

(Not so) Unprecedented: Media Analysis of the 2016 Presidential Race and Its Historical Precedents

Sox Sperry

Economic inequality. Women's political power. Security threats. Race-based fear. Many of the issues raised in the 2016 presidential election have strong historical precedents. How can we bring these issues into the classroom in a way that engages students, and that teaches core content and develops the skills needed to strengthen critical thinking?

In today's media saturated world, the proliferation of campaign ads, candidate tweets and citizen-produced YouTube clips can provide either an avalanche of white noise or a teaching opportunity to engage students who may resist text-heavy readings about elections of the past. Helping students to develop media literacy skills—the abilities to access, analyze, evaluate and produce media messages—is one way to support habits of inquiry consistent with social studies learning. The C3 Framework makes it clear that social studies teachers must teach students to do close evidence-based analysis of diverse texts, to compare conflicting claims, and to evaluate the point of view and credibility of sources. What better way to do this than to make use of the communication forms that define students' daily media landscape?

Each of the following activities proposes a compelling question, a teaching standard from the C3 Framework to advance a specific teaching objective, sets of historic and contemporary media documents for student analysis, and media literacy questions to help teach social studies content while practicing critical thinking about media messages in general.

Activity 1: Economic Inequality as an Election Issue

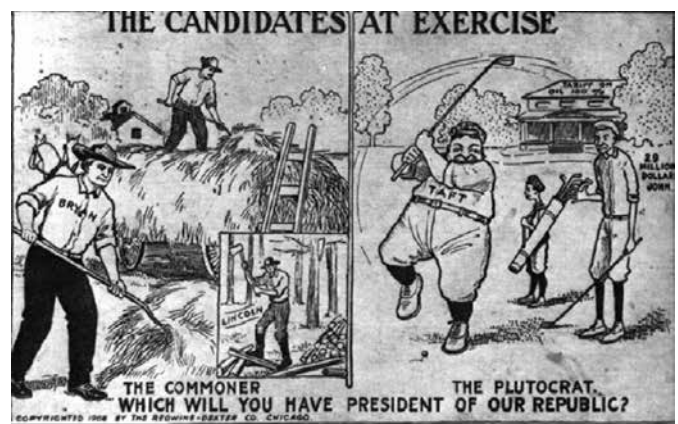
Like most wheels, the Sanders revolution has turned around before. Candidates were “feeling the Bern” at the turn of the twentieth century when the William Jennings Bryan and Eugene Debs campaigns initiated conversations about corporate power, concentration of wealth, and structural change.

A compelling question to frame this activity is “How has

income inequality fueled voter engagement?” This question addresses the standard from Dimension 1 of the C3 Framework



A 1900 poster for Republican candidates William McKinley (the incumbent President) and Theodore Roosevelt. What message is communicated about the differences between Republican and Democratic policies?



1908 postcard for Democratic Party candidate William Jennings Bryan. How are these themes reflected in the 2016 campaign?

on developing questions and planning inquiries: *D1.2.9-12. Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.*

We select two media documents (see opposite page) from presidential campaigns of the early twentieth century on which to base our media decoding: (1) a 1900 poster from the McKinley/Roosevelt campaign contrasting shuttered factories and “a run on the bank” under Democratic leadership with images of robust production and “a run to the bank” under Republican leadership; and (2) a 1908 postcard for Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan asking, “Which will you have president of our republic?” with images of candidate Bryan pitching hay and Lincoln splitting logs while Republican candidate Taft plays golf with “Million Dollar John” D. Rockefeller.

In the classroom, an opening discussion about the first historical document—the poster claiming that “the administration’s promises have been kept”—might sound like this:

Teacher: Is this a poster for a Democratic or a Republican candidate?

Student: It looks like it’s for the Republicans.

Teacher: What’s the evidence in the document that makes you say that?

Student: Things look a lot better on the “Gone Republican” side than they do on the “Gone Democratic” side.

Teacher: What things do you notice that look a lot better?

Student: The factory smokestacks are smoking on the Republican side and they’re not on the Democratic side. I’m not sure that black smoke coming from the smokestacks would be such a positive image today.

Student: And it looks like people are angry in the “Gone Democratic Run on the Bank” side while people look calm as they’re walking into the bank on the Republican side. It seems like there’s been lots of anger in this year’s election about the economy just like there was back then.

Teacher: You’re placing this poster in historical context, reading some of the messages that might have been intended by the candidates and the poster designers in 1900, and you’re also making points about how some of these same issues are present today.

This sample interaction illustrates how a teacher might encourage students to dig for a deeper read of the document while supporting student curiosity about historical parallels.

