

# How to Teach about “Aligning Elections” Using the Internet

C. Frederick Risinger

**Are you tired of the 2008** presidential election already? I think that many of us are. However, I can suggest a way to teach about the upcoming election that will be helpful to secondary teachers of history, civics, and U.S. government and to elementary teachers who want to bring the election into their classrooms.

Whenever I plan one of these columns, I never know if I want the editor of *Social Education* to tell me the issue’s theme (such as economics) or to tell me that I should select the topic of the column myself, as he did for this issue. Fortunately, the September issue of *The Atlantic* (my favorite magazine) arrived about the same time. An article by Joshua Green, titled “The Rove Presidency,” discussed how historians would treat Karl Rove, also known as “Bush’s Brain.” Green described the political science theory of “realignment”—the concept that a few elections in U.S. history were more important than others because they resulted in “sharp and durable” changes in the political climate of the nation. Green claims that Karl Rove knew about realignment elections, thought that the 2000 election would be one, and that he was the man who could bring it about, but he failed to achieve his goal. The American public simply was not ready for the dramatic changes that Rove and Bush had in mind, such as privatizing social security, launching faith-based

initiatives, and allowing private health care savings accounts.

Green thinks that the Democrats have a chance at a realignment election in 2008. According to political scientist Alan Beck, two preconditions exist prior to a realignment election: (1) loyalty to the party in power must be weak; and (2) some sort of “societal trauma” (such as the Depression) must exist. These factors persuade *Atlantic* author Green to believe the 2008 election could be a realigning one. Right now, several prominent Republican senators, representatives, governors and former governors are calling for change, and the Iraq War has certainly caused some societal trauma.

This contention intrigued me. I remembered my political science classes, in which I learned about V. O. Key (and others) elaborating this concept in 1955. Then I thought about teachers trying to bring relevant, important information about the election into their classrooms and still meet the daunting requirements of their state standards and related assessments, and I had an idea. What if teachers explained this concept to students, who would examine the five previous realignment elections, compare them to the political mood in the nation today, and try and “call” the election by making predictions on the outcome—both at the presidential and congressional levels? This would

involve concepts in history, civics, and political science. It might be the type of project on which students could work, either individually or in groups, for much of the 2007-08 school year. And they would be knowledgeable, involved and interested by the fall of 2008 when the election finally takes place.

If you’ve read this far, I know I have you for another paragraph or so. You want to know which five presidential elections are considered the realigning ones. If your first thought was Roosevelt’s victory in 1932, you’re right. See the box on page 293 for the complete list of realigning elections.

Are your students likely to become interested in this somewhat arcane political theory? Could they get into analyzing polls, candidates, and primary election results to see if the sixth Realigning Election may be in the works? Perhaps. But even if it’s just you who are interested, here are some websites that will both help you teach about the concept of realigning elections and help your students learn about the concept and follow the news and primary returns to evaluate it. I’ve divided the list of websites into three groups: (1) one dealing with the election realignment concept; (2) a few sites that will help students review the five earlier realigning elections; and (3) sites that will help students and teachers review news, election polls and returns, and

Year	Victor	Reason
1800	Jefferson	"Finished off" the Federalist Party. Power moves from industrial North to agricultural South.
1828	Jackson	More or less modern two-party system—liberal and conservative— begins. Twenty years of Jacksonian democracy ensue.
1860	Lincoln	Republican party drives out old Whigs. Southern secessionists begin moves leading to Civil War.
1896	McKinley	Industrialization leads to a shift to increasingly urban-based political power. Business interests begin to dominate politics.
1932	Roosevelt	Great Depression leads to a Democratic majority that lasts until 1956.

site for Lincoln's election is that of the National Endowment for the Humanities. You can find it at [edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=662](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=662). This is the fourth lesson plan in a larger curriculum unit titled "A House Dividing: The Growing Crisis of Sectionalism in Antebellum America." It's a fantastic unit designed for secondary students that has them discussing John Calhoun's theory of nullification and Steven Douglas's policy of popular sovereignty. The recommended fourth lesson plan will take 2-3 daily lessons to complete, and discusses historical and political topics that I learned about in college, not high school.

The 1896 election of William McKinley is covered by Wikipedia at

lesson plan ideas for both elementary and secondary teachers.

### Wikipedia-Realigning Election

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realigning\\_election](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realigning_election)  
I generally don't recommend Wikipedia. I do not like information that anyone can edit. However, this review of the realigning election concept seems to be a concise discussion that is fairly easy for students to read. It includes a section describing "possible" other realigning elections. All teachers who want to teach about realignment should read it, and secondary teachers may want to assign it to students.

### Teaching about the Five Realigning Elections

In this section, I am going to recommend some basic websites for each of the five presidential elections deemed by political scientists and historians to be realigning. You'll be seeing Wikipedia again because it follows a similar format in covering presidential elections, which may be useful for instructional planning purposes. The Wikipedia entries trace the nomination battle in each party, discuss the issues debated during the campaign, and provide the results of the general election. They also provide a state-by-state chart showing how many popular and electoral votes were cast for each candidate. Each article also recommends several other

The screenshot shows a lesson plan page from EDSITEMent. The title is "The 1828 Campaign of Andrew Jackson and the Growth of Party Politics" for grades 9-12. It includes a curriculum overview, an introduction, and a subject area of History and Social Studies. The text describes the triumph of Andrew Jackson and the end of the old era of trained statesmen for the presidency.

links for teachers and students. For the 1800 election, the Wikipedia article is at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election,\\_1800](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1800). Another great site for 1800 is "The Election of 1800: Teaching about a Critical Moment in the History of American Constitutional Democracy," found at [www.kidsource.com/education/election.html](http://www.kidsource.com/education/election.html). It's part of the KidsSource site and has advertisements. It's a very good site for elementary teachers, although secondary teachers will also find it useful.

