

Subject: What is a Caucus?

Grade Level: 6-8

Standards:

8.2.8 Explain ways that citizens can participate in the election process (political parties, campaigns, and elections) at the national, state, and local levels.

USG.3.13 Explain the electoral process in terms of election laws and election systems on the national, state, and local level.

USG.5.2 Analyze the roles and responsibilities of citizens in Indiana and 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.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:

- A computer or way to view the websites
- A computer or paper and pen/pencil if written submission of discussion question responses is required

Learning Objectives:

- Be able to describe how a caucus works.
- Be able to discuss the positive and negative aspects of caucuses.
- Be able to discuss how you could participate in a caucus and influence others.
- Be able to state the differences between caucuses and primaries.
- Be able to identify at least two states that hold caucuses.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Do you like to voice your opinion? Do you like to debate pros and cons of choices? If you answered yes to these questions, then you might like to participate in a Caucus. There are only certain states that hold caucuses, and Indiana is not one of those. Moving to a state other than Indiana would be necessary.

Body of Lesson:

Watch the video The Vote – What is a Caucus? (2:23 minutes)

<https://www.wfyi.org/programs/the-vote/television/what-is-a-caucus>

Definition of Caucus:

A closed meeting of a group of people belonging to the same political party. The goal of this meeting is usually to select candidates to run for president.

A caucus is a type of primary. The most common type of primary election is done by secret ballot. A caucus is a meeting of a group of people. They may meet at a school, a library, a church, or a home.

People attending the caucus will divide into groups based on which candidate they support. Each group will present the reasons why they support their candidate and why others should also. The group then votes on the candidates. Any candidate who gets at least 15% of the vote will be categorized as “Viable” meaning they have a good chance of winning in the general election. People who supported a candidate who did not get 15% of the vote can then choose to join the group of another candidate or to leave the caucus.

Caucuses were first held in 1796 and were the main way to select presidential candidates until the 1970s. At that time, most states changed to primary elections to select the presidential candidates. Thirteen states still hold caucuses. A state may have a caucus for both the Republican and Democratic political parties. Or a state may have a caucus for one of the parties and a primary for the other. The decision to use a caucus and the rules around how that caucus is conducted can change every election year. It is up to the states and the political parties to make these determinations.

Let’s look at the states that still have caucuses.

Iowa

Iowa has caucuses for both political parties. Caucuses are held every 2 years. It can take several meetings for them to select candidates. They select presidential candidates, but they also select party committee members and delegates to county conventions.

LESSON PLAN – What Is A Caucus?

Nevada

Nevada holds caucuses in each county. The county caucuses selected delegates to go to the state caucus. In 2016, both the Republican party and the Democratic party held caucuses in Nevada. In 2020, the Democratic party held caucuses. The Republican party canceled the 2020 caucus to show support for Donald Trump.

North Dakota

Historically, both parties have held caucuses in North Dakota. In 2016, the Democratic party held a caucus. The Republican party did not have a caucus. They selected a candidate at the Republican National Convention. The Democratic and Republican parties held caucuses in 2020.

Wyoming

The Democratic party holds a caucus in Wyoming. In 2020, only people who registered as members of the Democratic party could participate in the caucus.

Why are caucuses a positive thing?

- They encourage discussion and deliberation and sharing of ideas.
- They are a great example of the “democratic process”.

What are some negative aspects of caucuses?

- The voting is more public in nature which makes some people uncomfortable.
- It can be easier for political leaders of the party to influence participants.
- Voting by caucus can take hours, which many people do not have time for.
- The voter turnout at a private ballot primary is 19% higher than turnout for a caucus.

Why do some states still use caucuses?

Read this article and watch the video that is imbedded in the webpage. (video is 3:33 minutes)

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/presidential-caucuses-are-complicated-why-do-some-states-use-them>

Discussion Questions

Have the class divide into groups and discuss the following questions. Each group can present their thoughts in verbally or can turn in a written response.

1. What are the benefits of holding a caucus?
2. What are the negative aspects of holding a caucus?
3. Why do you think our country started using caucuses in the 1790's?
4. Would you like to participate in a caucus? Why or why not?

LESSON PLAN – What Is A Caucus?

5. Describe your role if you were participating in a caucus. Explain how you might influence the decisions of others participating in the caucus.
6. Do you think the Iowa caucus should be the first one held during a presidential election year? Why or why not?
7. The process for selecting presidential candidates is complicated. Do you think it is too complicated? How would you improve the system?

Class Activity

Hold a caucus in class to elect class officers. Have 3-4 “candidates”. The following candidates are examples. You may change what each candidate supports to meet the needs of your classroom.

Candidate #1: This candidate supports more on-line learning, fewer homework assignments, and more use of group project assignments.

Candidate #2: This candidate supports in person learning, fewer homework assignments, more individual project assignments, and increasing recycling in schools.

Candidate #3: This candidate wants the schools to provide laptops for all students, supports the use of homework assignments of up to 1 hour per day of work, and a mix of on-line and in person learning.

Have the students divide into groups supporting the candidate of their choice. The students can get up and move around the room to be with the group of his/her choice. Have them debate the pros and cons of each candidate.

Hold a vote to determine which candidate(s) receive at least 15% of the vote.

Proceed through the caucus process until “viable” candidates are determined.

You could then proceed with an “election” to determine the elected class officer if desired and time allows.

Summary/Closure

The use of caucuses in the United States elections have changed over the history of our country. Caucuses were originally used as a way to have input and debate related to the candidates. In more recent history, more and more states have moved to primary elections; however, caucuses are still important – particularly the Iowa caucus. The processes used in caucuses and primaries are changed often. It is important to stay up to date on the latest changes for each presidential election.

Extension Activities

PBS New Hour – multiple news reports on caucus results from the 2020 elections

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/search-results?q=caucuses>

The History of the Iowa Caucuses (series of 10 short videos)

https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/iptv_caucusiowa_gallery/iptv_caucusiowa_gallery/

Iowa Caucus History Introduction: (2:02 minutes)

Iowa Caucus History 1968: (2:56 minutes)

Iowa Caucus History 1976: (2:56 minutes)

Iowa Caucus History 1980:

Iowa Caucus History 1984:

Iowa Caucus History 1988:

Iowa Caucus History 1996:

Iowa Caucus History 2004:

Iowa Caucus History 2008:

PBS Learning Media

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<https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/signup/>

Other References Used

World Atlas: What States have Caucuses? 2022

<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-states-have-caucuses.html>

Presidential Caucuses are Complicated – Why do Some States Still use Them?

January 9, 2020

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/presidential-caucuses-are-complicated-why-do-some-states-use-them>