The teacher can then introduce the second document—the 1908 postcard contrasting Bryan, depicted as a hard-working farmer on a typical farm, with Taft, presented as a plutocrat enjoying a game of golf with his millionaire partner. Some key questions for media literacy are suggested by this document, and can be used with other documents: *What are the messages about economic inequality in this media construction? What is your evidence in the document? Who made this and for what purpose?*

From there it would be possible to examine a third document of the early twentieth century, a 1904 poster for Socialist Party candidate Eugene Debs emphasizing the electoral strength of united workers. The class can then move on to the present campaign, possibly using three media documents from the 2016 campaign—a website page from the Bernie Sanders campaign on income and wealth inequality, a video from the Trump campaign website on self-funding and Hillary Clinton’s webpage entitled “An economy that works for everyone.” (Each of these documents will be available on the Project Look Sharp website by mid-September.)

All of the above documents provide a rich opportunity for decoding by using contrasting images and provocative language. The documents and the questions

SIX KEY CONCEPTS IN MEDIA ANALYSIS

All media messages are “constructed.”

Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique “language” of construction.

Media messages are produced for particular purposes.

All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.

People use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and the democratic process.

Project Look Sharp, a media literacy initiative of Ithaca College, has developed *Media Constructions of Presidential Campaigns: A Document-Based History Kit*, which contains more than 200 curriculum activities that use a wide variety of media messages from electoral campaigns beginning in 1800 and continuing to the present day.

This article highlights the analysis of media messages from past elections and compares them with current media messages, as a way to invite students to reflect on key questions related to media literate citizenship. The documents and curriculum materials mentioned in this article, along with many other documents and lesson plans on presidential election campaigns from 1800-2008, are available free of charge at www.projectlooksharp.org.

Media Constructions of Presidential Campaigns was developed with funding from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. Activities related to the 2016 campaign, funded by a grant from the Park Foundation, will be accessible on the Project Look Sharp website in fall 2016.



What messages do these campaign ads give about the candidates' positions on national security?

they raise invite students to reflect on issues that have driven the voting public for over 100 years: *Why are there haves and have-nots in our country? How can all people share in our country's wealth? How do presidential promises match up with performance on issues of economic opportunity for all?* This pedagogy shifts teaching practice from a lecture-based methodology aimed at filling students up with knowledge to an inquiry-based constructivist approach based on a collective approach to learning.

Activity 2: Using fear about national security as a way to win votes

ISIS attacks. Major droughts tied to global climate change. Refugees fleeing the war in Syria. While these current threats will likely be raised during the Clinton/Trump debates, manipulation of voter fear has been a constant in U.S. politics since newspaper reports about French Jacobins and Barbary pirates during the Adams and Jefferson campaigns more than 200 years ago.

One compelling question for this activity is “How do candidates use fear of threats to national security to enlist support?” The accompanying C3 Framework objective for this activity is from Dimension 3, Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence: *D3.1.9-12. Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.*

The media form we'll use for this activ-

ity has become familiar over the past half century—televised campaign ads. The 2016 offerings include the Trump ad, “Cut the head off of ISIS” and the Clinton ad, “Secure” with the tag line “Safe America. Strong Economy.”

For historic context, teachers could also add the famous 1964 “Daisy girl” ad for the Johnson campaign, showing a young girl counting down from 10 to a nuclear explosion, a 1972 Nixon ad showing military toy soldiers and ships being swept off a table, and the 1984 Reagan ad, “Bear in the Woods,” suggesting the unseen dangers of Russian aggression. (All the above-mentioned ads will be available at the Project Look Sharp website.)

Key media literacy questions for these ads include *Who is the target audience and how is this message targeted to them?*

An initial decoding of the Trump and Clinton ads might go like this:

Teacher: What national security threats are the candidates concerned about in these campaign ads?

Student: Trump is all about keeping Muslims and Mexicans out and killing ISIS and taking their oil.

Teacher: What images did the ad designers use to convey these messages?

Student: They show pictures of a woman in a headscarf like in a wanted poster, guys in black hoods and explosions on some kind of military ship.

Student: And they show people running toward a dark wall like ants.

Teacher: How about the Clinton ad.

What's she concerned about and what images go with her concerns?

Student: Her ad is really different than Trump's. She wants to strengthen the economy, healthcare, and jobs to keep the country secure. She shows people going to work and mothers with babies. But then she shows herself walking with generals while she talks about leading the world.

Teacher: Who do you think the target audiences are for these ads and why are the approaches to keeping America safe so different? Do they remind you of the ads from the Johnson, Nixon and Reagan campaigns we saw earlier?

