

Making Choices: An Exploration of Political Preferences

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Preparation for active citizenship in a democracy is a primary goal of social studies education. Effective participation goes beyond simply voting once a year or so.¹ Social studies teachers can provide experiences that give students the opportunity to analyze information, examine views that are different from their own, and make informed decisions. Such experiences can help students understand how attitudes and beliefs, information from the media, and conversations with fellow citizens all influence an individual's opinions and political choices.²

With these aims in mind, we collaborated to create a lesson for seventh graders that might be especially engaging during a presidential election year. It was taught over two 50-minute periods. The purpose of the lesson is

- To invite students to consider how we form opinions about political issues, parties, and candidates
- To have students compare some of the policy positions of the two

major presidential contenders

- To give students practice discussing the issues and the candidates in a civil and thoughtful manner

Food Choices on the Table

A “focusing event” or “anticipatory set” is an activity that introduces the lesson and motivates students to learn.³ It arouses their curiosity, stimulates a need to know more, and provides a memorable learning experience. An effective anticipatory set can also set the tone for the rest of

the lesson and stimulate higher-order thinking. The focusing event described in this article invites students to compare things, re-evaluate their comparisons in light of new information, and then make a final decision.

In this “Making Choices” anticipatory set, the teacher places a sign labeled “A” on one table, and one labeled “B” on another. He explains,

- After I place a food item on each table, you must silently determine which of the two items you prefer and then walk to the appropriate side of the room, closer to table A or table B, to show your preference.

He places the first set of items (canned corn on table A and canned green beans on table B) and invites students to stand up and “vote with their feet.” Students congregate on the two sides of the room. Now it gets tougher for the students. The teacher explains,

- As I place new items on tables A and B, you must silently decide which food set you prefer as a whole. Your deliberations should include not only the most recently placed item, but the whole collection on each table. Once you have made your decision, walk to the appropriate side of the room. I may call upon you to explain your decision.

Table 1: **Choices on the Table**

This is a suggested list of foods for the anticipatory set. The teacher places items on the tables in the order shown.

Table A

1. Canned corn
2. BBQ chips
3. Apple pie
4. Cola
5. Oatmeal
6. Coffee
7. Spam

Table B

1. Canned green beans
2. Nacho chips
3. Brownie
4. Diet cola
5. Sweetened cereal
6. Hot chocolate
7. Peanut butter



The teacher continues adding items to each table, pausing as students re-evaluate their position and choose a preferred side on the basis of all the items now on the tables. Students pause to think, then cross the room or stand still to indicate their “new position.” When students stop moving, the teacher may call on an individual student and ask,

- Why did you “stand your ground” and not move at this time?
- (Or, to a different student) Why did you change our mind and move to the other side?

This activity works best if the first items placed on the tables are foods that students will likely be willing to give up, and the last ones are foods that students likely either love or hate (Table 1). The idea is to set out the items so that most students will feel compelled to change sides at some point. The goal should be to encourage deliberation over items, but in the end, most students should have a strong sense of conviction toward one particular table.

The teacher asks open-ended and probing questions to encourage students to think carefully as they indicate their shifting but deliberate preference:

- Why are you continuing to stay on this side?
- Why are you switching to a different side?
- Why haven’t you moved even though I have placed two new items on each table?
- Why did you switch to this side when I put oatmeal on table A?
- Do you like Spam? If not, why did you stay on this side even though you don’t like it?

The teacher continues at a thoughtful pace until all items are “on the table,” and all students have chosen a final side.

The teacher now leads the students in reflecting on the activity, posing questions to initiate discussion and help students make connections between their decision-making process in the activity and more complex choices that a person might make about political issues.

Reflecting on the Activity

While the class is still standing near their preferred table, the teacher asks questions about what just happened, and why.

- Raise your hand if you stayed at one table throughout the entire activity.
- (To these students, he asks) Is there one particular item that kept you at your preferred table?
- Among those of you who moved back and forth a lot, what item helped you make your final decision?
- If the item you like most was placed on the other table, would you move to that side? Explain.
- What item do you dislike the most on the other table? If this item were placed on your side, would you switch to the other table? Why or why not?

