

## 4.6

# 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 substantive 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 critically evaluate information related to elections so they can participate fully as voters, citizens, and engaged community members?**

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](#)
  - [MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Using Social Media in Political Campaigns](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Presidential Debates in U.S. Politics](#)
  - [MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Assessing Media Coverage of Political Debates](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Should There Be Public Financing of Elections?](#)

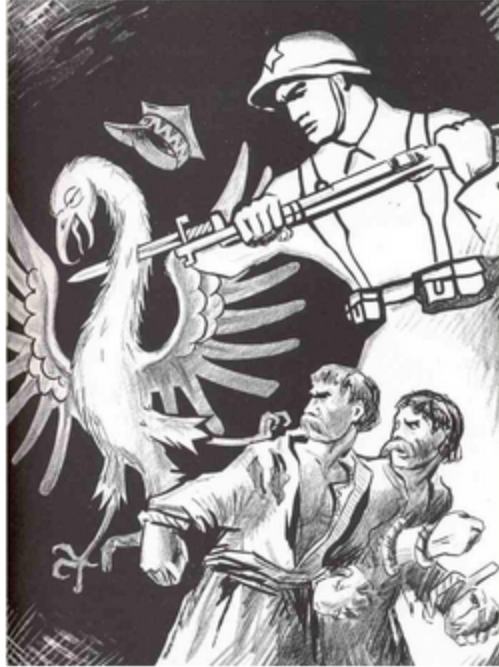
## **1. INVESTIGATE: Persuasion, Propaganda, and Political Language in Elections**

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

- **Persuasion** means "to influence." Persuading is convincing someone to do or believe something that you want them to.
- **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](#)).
- **Political language** refers to how words, symbols, and images are used to influence people's thinking about public policy issues and topics.

The goal of propaganda is persuasion, and to fully understand the impacts of propaganda on elections in a democracy, it is important to explore how politicians and political campaigns use political language is used to motivate voters and supporters.

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. 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](#)).

### **George Orwell and Political Language**



[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).

### **Trump and Twitter**

Twitter has become a powerful tool for political persuasion and propaganda. Looking at the first two years of the Trump Presidency (which included the Mueller Investigation into Russian interference in 2016 presidential election), researchers found that whenever a politically uncomfortable or potentially unfavorable issue appeared in the media, Trump's Twitter account responded with tweets about unrelated topics, emphasizing his strengths as President and using language that appealed to his base of voters (Lewandowsky, et.al. 2020).

Terms like "jobs," "China," and "immigration" were used to signal how his administration was creating jobs for American workers while opposing China internationally and blocking immigration domestically. This pattern of diversion was not found to be present when the media was covering topics not related to or favorable to the Trump agenda.

Interestingly, Trump himself does not write many of these tweets. In 2018, [NPR reported](#) that Dan Scavino, the President's former golf caddie from 1990 and White House social media director, is the author of much of the content on the site @realDonaldTrump. Scavino also takes dictation and then crafts the message into grammatically correct language, further evidence of how Twitter was used to convey political information.

## Media Literacy Connections: Using Social Media in Political Campaigns

### Focus Question: How do politicians and political campaigns use political language to influence voters?

Democracies depend on the active and informed involvement of their members. The development of social media provides expansive new opportunities for politicians to use political language as propaganda to influence voters. As Pinar Yildirim of the University of Pennsylvania points out, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow political figures, particularly newcomers, to reach millions of people at little or no cost ([How Social Media is Shaping Political Campaigns](#), Knowledge@Wharton, August 17, 2020).

It is estimated that 72% of U.S. voters actively use social media ([Social Media Could Determine the Outcome of the 2020 Election](#), Forbes, October 26, 2020). Accordingly, the 2020 Presidential election has seen an enormous investment in social media by candidates and political parties. Donald Trump alone has 87 million followers on Twitter.

#### Activity 1: Evaluate Political Social Media Campaigns

- Choose a political candidate or political party in the 2020 election. It can be a candidate for President, Senate, House of Representatives, or a state or local office.
- Evaluate the political candidate's use of political language, visuals, and propaganda techniques in their social media posts for [how it might influence the partisan brain](#).
- Create an interactive image or screen recording in which you deconstruct the meaning behind the words and visuals and share your digital media product with the public to inform their thinking.

#### Activity 2: Design a Political Campaign Poster or Social Media Campaign

- Explore the [History of Presidential Campaign Posters](#), a video from the Library of Congress and [Political Commercials from 1952 to 2016](#) from the Museum of the Moving Image.
- Decide what propaganda techniques or political language you are going to use to persuade others to vote for you.
- Design a political campaign poster or social media campaign (series of tweets, memes, videos, Tik Toks, posts, etc...) to support your run for political office.

#### Additional Resources:

- [Documentary: The Social Dilemma on Netflix](#)
- [Ted talk: How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day | Tristan Harris](#)
- [Challenging confirmation bias lesson plan](#) (for teacher)
- [2020 social media voter scorecard](#)
- [Is breaking news broken on social media lesson plan](#) (for teacher)
- [5 Things to Check Before Sharing News About Politics](#)
- [How to Find Credible Information About the Election \(and Avoid Getting Duped\)](#)

## Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design a Propaganda Graphic or Poster**
  - Review:
    - [50 Powerful Examples of Visual Propaganda and the Meanings Behind Them](#)
    - [Winning Over Hearts and Minds: Analyzing WWII Propaganda Posters](#)
    - [Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art from World War II](#)
  - Then, create your own propaganda graphic or poster art to change people's thinking and/or behavior about a candidate for political issue.
- **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](http://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.