The Common Core English Language Arts standards for literacy in history and social studies complement the C3 Framework. They call for students to cite textual evidence to support analysis, to evaluate authors' different perspectives on the same historical issue using claims, reasoning, and evidence, and to integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media. Close readings of diverse texts lead to critical, well-reasoned analyses of media documents and become a platform for the practice of metacognitive thinking demanded by these new social studies and ELA standards.

In this activity, students achieve these objectives as they view ads related to candidate positions on national security, then contrast different points of view about threats, using evidence from the documents to support their conclusions. When the activity is partnered with other activities, students can practice integrat-

ing multiple sources over different historical time periods, using a variety of print and non-print media forms, as suggested in the Common Core ELA standard for reading history. These ads also provide an opportunity for students to harvest information from multiple sources with diverse points of view while providing the teacher with the chance to ask questions about sourcing, techniques, histori-

cal context and credibility (all of which are emphasized in the C3 Framework).

Suggested Additional Activities

Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Hillary Clinton's selection as the Democratic Party's candidate for president in 2016 is historic and it has its precedents. Women's suffrage leader Victoria Woodhull ran for president in 1872,

nearly 50 years before women achieved the right to vote in the U.S. One hundred years later, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm became the first woman ever to run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination as well as the first major-party African American candidate for president.

A question that students might examine is: "How has media coverage of female presidential candidates changed over time?" A C3 Framework objective for this activity can be found in the second dimension, Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts in the discipline of Civics: D2.Civ.10.9-12. *Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.*

Many resources are available for classes investigating this question. The starting point could be an 1871 Thomas Nast cartoon of Victoria Woodhull depicted as "Mrs. Satan," an advocate of free love trying to divert women away from the path of matrimony. A set of media literacy questions for this image might include: *Who might benefit and who might be harmed by this cartoon? What civic values are implied or overt? Does this message further stereotypes about women or counter them?*

The same media literacy questions could be used in discussions about more recent women candidates. Possible images or video excerpts could include: a 2008 Steve Benson cartoon of Hillary Clinton as the Wicked Witch of the West; a 2008 Daryl Cagle cartoon of Sarah Palin as a beauty pageant contestant; a video interview with Shirley Chisholm from the film *Chisholm 72: Unbought and Unbossed*; a *Time* magazine interview with 1984 Democratic Party vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro; and a *Fox News* interview with Hillary Clinton from her 2016 campaign. (These media documents will be available on the Project Look Sharp website by mid-September.)



1871 political cartoon by Thomas Nast about presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull. In what ways does this characterization of a woman candidate for president compare with today's perceptions of female candidates for higher office?

Students might be assigned to find cartoons or interviews about these and other women candidates in less familiar media sources, such as suffragist, feminist or libertarian sites. This research allows the questioning of points of view across a wider political perspective, investigating civic values and stereotyping of women across both time period and media source type.

The Race Card

Young black men dying. Young black men going to prison. Young black men committing violence. These current realities are echoes of U.S. history rooted in slavery, in the old Jim Crow and in the criminal justice system. Candidates have used appeals based in fear and racism to persuade voters in the past, much as they do in the present. How can teachers bring these issues to the table in a way that does no harm in a diverse classroom? Many teachers shy away from the difficult conversations and strong emotions that such truths generate. As long as we keep our distance from these topics, the national conversation on race simply stays in neutral.

A compelling question for this final activity is “How do campaigns use racism and violence to win votes?” The C3 Framework objective for this activity is taken from its fourth dimension, Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action: *D4.4.9-12. Critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.*

Media documents we recommend for this activity that will be available on the Project Look Sharp website include an 1864 George McClellan campaign poster (see above) warning of “universal anarchy and ultimate ruin” if Abraham Lincoln’s “Black Republican ticket” is reelected; a 1968 George Wallace TV ad, “Law and Order: Busing”; and a 1988 George H. W. Bush ad, “Revolving Door,” accusing his opponent of carelessly releasing murderers from prison. Contemporary documents could include a Donald Trump ad, “Jamiel,” featuring the father of a young African American man killed by an “illegal immigrant gang member,” and a Hillary Clinton webpage on racial justice. Media literacy questions for this

activity include *Is this credible? Why or why not?* and *What is left out that might be important to know?*

After the class has viewed all these documents, a classroom discussion might start like this:

Teacher: We began this activity by agreeing on some guidelines to allow us to enter difficult conversations without hurting anyone. I appreciate the fact that everyone kept to our agreements for no side talk, laughter or putdowns. Now that you’ve viewed all these documents what are some of your feelings about what you’ve seen and read?

