

LESSON PLAN – WHAT IS A CAUCUS?

Subject: Civics and Government

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, and 12

Standards:

Standard 3: Students explain how purposes, principles and institutions of government for the American people are established in the United States Constitution and reflected in the Indiana Constitution. Students describe the structures and functions of American constitutional government at national, state, and local levels and practice skills of citizenship in relation to their constitutional government.

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.

Standard 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.5.7 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.

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:

- Identify differences between a primary election and a caucus.
- Identify problems with the caucus process in recent elections.
- Debate whether to end the caucus process in favor of primary elections.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Many political commentators feel it's time to abandon Presidential primary elections because they require so much time and money that would be better spent on the general election. One proposed solution is the caucus, a closed meeting of party faithful who choose delegates to their national convention. Political parties held caucuses beginning in 1796, but they have always been fraught with problems.

Body of Lesson:

1. Show video, "What Is a Caucus?"
2. Differences between a primary election and a caucus.
 - a. When George Washington chose not to stand for election to a third term as President in 1796, two political parties emerged to sponsor candidates for that office. The Constitution did not anticipate this, so it did not specify how competing parties should choose candidates, so each party's delegates to Congress held a secret meeting (*caucus*="meeting of elders") to select candidates for President.
 - b. An early attempt to let the public participate in this process was Wisconsin Governor Robert LaFollette's law establishing an open primary election in 1904. (NOTE: An "open" primary allows registered voters to participate in either party's primary, while a "closed" primary allows only voters who declare their affiliation with a particular party to participate in that party's primary.) Other states were slow to follow suit, and by 1968 only 15 states used primaries instead of caucuses to choose their candidates for President.
3. The Defiant Convention Caucus
 - a. The scene changed dramatically in 1968, when Robert Kennedy's assassination left most Democratic convention delegates pledged to a candidate who was no longer available. Anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy had the next highest number of primary votes, but not enough to give him the nomination. Vice President Hubert Humphrey then declared himself a candidate, although he had not been a contender in any of the primaries. National Democratic leaders, led by Chicago mayor Richard Daley, held an informal caucus at the convention to throw their support to Humphrey.
 - b. As a result, anti-war activists rioted at the convention to protest the party's failure to choose an anti-war candidate. With the party divided, Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon won the election.
 - c. Since 1978, most winner-take-all caucus states have switched to a primary election. By 2020, only Iowa and Nevada still held caucuses; other states and territories opted to use primaries instead.
 - d. Learning Activity

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- i. Have students write a 3-page essay (approximately 750 words) on one of the following topics. Each essay should be a summary and analysis of the sources indicated:
 1. Pro's and Con's of Caucuses
 - a. Source: "Caucuses vs. Primaries and What the Switch Will Mean for Colorado"
(<https://news.ucdenver.edu/caucus-vs-primary/>)
 - b. Source: "Pro's and Con's of an Election Caucus"
(<https://classroom.synonym.com/pros-cons-election-caucus-10440.html>)
 - c. Analysis: If you were a voter in a caucus state, how would you feel about the process? If you were a voter in a primary state, how would you feel?
 2. Why Robert M. LaFollette Opposed Caucuses
 - a. Source: "Fighting' Bob LaFollette: Governor and Progressive"
(<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS14863>)
 - b. Source: "LaFollette and His Legacy"
(<https://lafollette.wisc.edu/images/publications/otherpublications/LaFollette/LaFLegacy.html>).
 - c. Analysis: What events of LaFollette's life led him to oppose the caucus process?
 3. 1968: An Unexpected Outcome
 - a. Source: "1968 Democratic Presidential Primaries"
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968_Democratic_Party_presidential_primaries)
 - b. Source: "The Tragedy of Hubert Humphrey"
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/opinion/vietnam-hubert-humphrey.html>)
 - c. Analysis: The convention caucus produced a nominee who promised to widen the Vietnam War, although all of the primary candidates had promised to end the war. How could the caucus have avoided this? How could the primaries have avoided it?

Summary/Closure

Divide your students into three groups (pro, con, and judges) to debate the following proposition: Party caucuses should be eliminated in favor of Presidential primary elections.

Extension Activities

Have students research the errors of the 2020 Iowa Democratic caucus, in which the results were not known for several days. Ask the group to discuss these questions: As best you can determine, what caused the delay in declaring a winner of the Iowa caucus? How might this have been avoided? Do you think the delay prevented any candidates from continuing their campaigns? Might the result in Iowa have caused the public to lose confidence in the Democrats' nominating process?

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