The teacher tells everyone to return to his or her desk and then asks questions that invite students to make a mental leap toward thinking creatively about a citizen’s political decision making.

- Think about how deciding on a preferred table of food items might be related to a citizen’s choices in the voting booth.
- For example, there seemed to be only a few students who loved all of the items on one table, or completely disliked all items on the other table. How can we relate this situation to voters and political parties?

Possible connections that students might make during the ensuing discussion include how each item could relate to a specific political issue, including issues that are controversial. Explain to students that political parties have official stated positions on various issues that are described in an official document called a “party platform.” The individual positions are “planks” in the “platform,” which the two major parties vote on every four years at their presidential conventions.

A discussion of students’ individual choices during the focus activity can be connected to how people often choose their political parties according to how the parties stand on various public policy issues. For example, sometimes voters feel so strongly about one issue that they will change their party affiliation based on it.

This discussion can be rather free-wheeling and creative. Analogies that students might make between themselves and adult voters, and between food items and policy positions, do not have to be carefully reasoned or particularly realistic. The point is to get students thinking about various factors and forces that can be involved when citizens make political decisions — and excited about the prospect of learning more.

Examining Candidates’ Positions

The focusing event described above can set the stage for a lesson that introduces new concepts and terms related to political parties in the past or present; assesses students’ initial ideas and opinions; grapples with current political issues; and/or analyzes candidates’ positions (or party platforms) on various issues. In our second lesson, the teacher segues into a discussion about how people seek to match their own opinions with a candidate’s positions before voting.

The teacher leads a discussion to assess students’ prior knowledge. He asks students to brainstorm a list of contemporary issues that are important to everyone in the United States, as well as issues that are especially interesting to young people. (Sidebar 1). The teacher encourages stu-

Sidebar 1. Seventh Graders' Sampling of Current Issues

Civil rights	Health Care
Crime	Homeland Security
Defense	Immigration
The economy	Intelligent design
Education	Kyoto protocols
Energy policies	Oil drilling in protected areas
Faith-based initiatives	Patriot Act
Farm policies	School accountability
Finance reform	Social programs
Foreign policy	Social Security
Free Trade	Taxes
Global Warming	War in Iraq
Gun control	Women's Rights

Sidebar 2: Preparing Sentence Strips

Here is a way to get individual position statements into the hands of your students so they can examine them one at a time and then match them up with a candidate (or a political party).

Use a paper cutter to slice off and discard the first column of Table 2 (page 14). Duplicate the remaining part so there is one copy per student. Then slice across the rows so that each Democratic or Republican candidate position statement now appears on a separate "sentence strip." Keep the stacks of strips separated and organized by topic (i.e., do not shuffle the stacks).

You now have eight stacks of statements on current public policy issues, but the source of each statement is not shown. That is, each sentence strip is missing its first column of information, which identified who holds a particular position. (The teacher keeps one master whole, of course, to serve as the key.)

During the lesson, the teacher distributes one statement at a time for the class to discuss. Students then make an educated guess as to which candidate (or political party) is the source of the statement. The teacher provides the correct answers later in the lesson.

dents to give reasons for listing specific issues as important. He asks students to rank the issues from the most to the least important, in their own view. The teacher then asks some questions:

- What are the main political parties in the United States?
- What do you know about the major positions of each party?
- Where does each party stand on issues that you listed as important?
- And how can you find that out?

The teacher introduces the next part of the lesson, which is comparing some of the policy positions of the major candidates for president (Table 2, pages 14–15). In preparation for this lesson, the teacher has made stacks of "sentence strips" that contain individual position statements, but do not reveal the author. (Sidebar 2). The teacher now instructs the students to

- Create a T-chart by folding a blank sheet of paper in half and labeling one half "Democrat" and the other "Republican."
- Take one "sentence strip" as the stack is passed around and read it.
- From what you know about the candidates and the political parties, guess which candidate holds this position.