The teacher should then invite students to give their reactions to the individual documents. They can address the question whether presidential election campaign materials have to tell the truth, and can exercise their skills in the evaluation of documents and in media literacy by investigating how people can determine if an ad is believable. Students can then discuss how people in a democracy should react when they are confronted by inaccurate and offensive views. They should reflect on what they can do about their feelings of anger and sadness when they are confronted by such views, by taking action as citizens to make the changes our democracy needs.



1864 poster for Democratic Party candidate George McClellan.

In what ways do current candidates use some of the same themes to win office?

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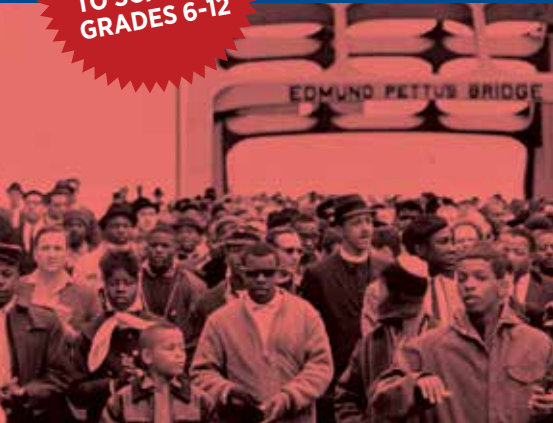
Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson believed that an educated citizenry was required to maintain free institutions. We can use the expanded forms of today’s free press as teaching tools to help students develop the analytical skills and historical knowledge necessary to act as co-learners in the classroom and as citizens in a democracy. 🌐

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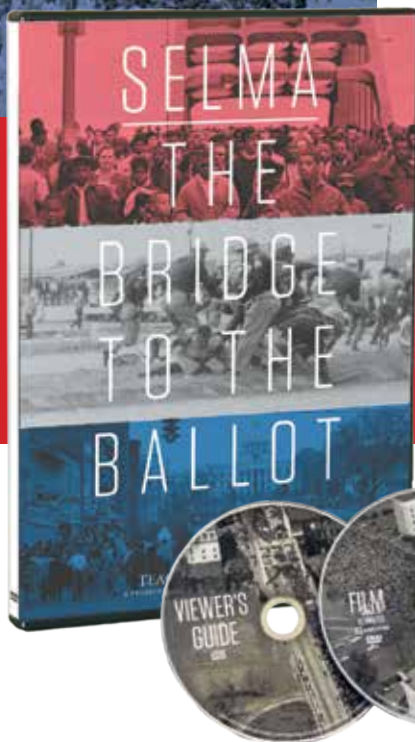
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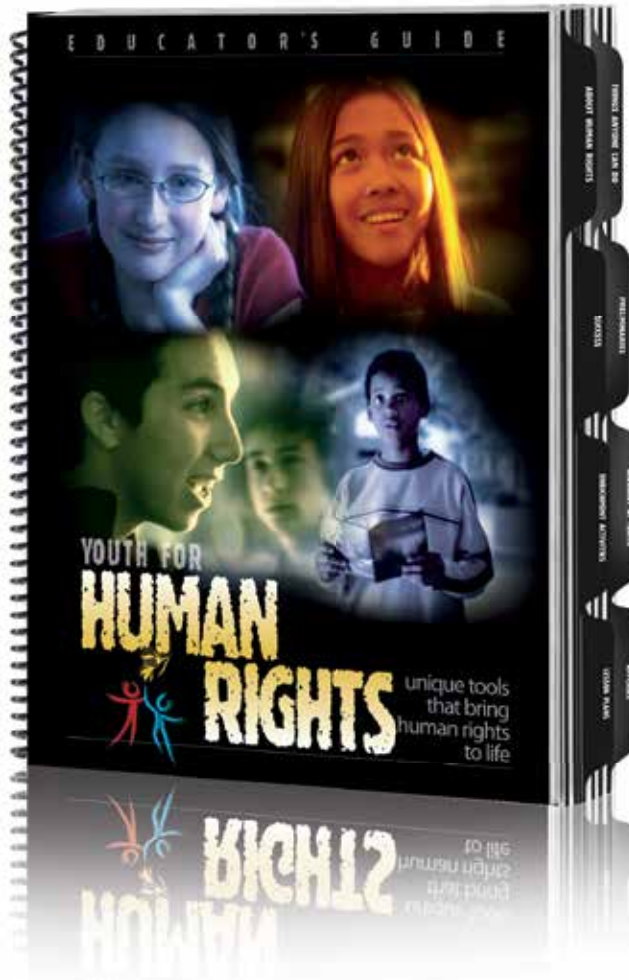
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