

# A Presidential Election Simulation: Creating A School-Wide Interdisciplinary Program

Helen M. Joyce

In 1980, several colleagues and I at New Hampshire’s Littleton High School crafted a plan to raise political awareness among our students and to get them to become more involved in the presidential election. For several months after school, we met with students who took on the roles of the actual presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Building their campaign staffs from among their peers, the pretend candidates prepared speeches that addressed the major issues of the election and ran a full-fledged campaign. Our ultimate goal was to hold an election rally during the school day that would generate excitement among the student body in preparation for a mock presidential election. The rally surpassed our wildest expectations, and the students became instant celebrities in the school community—so much so that we repeated the program in 1984. I continued the same format in 1988, when I served as assistant principal at Woodsville High School. The presidential rallies and mock elections every four years were a huge success and generated a great deal of attention among the local and state media. The students in both high schools became informed “voters” and were very much engaged in the electoral process.

When I returned to the classroom, as a social studies department chair at Sanborn Regional High School, in Kingston, New Hampshire, I was able to take this same program and create an actual social studies course for students during the 2000 presidential election campaign. The program developed into a school-wide interdisciplinary course, involving virtually every department in the school, simulating every aspect of the electoral process and directly or indirectly impacting all 600 students. The beauty of offering the course vs. working with students after school on this project was that I had the opportunity to meet with them everyday and we were better able to organize the school-wide campaigns through very specific lessons and related activities.

My objectives in creating “Elections” included each of the following:

1. to create a school-wide project involving a number of high school departments which would be in the true spirit of interdisciplinary instruction
2. to make the students more aware of the issues facing voters in the upcoming election
3. to have the students simulate the entire campaign process—including organizing a campaign, writing a party platform, studying the role of the media and ultimately presenting the candidates’ positions to the student-voters in a rally forum

4. to have the students simulate the election process—including the study of voter behavior, voter registration, division of the school into electoral districts, and conducting the actual mock election.

“Elections” is offered as an elective for 11-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in the fall to coincide with the actual election campaign. While I have organized the course for a semester length 4x4 block schedule, it could also be run in traditional 55-minute classes. In either case, the remaining time in which the students are in the course is devoted to “Current Issues”—certainly a logical follow-up to the presidential election. When I introduced the class in 2000, I had a total of 12 very dedicated gifted students enrolled. By 2004, as a result of the success of the earlier program, the administration had to close the doors at 35. My class was comprised of students who represented all academic abilities—inclusion became an integral part of the program.

The beauty of this course is that there is a role for every student and very specific responsibilities that are attached to those roles. The key element in the early lessons is to determine what each student’s strengths are, thereby assigning them the appropriate jobs and, secondly, to determine what their political affiliations might be. By having them fill out an interest and talent inventory, they are

## Election 2004

Just as in Election 2000, the Mock Election was a school-wide project involving a number of departments and students. The focus of the project is to make the students more aware of the issues facing the nation in the 2004 presidential election campaign.



Secret Service  
Bobby Saunders



John Kerry  
Scott Hopkins



Guest Speaker  
Vanessa Kerry

President Bush  
Sean LeBlanc



The Election Class of 2004



During the Mock Election

"The Election 2004 class has been an experience to remember. I have learned a lot more about politics and what's going on in our country today." ~Sean LeBlanc

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A page from the Sanborn Regional High School yearbook spotlights the successful 2004 mock election.

able to see for themselves how their skills match the aforementioned roles. They are further surveyed, using Kamber and O'Leary's "The Political Quiz Show" and other instruments to determine where they stand in terms of party affiliation. Once both have been ascertained, the teacher can then proceed to assign students to various campaigns and specific roles within those campaigns.

One of the things that I have to be very careful about is not to divulge my own political affiliation to the class. It helps to keep that information close to the vest to avoid being accused of favoritism toward one group or another. During the 2004 election, my students decided that they wanted to invite the actual candidates to

speak or appear at the rally. Invitations were sent out by the media coordinators to both the Kerry and Bush staffs. While President Bush's campaign declined the invitation, Vanessa Kerry, the senator's daughter, jumped on the bandwagon, accepted our invitation and delivered a short address at the beginning of the rally. She was an instant hit with the high school students, and it was interesting to see that she did not concentrate on her father as a candidate, but rather emphasized the importance of students getting involved in the electoral process. It's important to note that you do have to be careful, if you include actual candidates or their representatives in the rally. Make sure that all parties are included in the invita-

tion process and that their messages are of a non-partisan nature.