The teacher then calls on individual students to read aloud and place (the teacher's copy of) the sentence strip in the appropriate column on a large T-chart displayed on the front board. He gives clues to any student who seems unsure of what the correct placement might be. The teacher then asks the class to give a "thumbs up or down" to indicate whether students think the statement has been placed with the

correct candidate and political party. The teacher clarifies the correct answer (shown in the first column of Table 2, page 14). The students construct the T-chart on their desks, statement by statement, until the chart is complete.

Students with little prior knowledge may need more prompts from the teacher throughout the activity. The chart-making activity can be a spark that inspires interesting discussions. Take time for students to speak their opinions and observations. Ask them to state their source of information: Have they learned about the candidates by listening to their parents' conversations? Watching television? Reading Internet sites? Talking with friends?

Once the T-chart is correctly completed, the teacher can introduce students to the website procon.org, a nonprofit organization that presents the major candidates' various positions (in a "pro" and "con" format) on its well organized website.³ Students can check it out as an extension activity. The website is the source of the information on Table 2.

Note: As we go to press, it is unclear whether Senator Hillary Clinton or Senator Barack Obama will be the Democratic Party's final presidential candidate. Thus, we have provided samples from all three presidential hopefuls, and students need to construct a three-column chart (not a simple T-chart) to accommodate these quotes.

Making a Choice

At this point, the teacher recalls for the class the process of choosing table A or B during the focusing event. He asks students to remember how they ranked various public policy issues earlier in the lesson. Then the teacher addresses the class:

- Place a check mark beside the statements you agree with on your T-chart.
- Which issues did you consider to be the most important?

- To what extent do the candidates' positions line up with your opinions?
- Do you feel ready to choose one candidate over the other?
- Is it difficult to choose a particular candidate? Why or why not?
- How is the process of choosing a candidate similar to the process you went through in the focusing event? How is it different?

A writing assignment can serve as an assessment of learning. For example, students can describe various policy issues and give their opinions about the importance of each. As a possible extension activity, students can research the candidates' positions on various issues with the use of the ProCon website, candidates' websites, and other sources (Sidebar, p.13).

Invite Critical Thinking

Because this lesson is based on exploration and inquiry, it is important to give students the opportunity to build their own opinions and ideas. The teaching suggestions help students learn from and enjoy the lesson—and realize that choosing one's opinion on an issue of public policy is more complex than choosing food items on a restaurant menu. The teacher should

1. Use divergent questions before, during, and after the focusing event and throughout the lesson. Planning questions that promote higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation is critical to the effectiveness of this lesson.⁴
2. Accept student responses without correcting them, at least initially. Allowing students to express their ideas can help you assess prior knowledge and identify misconceptions and stereotypes as well as encourage student response.⁵

3. Act as a devil's advocate. Ask questions that challenge students to question or examine their initial opinions, decisions, or sources of information.
4. Avoid authoritative lecturing. Rather than providing explanations, guide students into recognizing patterns and making the connections themselves through the use of questions.⁶ In addition, give students adequate time to reason carefully, so they can construct a thoughtful response to open-ended questions.
5. Be strictly nonpartisan. It's important that students, their parents, and the principal view this lesson as nonpartisan. Help students to be respectful of each others' opinions, especially when there is disagreement. The teacher should not state his or her own preference (on any issue or candidate), but rather encourage students to state their own opinion and then examine the values and reasoning that support it. If students have stated a political preference in discussion or in writing, that statement should be excluded from any assessment.