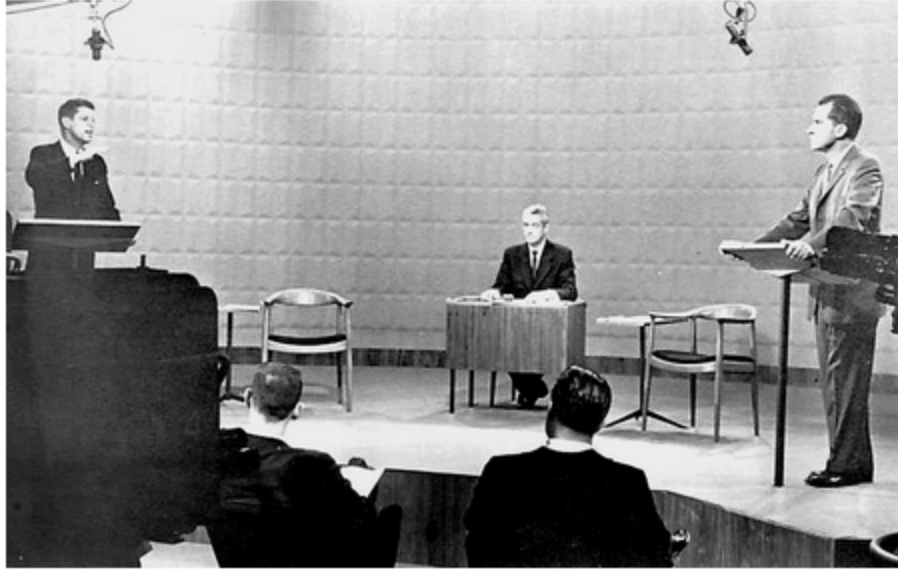


Photo of the first Kennedy/Nixon presidential debate, September 26, 1960  
["First 1960 presidential debate"](#) by Associated Press | Public Domain

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](#).

## Media Literacy Connections: Assessing Media Coverage of Political Debates

**Focus Question: How do the media re-frame and package the message of political debates for viewers?**

Political debates provide politicians with a platform to share ideas and information with their constituents and potential voters. Meanwhile, news outlets seek to capture and maintain audience attention. How do these different agendas influence the way messages are framed to viewers?

### Activity 1: Identify Media Bias

- Group students in groups of 3-4.
- Ask students to [watch the 2020 vice presidential debate](#), then find news articles from [different sides](#) that discuss the performance of Vice President Mike Pence and Senator Kamala Harris.
- Examine how the media frame the performance of both candidates. Discuss the following questions:
  - **Production:** Who wrote this? What is the article's message?
  - **Language:** What words are used to tell the story? What do the stories say? How do you know? Give some examples of language showing the author's bias.
  - **Audience:** Who is this story aimed at? How do you know? How do people access this story?

### Activity 2: Produce a Biased Media Report

- In groups of 3, ask one student to write a news report (including a headline) purposefully favorable to VP Pence (Fox News style); one student to write news report (including a headline) purposefully favorable to Senator Harris (MSNBC style), and one student to write an objective presentation for a major newspaper (New York Times).
- Have the students explain how they purposely used or did not use biased language and discuss who they aimed their news story at. Answer the following questions:
  - **Production:** What is your news report's message?
  - **Language:** What words did you choose to tell the story? Give examples of language showing the author's bias.
  - **Audience:** Who is your story aimed at? How do you know? How will people access this story?



## 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?
  - Which do you think has more influence on viewers: The actual debate or the media coverage of the debate?

## 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 Presidential Library and Museum

## 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 powerful role of money in politics in [Topic 4.13](#) of this book.

## Suggested Learning Activity

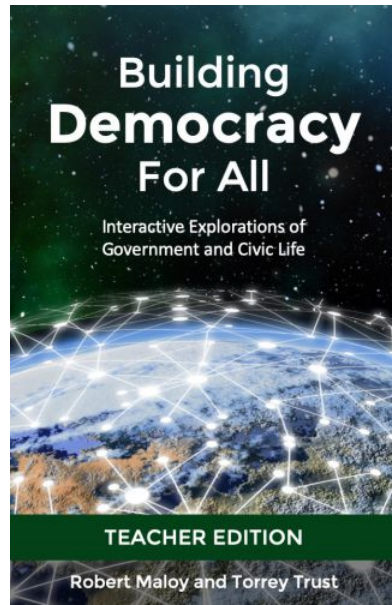
- **Argue Pro and Con**
  - Should there be public financing of elections?
    - Pro: [The Small-Donor Antidote to Big-Donor Politics](#), Center for American Progress (June 11, 2018)
    - Con: [Three Problems with Taxpayer Funding of Election Campaigns](#), CATO Institute (January 16, 2019)

## 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.  
<https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>