The roles of each member of the class vary but each has very specific responsibilities and deadlines to meet, all of which are part of their assessment. The presidential and vice-presidential candidates oversee their campaigns and are responsible for researching and delivering speeches that address the major issues at the student rally. Campaign managers assist the candidates with the logistics of the campaign and are responsible for introducing them at the rally. The campaign staffs are assigned a multitude of tasks, from polling the student body to writing campaign literature. Media coordinators help to organize publicity for their respective candidates and are responsible for the press corps segment of the election rally. The election coordinators' tasks center on student registration for the mock election, dividing the school into precincts and districts and helping in the capacity of supervisors of the checklist. The rally coordinators concentrate on the nuts and bolts of the rally itself, preparing for every eventuality, from the opening ceremony to the final exit of the student body from the gym.

It is rare that you will have a large number of students who want to take on the role of the candidates. This is especially true when they realize that they must make a speech at the election rally. However, should you find that more than one student wants to represent a specific candidate, you can hold a primary election in the classroom and require the students to prepare a short speech on their positions relative to the issues of the campaign. The class then votes to determine the nominee. From my own experiences, I have found that before the actual primary, the students will often drop out of the race and choose a role with less responsibility—such as campaign manager. Also, while it would be nice to have many third parties represented, in a program of this size, it's not feasible. While my students in the elections class represented only Democrats and Republicans, I did permit other students in the school to distribute campaign literature for other

candidates. As the momentum grew, this became a large part of the rally, as well. Subsequently, they could also vote for their third party candidate as a write-in on the mock election ballot.

Students in "Elections" are aware that, while they are having an exhilarating time running their campaign, there is also a strong academic component to the course. They are required to complete research papers on the candidates' positions, take quizzes and exams in each unit of study, and they have deadlines that they must meet regarding specific jobs and assignments related to the rally and election. At a weekly seminar, each student must report on what they have accomplished over the past seven days, and we use the other students to troubleshoot any problems their classmates might encounter. In addition, we hold bi-weekly news seminars in which the students are responsible for a news event germane to the election. The course includes units of study on the process of electing the president as well as qualification for office, origin and roles of political parties, political campaigning, the role of the media, and elements of effective speeches. Assessments include traditional exams, research papers with rubrics, video worksheets, formal debates, and writing campaign literature and news seminar reports.

Probably the most exciting element to this course is the fact that it has become a truly interdisciplinary program, with virtually every department in the school getting on board. In September, I arrange with the principal to speak about the program at one of the early faculty meetings. I describe the upcoming activities and what I hope to see develop school-wide. If this program is to be a success at any school, it's imperative to have the support of the administration, as well as that of other classroom colleagues. During the last two presidential elections, the English department helped with selecting and preparing students who served as members of the press corps at the rally. The journalism/media class had students write editorials regarding the candidates and helped to videotape the rally. The mathematics department conducted sur-

veys, analyzed the data, and compiled the results for each candidate. The science department had their students research the candidates' positions on environmental issues. The foreign language teachers assigned their students research relative to the candidates' position on international issues that affected their sister nations. Some even made placards for the rally, written in Spanish, showing their support for Kerry. The art department had their students create campaign posters for each candidate. The music department (high school band) provided the music for the rally, including introductory upbeat songs as the candidates entered the gym and shook the hands of their supporters in the bleachers. The business department assisted with the program for the rally. The student council and their advisor served as the supervisors of the checklist, registering voters before the election and manning the polls on our Election Day. Of course, the social studies department played a major role in recruiting students from other classes to serve on campaign staffs, as precinct captains in homerooms and, believe it or not, as secret service agents. Students were also selected for the Color Guard. Their responsibility was to serve as an escort for the presentation of the flag at the beginning of the rally. They were trained by professionals from the local Veterans of Foreign Wars and Scouts programs. It did not take long for the entire school and community members to be engaged in the process.

