

Teaching about the 2012 Elections Using the Internet—Part 2

C. Frederick Risinger

In the previous issue of *Social Education*, this column looked at the upcoming elections from a more general point of view and recommended websites that examined presidential election history, voting laws, and the origins of the Electoral College and how it works. In this column, I focus specifically on this year's presidential battle and pay some attention to the struggle over the control of Congress.

I began to write this column the day after Mitt Romney selected Paul Ryan of Wisconsin as his vice presidential running mate. I opened my last column stating my belief that the “2012 election may be one of the most important elections in U.S. history” and that I believed that “the future of democracy in the United States is going to be shaped by this election.” Paul Ryan's selection only intensifies these beliefs. Ryan's proposed budget several months ago represented a very different way of viewing taxation, public spending, and social issues from what has been practiced for the past few decades. This election (congressional as well as presidential) will force Americans to choose between two quite different approaches to government budgeting and spending. As someone who describes himself as “socially liberal, fiscally conservative,” this election forces a bit of self-examination. Additionally, this election seems to be dividing U.S. citizens more dramatically than any election I can recall—particularly on social issues such as immigration reform, women's rights, and gun control.

The 2012 elections, nationally and at the state and local levels, present a tremendous challenge to social studies teachers and educators. Those of you who follow this column know that I wrote an “open letter” to President Obama calling for him to help bring social studies

and citizenship education back from the marginalization in the curriculum that has occurred during the past half-decade. The president did not respond, though Secretary of Education Arne Duncan did publish an article in *Social Education* (one I considered weak and irrelevant).

So, it's up to us—social studies classroom teachers (at all grade levels), department heads and supervisors, and teacher educators—to do what we can to help our students understand the U.S. election process, the issues citizens must analyze in making their decision, and how to keep this nation from tearing this wondrous democracy apart. Can we do it? I don't know, but we have to try.

The websites I've recommended below provide links to both elementary and secondary lesson plans, collaborative projects, and other learning activities I believe would be effective and enjoyable for both students and teachers. Nearly all the sites have links to other sites that could well be on my list, but space limits their inclusion. Take a look at them yourself, and you may find some you really like.

Real Clear Politics

www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2012/president/2012_elections_electoral_college_map.html

You can go to www.realclearpolitics.com and work your way to this page from the menu, but I like this page because it has a superb

electoral map that not only gives you more than you may want to know about the presidential election, but also includes a map for both the House and Senate races. You will be surprised at the amount of information on elections and election issues that are examined here. This site would be especially good for group projects at the middle and high school levels. Elementary teachers could use some of the maps and other information for illustrative slides and background information.

Center for Action Civics

www.centerforactioncivics.org/elections-in-action-lessons/

Founded and funded by the McCormick Foundation as a tribute to an outstanding Illinois congressman, Abner Mikva, and his wife Zoe, the Center for Action Civics is a “non-partisan organization that develops the next generation of civic leaders, activists, and policymakers.” The first thing you should do when you log on is to go to the “Resources” page and order the free pdf/Word document of the 2012 General Elections version of their “Elections in Action” curriculum unit. Their Lessons/Activities section contains several intriguing classroom activities, although some of them are a bit dated. While this site is somewhat Chicago-centric, it has some interesting features and links to other good websites.

The Learning Network of The New York Times

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/election-2012-teaching-ideas-and-resources/>

This excellent website is a blog from the education division and its writers at the *Times*. I would recommend that all classroom teachers have it on their Favorites/Bookmarks. It always has a “word of the day” to help build students’ (and teachers’) vocabulary. The day I looked at it included a great interview from 1995 in which 5th graders predicted how we would be using the Internet with uncanny accuracy. If you go to the specific page listed here, you will find a wealth of outstanding resources and lesson plan ideas for teaching about the 2012 elections. There are so many ways this site can help you that you have to go to it and look around to find out.

Channel One

<http://onevote.channelone.com/>

Many teachers already know about Channel One. In schools across the country, teachers have their students watch Channel One’s news broadcasts daily. (The day I watched recently, they were having student reporters discuss whether or not high-sugar drinks should be taxed heavily, and the new Australia law requiring gruesome pictures to be on cigarette packages.) It’s aimed directly at teens, but many of their activities and resources can be used by teachers and students in pre-teen grades. Click on “OneVote 2012” and you’ll find many stories aimed at students’ interest. Click on “Teachers” and you’ll find lesson plans and activities on a variety of topics including the 2012 election. Your students can respond to stories and even become “reporters” for the network.

National Writing Project

www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2642

The National Writing Project began at the University of California, Berkeley in 1974. It now works through major universities throughout the nation and seeks to improve learning through writing in all subject areas. While they focus on writing as part of learning, they have a great page on the 2012 elections.

Follow the URL above and you’ll find a diverse and helpful array of ideas and links to other websites that contain great information, teaching plans and learning resources. These sites include Kids Voting USA and TeacherVision, both deserving to be in this column. I strongly recommend that you check out this site.

