votes to win any convention delegates.
 - ii. A candidate with at least 15% of the primary votes receives a portion of the state's total convention delegates that matches the percentage of total primary votes cast for that candidate.
 - iii. If a candidate does not receive at least 50% of delegates' votes at the national convention, they are released from their pledges and vote again. Voting continues until one candidate receives the minimum number of votes.
- f. Learning Activity
 - i. Primaries match candidates from the same political party, who usually have similar or identical positions on issues, so primaries seldom reveal how voters feel about their party's stance on the issues. They reveal how voters feel about the personal appeal of various candidates.
 - ii. A candidate's ability to win the general election depends on his/her personal appeal as well as proposals for implementing the party's position on current issues. For example, Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party was opposed to slavery in the election of 1860, but its candidates had various proposals for limiting or abolishing slavery. Since the party had no primary elections at that time, a few party leaders chose their nominee. They chose Lincoln for his anti-slavery strategy, despite the fact that he had little personal appeal. Use this website and have your students discuss the following questions:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/31/abraham-lincolns-lesson-democratic-primary/>
The editorial reflects a common perception that Lincoln was a poorly educated, unsophisticated speaker. Do you think most Americans perceive him that way now? Why or why not? Instead of making solo speeches, Lincoln and his chief rival Stephen Douglas usually appeared in debates. Research Douglas's proposal for dealing with slavery. Why do you suppose the Lincoln-Douglas debates influenced party leaders to choose Lincoln?

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If the Republican Party had held primary elections in 1860, there's a good chance that the party would have chosen Douglas, who seemed to be more of a statesman. Do you think Douglas's handling of the slavery issue could have prevented the Civil War? Why or why not?

g. Learning Activity

- i. If a few national leaders chose their party's nominee, as in the 1860 election, the nominating process would be simpler and would allow voters to focus more attention on current issues in the general election.
- ii. However, this "back room" method is not without its problems. The nomination of Hubert Humphrey in 1968 illustrates what can go wrong. Use this website and have students answer the following questions:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hubert_Humphrey_1968_presidential_campaign#:~:text=Humphrey%20entered%20the%20race%20too,t o%20obtain%20slates%20of%20delegates.&text=Humphrey%20w on%20the%20party's%20nomination,ballot%2C%20amid%20riots %20in%20Chicago

Many believe that Hubert H. Humphrey did not enter Democratic primaries in 1968 because he did not have the personal appeal of Robert F. Kennedy, who was assassinated after the last primary in June. Only then did Humphrey announce that he would be a candidate. What facts about Humphrey and the remaining candidates support this belief?

Did Robert Kennedy's assassination made the 1968 primaries useless? Or did delegates who pledged to vote for Kennedy still contribute to the nominating process?

Research what caused the riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and write a one-page essay on these questions: What role did Humphrey's nomination play in the riot? How might Democrats have made their nomination in a way that would have united the party and gained more public support?

h. Learning Activity

- i. Several proposals have been made for improving or replacing the primary election process. Use the website below. Have students analyze this commentator's recommendations for changing the election process, then discuss the questions as a group:

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/rationalizing-presidential-nomination-process>

What does Walter Shapiro see as specific flaws of the primary election process? List his recommendations for improving the process. Do you think these changes would give voters a better way to compare candidates and choose the best candidate for

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President? As a group, brainstorm other methods that might be used.

Summary/Closure

Discuss as a group this question: If all citizens can vote in the general election, do they need to be part of the nominating process?

Extension Activities

Research the difference between a caucus and a primary. Form three groups (pro, con, and judges) to debate the following proposition: Resolved, that caucuses should no longer be used to nominate candidates for President.

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