

Election Information

Standard 4.6: Election Information

Evaluate information related to elections. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) **[8.T4.6]**

FOCUS QUESTION: How do Students Access and Assess Information about Elections and Politics?



Congress of Industrial Organizations poster by Ben Shahn (1946)
Library of Congress (164) "[Ben Shahn and a Fight for Rights](#)" | Public Domain

Elections are essential to democratic systems of government. They give real meaning to the phrase “of the people, by the people, for the people.”

Through elections, people make known their choices between candidates, policies, and political parties. Elections decide who will lead cities, towns, states, and the nation. In his “[Dissertation on the First Principles of Government](#)” (1795), the American revolutionary Thomas Paine declared that “the right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected” (para. 11).

To participate in elections, voters need accurate and unbiased information. Without information to critically analyze the candidates and the issues, people cannot adequately assess the differences of the

candidates and issues and understand the results of these for themselves or their communities.

How can students learn to evaluate information related to elections so they can participate fully as a voter, a citizen, and an engaged community member? The modules for this standard address that question by examining the impact of persuasion, propaganda, and political language in political campaigns, the role of Presidential debates in American politics, and the question of public versus private financing of elections.

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Persuasion, Propaganda, and Political Language in Elections](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Presidential Debates in U.S. Politics](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Should There Be Public Financing of Elections?](#)

1. INVESTIGATE: Persuasion, Propaganda, and Political Language in Elections

Understanding how persuasion, propaganda, and political language are used in elections and politics is essential to being an engaged member of a democratic society.

Persuasion means "to influence." Persuading is convincing someone to do or believe something that you want them to.

The goal of **propaganda** is persuasion. Propaganda means "the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person" ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary, para. 2](#)).

There are different kinds of propaganda, ranging from "selfish, deceitful, and subversive effort to honest and aboveboard promotion of things that are good" ([American Historical Association, 1944, para. 5](#)). To participate in elections and public policy debates, people must be able to separate harmful misinformation that is propaganda from fairly presented and accurate persuasive information that is meant to educate.



1939 Soviet propaganda poster depicting the Red Army killing an oppressive Polish eagle
Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#) | Public Domain

Propaganda has a long negative history. Dictators and totalitarian regimes have **used propaganda to manipulate and control their citizens**. Democratic governments, including the United States, have used propaganda to build public support for wartime policies and

actions that the people might otherwise NOT want to do. Politicians also use propaganda to market themselves - make themselves appealing - to voters.

Manufacturers and corporations also use **propaganda techniques to sell their products** - sometimes through deceptive commercials and false advertisements. For many years, cigarette companies hid the harmful effects of tobacco in ads that featured smoking as a healthy and part of a fun-filled lifestyle.

To fully understand the impacts of propaganda, it is important to explore political language. **Political language** refers to how **words, symbols, and images are used to influence people's thinking about public policy issues and topics**. Political language can be used to obscure, hide, or misrepresent, rather than inform, as [George Orwell \(1946\)](#) famously said, "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (as cited in [New Oxford Review, 2016, para. 2](#)).



[Image of George Orwell](#) | Public Domain

Orwell's novels [1984](#) and [Animal Farm](#) are examples of how powerful interests use information to control people and direct how they think and behave.

In 1984, an all-powerful dictator named Big Brother (modeled after the totalitarian Soviet leader Joseph Stalin) rules society through propaganda, political language, telescreens, Thought Police, and mind control. The ever-present state government relies on **doublespeak**, a form of language that deliberately distorts the meaning of words.

In *Animal Farm*, a group of barnyard animals revolt against their oppressive owner, a farmer named Mr. Jones. Over time, however, human-like greed causes the animals' revolutionary society to lose its commitment to values of freedom and justice, leaving in place only one principle: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

A [Doublespeak Award](#) has been given every year since 1974 by the National Council of Teachers of English as an ironic tribute to "public speakers who have perpetuated language that is grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-centered" (para. 3).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design a Propaganda Graphic**
 - Review the [50 Powerful Examples of Visual Propaganda and the Meanings Behind Them](#) and [Winning Over Hearts and Minds: Analyzing WWII Propaganda Posters](#)
 - Then, create your own propaganda graphic to change people's thinking and/or behavior.
- **Create a Campaign Poster**
 - Explore the [History of Presidential Campaign Posters](#), a video from the Library of Congress, and then design your own Presidential Campaign poster. Decide whether to include propaganda techniques or political language to persuade others to vote for you.
- **Invent an Example of Doublespeak**
 - An example of DoubleSpeak is the use of the term "Downsizing" instead of "layoffs."
 - Explore examples of Doublespeak at [yourdictionary.com](#)
 - Then, create your own Doublespeak terms and incorporate them into a short persuasive essay.

Online Resources for Persuasion, Propaganda and Political Language

- [Use of Propaganda During World War II](#) from NebraskaStudies.org
- [Propaganda 101: What You Need to Know and Why](#)
- [Propaganda: What's the Message?](#) from iCivics.
- [Nazi Propaganda](#) from the United States Holocaust Museum.
- [Totalitarianism and the Rise of the Dictators, 1920s - 1930s](#)

2.UNCOVER: Presidential Debates in U.S. Politics

Debates are one of the major ways that candidates seek to gain the support of voters. They serve as a way for people to learn about the views and personalities of the candidates who are running in a primary or general election.