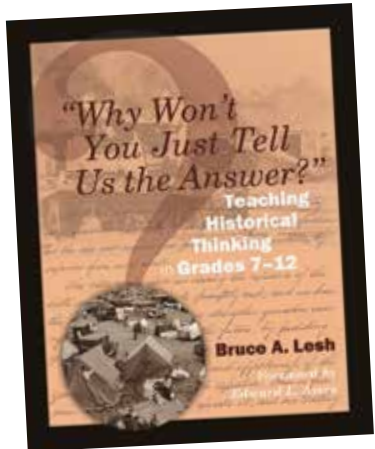
Constitutional Rights Foundation

www.crf-usa.org/

The Constitutional Rights Foundation has done a great job for years providing news, lesson plans, full units on Constitutional Issues and other services for social studies educators. When you get to the home page, go to “Election Central 2012.” They have a great group of free lesson plans including lessons that focus on major issues in this year’s election, such as The Economy, Immigration, Foreign Issues, and U.S. Foreign Policy. The set of recommended Internet links that focus on the election is outstanding. Don’t miss this site.

As I said, I could have discussed several other websites. However, many of the recommended ones have links to each other and to sites that you might want to examine. (Just use the search term “Teaching about the 2012 election” and you’ll find plenty to keep you busy.) The information, lesson plans, and instructional activities are out there. I encourage you to try and modify some of them to fit your local area. Elections for the House of Representatives, the Senate, and governors are very important this year. And, I still contend that this election is one of the two or three most important elections in my lifetime. Please try to find time to help your students understand the importance and the issues of the 2012 elections. 🌐

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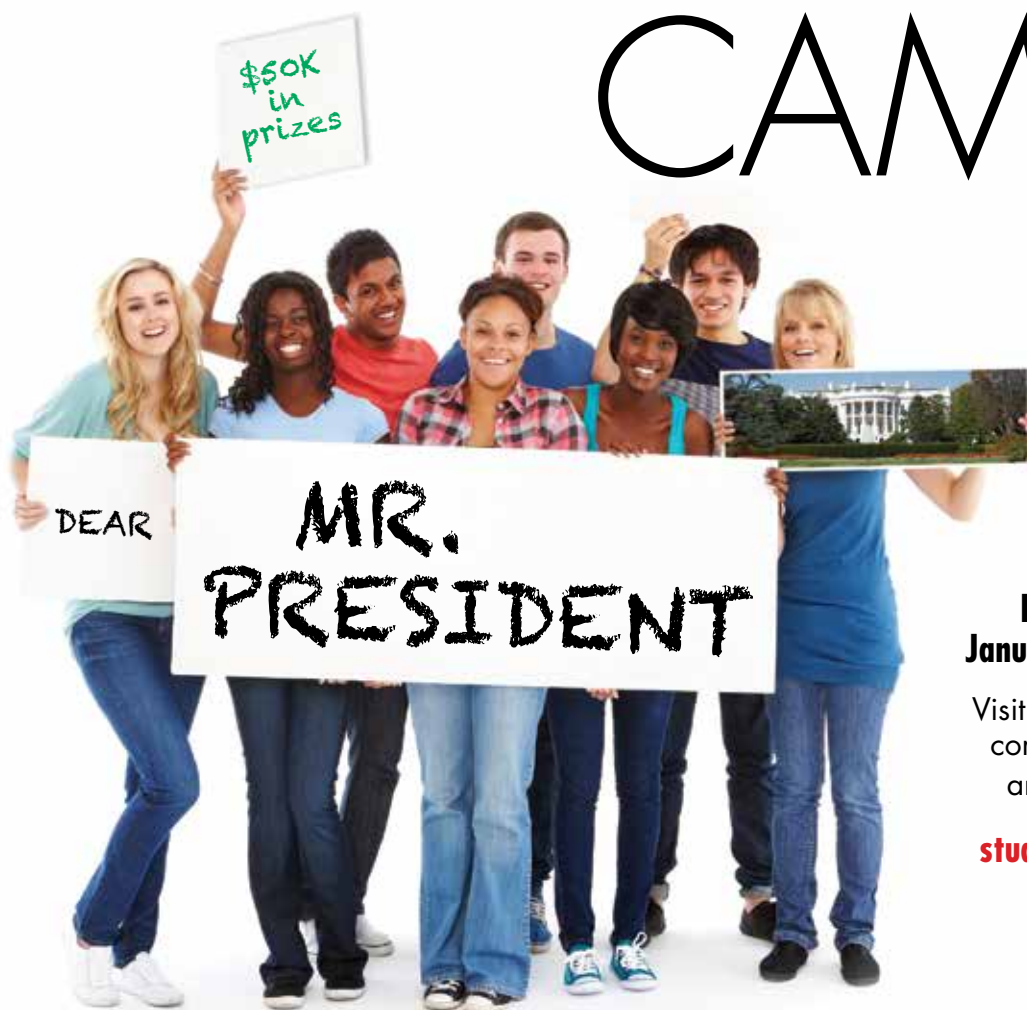
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