As the time for the rally approaches and each piece begins to fall into place, the students must concentrate on their speeches. Campaign managers are responsible for introducing the presidential and vice-presidential candidates by way of a short biography. The candidates are responsible for addressing key issues of the campaign, and they must truly represent the views of the actual candidates. It's important to note that the same issues should be covered by both the Democratic and Republican candidates, and they should be equally divided between the presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the same

way. This makes it easier for the students at the rally to make side-by-side comparisons and, therefore, a more logical choice in the voting booth. It's also imperative that the students practice their speeches, first in the classroom with their peers doing constructive critiquing and then ultimately in the gym or auditorium for a dress rehearsal with microphones, etc.

The day of the rally is one of the most exciting of the school year. In the final days leading up to them, both in 2000 and 2004, countless teachers stopped me in the halls to let me know that their classes were "totally into" the election. As a matter of fact, on several occasions, polite arguments had broken out in English, math, and science classes among the supporters of the various candidates. It sometimes became a challenge for the teachers to get the kids back on track in their own subject areas. I saw this as a positive sign that the school-wide interdisciplinary approach was indeed working.

If you have prepared well and covered all the bases, the rally will fall into place and take on a life of its own. The excitement and the passion that the students have for their respective candidates becomes contagious, as many placards are held high throughout the gym. I have also found that the student audience rises to the occasion and is most impressed with the marching of the Color Guard and National Anthem at the beginning of the rally. An opening address from either the teacher running the class or the principal also helps to set the proper tone. Personally, I enjoyed sitting back and watching the program unfold as months of preparation came to fruition. Seeing my students take the stage in the role of national candidates and doing so in a highly professional manner made me proud to be an educator. Just as profoundly, was the response of the student body to each candidate and their serious approach to listening to what the candidates had to say. It dispelled all the myths regarding the political apathy of students and reaffirmed my confidence in them as future leaders of this country.

The final stage of the program comes one or two days later, when the student body has an opportunity to cast their votes in the mock election. It was interesting to compare the school results with the actual ballots cast in 2000 and 2004. While George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000, the Gore candidate at Sanborn Regional won the school election. By the way, this was based on electoral and *not* popular votes. However, in 2004, the student representing Bush won the election, as did his counterpart in Washington, D.C. Again, the ballot totals were quite close.

Many of my former students, who have completed the Elections course, or who took part in earlier similar programs, have gone on to work in government on the state and national levels or are currently studying politics in college, with the intention of pursuing a career in government. The feedback that I received from my Elections students at

the end of the semester reaffirmed that my goals had been reached. The overwhelming majority of them felt that they now understood the political process and were so much more informed on the candidates and issues of the campaign. Their newfound confidence afforded them the opportunity to engage intelligently in political conversations and, just as importantly, the hands-on course gave them the chance to work as a team with others who both shared their views and respectfully disagreed with them,

This program is indeed an exciting approach to introducing the world of politics to high school students and provides them the experience of simulating the electoral process in a way that they will never forget. To this day, I have parents stop by to tell me happily that, as a result of this school-wide program, their sons and daughters had actually challenged the political ideas and philosophies that the parents had

inculcated in them from their early childhood. My response has always been the same: "Great! That's what the democratic process is all about!" 🌐

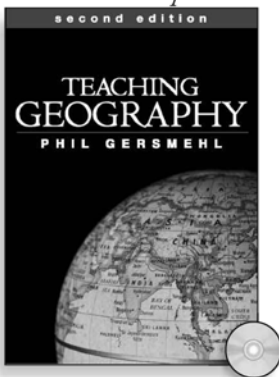
**Note:** I had the good fortune of having my course published by Teaching-Point Publishers in Jacksonville, Florida. The program, titled *Elections*, includes daily lesson plans, assessments, student activities, student workbooks, research assignments and rubrics, PowerPoint presentations, outline notes, film suggestions and a teacher-pacing guide. A class set of standard government books for supplemental reading could be used for additional classroom or homework assignments.

I would be happy to provide materials that I share with teachers who have attended my "Elections" workshops in New England to others free of charge.

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