For 1828, the Wikipedia site's URL is [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1828\\_election](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1828_election). A very good lesson plan with some excellent activities can be found on the EDSITEMent site at [edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=538](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=538). While the entire lesson plan could take up to six classroom days, teachers can select one or two activities that illustrate the importance of this election in U.S. history.

For 1860, the Wikipedia site is at URL [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election,\\_1860](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1860). Another fantastic

The screenshot shows the HistoryCentral.com website. The main heading is "United States Presidential Elections". There are navigation links for Home, Search Site, History Shopping, World Timeline, Election Central, and History Review. The page features a large "Call Fire" logo and a section for "1896" with sub-sections for Democratic Convention, Republican Convention, Popular Vote, Electoral Votes, and States Cast.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election,\\_1896](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1896). Finally, the Wikipedia article on Roosevelt's sweeping victory in 1932 is at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election,\\_1932](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1932). Another excellent site for 1932 is that of HistoryCentral at [www.multied.com/elections/1932.html](http://www.multied.com/elections/1932.html). HistoryCentral does a good job of mixing contemporary political news and issues with those of the past and gives students a good place to follow their favorite candidates for 2008.

### Useful Sites for Teaching about the 2008 Elections

[www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)

Did you know that Hillary Clinton would beat Rudy Guiliani by 3% (46% to 43%) if the presidential election were held today? That's according to the latest poll reported on this polling review website, which calls itself "an independent, nonpartisan resource on trends in American public opinion." If you really do want your students to look at realigning elections, this site might help them

decide if 2008 is realigning election number six. You can see all the polls on all the candidates and on all issues, including some that are controversial, such as American opinions on abortion, immigration, and same-sex marriage. Since many voters make their decision based on these “family values” issues, knowing what the American public thinks can help campaign planners—and your students—predict election outcomes. It’s a very interesting site.



[www.realclearpolitics.com](http://www.realclearpolitics.com)

Here’s another site from my favorites list. Founded by two Chicagoans in 2000, Real Clear Politics is an independent site that is updated every morning and throughout the day and “culls the best commentary, news, and polls” from all political points of view on today’s political issues. On the day I looked at it, there was an editorial from the *Des Moines Register* about Bill Richardson’s chances and an article from *Time* by the astute Joe Klein, titled “Democracy: The Fable.” This is a valuable site if you are going to look for signs of realignment in the 2008 election.



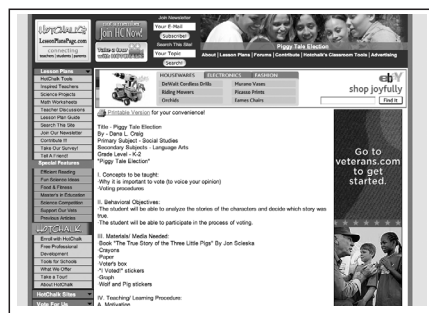
[www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/strategy/strategy050.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/strategy/strategy050.shtml)

Education World may be too commercial for some, but it has some good resources

and great links to other sites on just about every social studies and societal topic you can imagine. The site’s “Strategy of the Week” is to encourage the use of political cartoons to study the upcoming 2008 election and elections in the past. There are links to many good sites and a program where your students can submit their own political cartoons. This is a site (like this column) where the important parts are the recommended links and their descriptions.

[www.teacherlink.usu.edu/tlresources/units/byrnesF2000/HILHOL/resources.htm](http://www.teacherlink.usu.edu/tlresources/units/byrnesF2000/HILHOL/resources.htm)

Despite the inufferably long URL, this is a great site for teachers of all grade levels for general information and even lesson plans on U.S. elections. The specific part of the site that I have recommended contains a list of great websites. I have used several of them before, like “Ben’s Guide to U.S. Government for Kids ([bensguide.gpo.gov](http://bensguide.gpo.gov)). If you click on the “Home” button, you will find an excellent site for fifth grade teachers designed by two teachers, Brandi Barnard and Hilary Holmes. It includes suggestions for student activities, appropriate children’s literature, and additional teacher resources.



[www.lessonplanspage.com/SSLAImportanceOfVoting-UsesTrue3LittlePigsK2.htm](http://www.lessonplanspage.com/SSLAImportanceOfVoting-UsesTrue3LittlePigsK2.htm)

I have included the LessonPlansPage.com site because I want to illustrate that it is possible to teach very young kids about elections and have them practice voting. The site features many lesson plans in all subject areas, as well as advertisements for places that give you a master’s degree online. The lessons are good, however, and range through all grade levels. “Piggy

Tale Election” is an activity designed for grades K-2 that teaches “why it is important to vote” and asks to decide whether the wolf or the pig was telling the truth ... and to vote on it. The lesson doesn’t bring up realigning elections, but it’s a good start. I printed it off for Pegi, my wife, who is a speech pathologist with K-5 kids.

As usual, many of the sites recommended in this column will have links to other sites that may help you teach about the 2008 election, including the primaries, whose start is not far away. This could be one of those realigning elections. Wouldn’t it be great if your classes became interested enough to follow the election, apply the criteria mentioned in the introduction, and predict what will happen on the second Tuesday of November, 2008?

In 1896, more than 78 percent of eligible voters came to the polls to vote for William McKinley or William Jennings Bryan. Americans chose a change in direction. The proportion of eligible voters who have voted in recent presidential elections has been smaller than that. Young voters are the demographic group least likely to turn out, but this could change if schools succeed in engaging their interest in the electoral process.



**C. FREDERICK RISINGER** retired as director of professional development and coordinator of social studies education after 31 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. He currently is working on two social studies writing projects, is developing a new website, and works two shifts a week as a bartender at a local microbrewery.