The idea of debates between candidates is famously associated with [Lincoln/Douglas debates over slavery in 1858](#), but debate was a central feature of American politics since the Constitutional Convention. In the decades before the Civil War, candidates debated face-to-face, ordinary citizens took debating classes, and debating societies could be found in cities and small towns - although women were not allowed to debate ([Lepore, 2018](#)).

Debates by Presidential contenders is a 20th century development. In 1948, Republican Party presidential hopefuls Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen were the first to debate one another on radio. 1960 marked the first televised Presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon.



Photo of the first Kennedy/Nixon presidential debate, September 26, 1960
["First 1960 presidential debate"](#) by Associated Press | Public Domain

Following the Kennedy/Nixon debates of 1960, there were no presidential debates until 1976. [The Commission on Presidential Debates](#) was established in 1987. Since then, debates among Presidential candidates have become made-for-television, and more recently, highly anticipated social media events. Millions of people watch them live. Commentators and supporters comment online about who said what and why, making debates fascinating events for learning about how elections now happen in this country.

How much do political debates matter in terms of who gets elected? Political scientists are undecided. The general consensus is that primary debates “help voters evaluate candidates and can change minds” ([FiveThirtyEight, 2019, para. 5](#)).

Presidential debates are another matter, particularly after what happened in the 2016 election. Virtually every poll indicated that

Hillary Clinton won each one of the three debates with Donald Trump, yet although she won the national popular vote, she did not receive enough electoral college votes to become President.

It may be that the way the media covers the debates and comments on them after the fact is more important than the actual debates in influencing how voters subsequently respond at the polls. In one study, based on the 2004 debate between John Kerry and George W. Bush, participants who watched the debate on CNN thought Kerry won while those who watched on NBC thought Bush won ([The 2004 Presidential Debate in Tempe](#)). Learn more about the history of debates at the *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page [American Presidential Debates](#).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Learn Online**

- Play the game [Win the White House](#), iCivics

- **Conduct a Mock Political Debate**

- Choose an issue of importance in the school or community to debate with peers or another class/school.

- **State Your View**

- Do you think participating in or listening to a debate causes people to change their minds or does it just reinforce already held viewpoints?

Online Resources for Presidential Debates

- [Policies and Events Leading to the Civil War](#) offers background information on the Lincoln/Douglas Debates
- [The Role of Presidential Debates](#), Bill of Rights Institute
- [Political Debates: Advising a Candidate](#), John F. Kennedy

3. ENGAGE: Should the United States Adopt Public Financing of Elections?

Public financing of elections has been proposed as a system for limiting the influence of wealthy donors and dark money on candidates and the political process. In theory, publicly funded elections mean that candidates would not have to raise enormous amounts of money from wealthy contributors and special interests.

Public financing means that candidates receive government funds to help pay the costs of running for political office. One version of publicly financed elections is **small donor matching funds**. In this approach, people who give small amounts of money to political candidates would have those contributions matched by the government. Learn more: [The Case for Small Donor Public Financing in New York](#).

There is more about the role of money in politics in [Topic 4.13](#) of this book.

Suggested Learning Activity

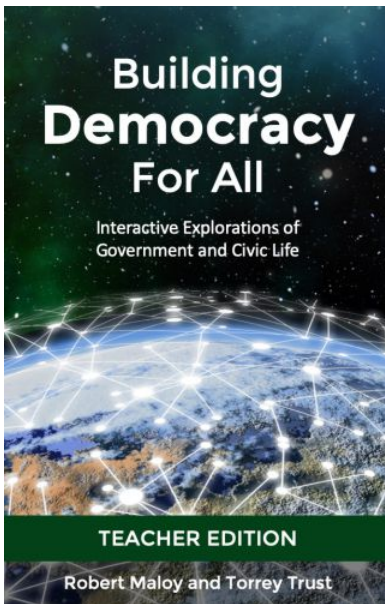
- **Argue Pro and Con**
 - Should there be public financing of elections?
 - Pro: [The Small-Donor Antidote to Big-Donor Politics](#), Center for American Progress (June 11, 2018)
 - Con: [Three Problems with Taxpayer Funding of Election Campaigns](#), CATO Institute (January 16, 2019)

Online Resources for Public Financing of Elections

- [Small Donor Public Financing](#) from Brennan Center for Justice
 - Small donations are matched and multiplied to help re-direct candidates' attention away from wealthy donors to ordinary citizens. A \$50 donation in a six-to-one matching system, for example, is worth \$300 to the candidate.
- [Overview of State Laws on Public Financing of Elections](#)
- [The Case for a New Small Donor Public Matching Funds System](#)

Standard 4.6 Conclusion

In a democracy, free and fair elections require that voters have access to reliable and understandable information about candidates and issues. **INVESTIGATE** examined how persuasion, propaganda, and political language can be used to influence voters and determine elections. **UNCOVER** explored the history of presidential debates in American politics. **ENGAGE** asked whether there should be public financing of elections.



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>



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