It is important throughout this lesson for the teacher to offer a psychologically safe learning environment, one in which students can express doubt, change their minds, and adopt playful attitudes toward uncertainty. The lesson calls for "tolerance, respect for diversity of ideas, and open-mindedness."⁷ It allows students to ponder complex and controversial issues in a developmentally appropriate manner. It is consistent with standards calling for middle level teachers to assist learners in understanding politics, to guide learners as they explore the nature of the American political culture, and to allow learners to find answers to questions such as: "What is politics?" and "What are the foundations of the American political system?"⁸

Finally, it helps to have an anticipatory set involving food to start off the lesson with a playful tone. Students were still talking politics as the period ended and they all headed for lunch. 🍴

Notes

1. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (London: Routledge, 2005).
2. Ronald W. Evans and David W. Saxe, eds., *The Handbook on Teaching Social Issues* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007). First published by NCSS in 1996, this book can be purchased at www.infoagepub.com/products/content/p471905b36bc10.php.
3. ProCon.org, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) public charity whose mission is "promoting education and informed citizenship by presenting controversial issues in a simple, nonpartisan, primarily pro-con format."
4. Benjamin S. Bloom, ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook I, Cognitive Domain* (New York: Longman, 1956).
5. "ENC Focus: How to Make a Grabber H.O.T. in 5 Minutes" (Columbus, OH: ENC Learning, 2005), enc.org/features/focus/archive/.
6. Ibid.
7. Evans and Saxe, 4.
8. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 1994), www.socialstudies.org/teacherstandards/.

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Background on Teaching Controversial Issues

GLOBAL WARMING—Beverly Milner Bisland and Iftikhar Ahmad, "Climate Change Draws World Attention: The 2007 Nobel Peace Award Goes to Al Gore and IPCC," *Social Education* 72, no. 2 (March 2008): 69-74.

GUN CONTROL—James H. Landman, "Out of Range: An Interview with Mark Tushnet on the Second Amendment" (Looking at the Law), *Social Education* 71, no. 5 (September 2007): 237-242.

HEALTH INSURANCE—Judy Terando, "Lesson Plan. Uninsured in America: Background, Activities and Critical Analysis," www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/health/uninsured/.

IRAQ RE-DEPLOYMENT—Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, Brown University, "The U.S. in Iraq: Confronting Policy Alternatives," *Social Education* 70, no. 7 (November/December 2006): 433-441.

Table 2. **Candidates' Positions on Some Major Issues**

As compiled by ProCon.org on March 19, 2008.

<p>Hillary Clinton, Democrat</p>	<p>PRO</p>	<p>Should all Americans have a right to government or employer subsidized basic health care?</p> <p>Under my plan, we won't require small businesses to cover employees. Instead we will provide tax credits to ensure that many of them do. These tax credits will be based on size and average wages, so that small businesses can provide health care without destroying their bottom line... Government also needs to do its part to promote shared responsibility. Under my plan, the government will provide tax-credits to insure that every single American can afford health insurance."</p>
<p>John McCain Republican</p>	<p>CON</p>	<p>Should all Americans have a right to government or employer subsidized basic health care?</p> <p>America has the highest quality health care in the world. Our job is to preserve it. Our job is to keep the costs down. Last year, the Medicaid inflation was 10 percent. ... No program in the world can survive under that. So of course we want to remove the employer ... tax, and tax incentives, and move it to the individual. Give the individual a \$2,500 refundable tax credit, a family a \$5,000 tax credit.</p>
<p>Barack Obama Democrat</p>	<p>PRO</p>	<p>Should all Americans have a right to government or employer subsidized basic health care?</p> <p>I believe that the millions of Americans who can't take their children to a doctor when they get sick have that right. ...If you already have health insurance, the only thing that will change for you under this plan is the amount of money you will spend on premiums. That will be less... [W]e will ask all but the smallest businesses who don't make a meaningful contribution today to the health coverage of their employees to do so by supporting this new plan.</p>
<p>Hillary Clinton Democrat</p>	<p>PRO*</p>	<p>Are humans substantially responsible for global climate change today?</p> <p>[T]he President [George W. Bush] and Vice President [Dick Cheney] refuse to admit that there were any human contributions to global climate change. There are climatic changes that are so-called natural, but we have so changed the atmosphere that it has a ripple effect...Yes, there are natural reasons why the climate may get warmer but we put so much CO₂ into the atmosphere that that changes the natural forces...</p>
<p>John McCain Republican</p>	<p>Not clearly PRO or CON</p>	<p>Are humans substantially responsible for global climate change today?</p> <p>I also believe that strengthening our energy security goes hand-in-hand with addressing global climate change, which I believe is real with human activity contributing to the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.</p>
<p>Barack Obama Democrat</p>	<p>PRO</p>	<p>Are humans substantially responsible for global climate change today?</p> <p>Global warming is real, is happening now and is the result of human activities. The number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has almost doubled in the last 30 years. Glaciers are melting faster; the polar ice caps are shrinking; trees are blooming earlier; oceans are becoming more acidic, threatening marine life; people are dying in heat waves; species are migrating, and eventually many will become extinct.</p>

*Note: The ProCon.org website lists Sen. Clinton's position as "Not Clearly Pro or Con" on this issue on 3/19/08.

Table 2 Continued. **Candidates' Positions on Some Major Issues**

<p>cut</p> <p>Hillary Clinton Democrat</p> <p>cut</p>	<p>Has changed from CON to PRO</p>	<p>Should the U.S. set a timetable for troop withdrawal in Iraq? (Con) It is time for the President to stop serving up platitudes and present us with a plan for finishing this war with success and honor—not a rigid timetable that terrorists can exploit, but a public plan for winning and concluding the war.—Nov. 29, 2005</p> <p>(Pro) The Secretary of Defense should commence the redeployment of the Armed Forces from Iraq not later than October 1, 2007, with a goal of completing such redeployment within 180 days.—Apr. 26, 2007</p> <p>cut</p>
<p>cut</p> <p>John McCain Republican</p> <p>cut</p>	<p>CON</p>	<p>Should the U.S. set a timetable for troop withdrawal in Iraq? Young men and women are risking their lives as we speak in Iraq. And I know that they will be in greater harm's way if we withdraw from Iraq, as we keep debating over and over and over again. ... I understand that if the American people don't continue to support this effort that we will be forced to withdraw. But it's also my obligation to tell the American people and my constituents in Arizona that I represent, what the consequences of failure will be; and I believe they will be catastrophic.</p> <p>cut</p>
<p>cut</p> <p>Barack Obama Democrat</p> <p>cut</p>	<p>PRO</p>	<p>Should the U.S. set a timetable for troop withdrawal in Iraq? The first part of this strategy [in Iraq] begins by exerting the greatest leverage we have on the Iraqi government—a phased redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq on a timetable that would begin in four to six months. ... For only through this phased redeployment can we send a clear message to the Iraqi factions that the U.S. is not going to hold together this country indefinitely—that it will be up to them to form a viable government that can effectively run and secure Iraq.</p> <p>cut</p>
<p>cut</p> <p>Hillary Clinton Democrat</p> <p>cut</p>	<p>PRO</p>	<p>Are more federal regulations on guns and ammunition needed? I remember very well when I accompanied Bill to Columbine after that massacre and met with the family members of those who had been killed and talked with the students, and feeling that we had to do more to try to keep guns out of the hands of the criminal and of the mentally unstable.</p> <p>cut</p>
<p>cut</p> <p>John McCain Republican</p> <p>cut</p>	<p>CON</p>	<p>Are more federal regulations on guns and ammunition needed? John McCain believes that banning ammunition is just another way to undermine Second Amendment rights. He voted against an amendment that would have banned many of the most commonly used hunting cartridges on the spurious grounds that they were "armor-piercing."</p> <p>cut</p>
<p>cut</p> <p>Barack Obama Democrat</p> <p>cut</p>	<p>Not clearly PRO or CON</p>	<p>Are more federal regulations on guns and ammunition needed? I'm a strong believer in the rights of hunters and sportsmen to have firearms. I'm a believer in homeowners having a firearm to protect their home and their family. It's hard for me to find a rationale for a 19-clip semi-automatic. I said at a forum earlier this week, "If you need 19 rounds to shoot a deer, you probably shouldn't be hunting," and so that I think is something that we should be able to have a reasonable conversation about.</p> <p>cut</p>