

SO YOU WANT TO BE PRESIDENT? ELECTION DAY AND THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL (2-5)

OBJECTIVE: Students will be able to...

- Identify the month and specific timing rule for the U.S. Presidential Election Day.
- Describe several roles and activities involved in a presidential campaign.
- Explain how candidates try to reach and persuade voters.

STANDARDS:

- **2.SP1.3** Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped a significant historical change.
- **2.SP3.4** Gather relevant information from one or two sources.
- **2.C2.1** Describe roles and responsibilities of people in authority within our country and world.
- **2.C2.2** Explain how all people, not just official leaders, play important roles in the world.
- **3.SP1.3** Generate questions about individuals and groups who have impacted history.
- **3.SP3.6** Construct arguments and explanations using reasoning, examples, and details from sources.
- **3.SP3.7** Present summaries of arguments and explanations using print, oral, and digital technologies.
- **4.SP1.3** Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical events.
- **4.SP3.5** Construct and present arguments and explanations using reasoning, examples, and details with relevant information and data from multiple sources.
- **4.SP3.6** Present summaries of arguments and explanations using print, oral, and digital technologies.
- **5.SP1.2** Explain how events of the past affect students' lives and society.
- **5.SP1.3** Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.
- **5.SP3.6** Construct and present arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.
- **5.SP3.7** Construct and present explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data
- **5.C3.1** Describe the origins, functions, and structure of the United States Constitution and the three branches of government.

- **5.H4.1** Use primary and secondary sources to describe how diverse groups (racial, ethnic, class, gender, regional, immigrant/migrant) shaped the United States' multicultural society within the historical timeframe.

CIVICS EXAM QUESTIONS:

- In what month is the election day for the U.S. President? **A:** November

TIMELINE: This lesson fits best prior to a presidential election or during a unit on the executive branch. Within the SPB process, this would fit best during the Campaigning phase.

APPROXIMATE LESSON LENGTH: 90-120 minutes

SUPPORTING MATERIALS:

- Video: ["So You Want To Be President?" YouTube clip](#)
- [So You Want to Be President? Notetaker](#)
- [Excerpt from USAgov on the Presidential Election Cycle](#)
- Video: ["Why are US federal elections always held on a Tuesday? The history behind weekday selection"](#)
 - Optional: *Excerpts from "So You Want To Be President?" transcript on presidential backgrounds/traits*
- [Library of Congress Observe, Reflect, & Question Method and primary resources](#)
- [Campaign Planning Graphic Organizer Handout](#)
- [Excerpt from "Guide to Working on Political Campaigns" on Campaign Roles](#)

VOCABULARY:

- **Election:** A formal and organized choice by vote of a person for a political office or other position.
- **President:** The elected head of state and head of government of the United States of America.
- **Campaign:** An organized course of action to achieve a particular goal, as in politics.
- **Candidate:** A person who applies for a job or is nominated for election.
- **Vote:** A formal indication of a choice between two or more candidates or courses of action, expressed typically through a ballot or a show of hands.
- **Electoral College:** The body of electors who formally elect the United States president and vice president.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Engage

- Begin by asking students, “What do you know about the President of the United States? What kinds of people have been president?” Share some interesting facts or descriptions from the “*So You Want To Be President?*” transcript, such as presidents’ previous jobs (lawyers, teachers, even a movie actor), personalities (shy, honest, joke-tellers), or motivations (serving the country, looking to the future).
- Watch *So You Want To Be President?* While watching, have students take notes using the *So You Want to Be President?* Notetaker on three categories: Responsibilities, Expectations, and Qualifications.
 - **Responsibilities:** These are the formal duties and powers explicitly granted to the President by the U.S. Constitution and subsequent legislation. They outline what the President must do and what they can do in their official capacity.
 - **Expectations:** These are the informal, often unstated, demands and hopes that the public, media, political parties, and even international communities place on the President. While not legally binding, failing to meet these expectations can significantly impact a President’s popularity, effectiveness, and legacy.
 - **Qualifications:** These are the explicit, legally defined requirements that an individual must meet to be eligible to serve as President of the United States, as outlined in Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution.
- Next, ask students to pair up with a partner and discuss their responses. Encourage them to share their ideas about the President’s job and the different backgrounds or characteristics they imagine presidents might have had. (If using the “*So You Want To Be President?*” resource mentioned previously, you could prompt them to think about any examples shared from that source during this pair discussion.)
- Finally, bring the class back together to share their ideas aloud. As students share, you can record their responses on the board or chart paper. Connect their responses to the idea that running for office is one way Americans can participate in their democracy, just like voting. This sets the stage for exploring the campaign process.

2. Explore

- Transition from the office of the President to how someone gets elected. Introduce the first key question: “In what month is the election day for President?” Provide students with the excerpt from the *USA Gov Source*. Guide them to locate the answer. The source states that the election for president happens every four years on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. The overall process takes almost two years, with Election Day in early November.

- Have students brainstorm why Election Day is held on the First Tuesday of November. Then watch the following Video: “*Why are US federal elections always held on a Tuesday? The history behind weekday selection*”.
- Explain that presidential candidates need to campaign, or reach out to their voters, in order to get people to vote for them. Next, students will look at how presidential candidates have done this using the Where and Why? activity from the *Library of Congress Observe, Reflect, & Question Method and primary resources*.

3. Explain

- In small groups, after the Where and Why? activity, have students write explanations for the following questions:
 - What patterns did you notice about the different venues that candidates have used to reach voters?
 - How did the sources you studied support or challenge what you already understood about where candidates have gone to reach voters and why?
 - Based on the sources you reviewed, what conclusions can you make about where candidates have gone to reach voters and the motivations behind their decisions? What new questions do you have?
- Explain that becoming president involves a long and complex process called a campaign. A candidate needs to reach, communicate with, and persuade voters to deserve their votes. Discuss how this has changed over time, from candidates staying home (front porch campaigns) to traveling widely for rallies and public speeches, volunteers knocking on doors to spread awareness, and using digital tools like radio, televised debates, television ads, and social media. Explain that it takes a team of people with different skills and lots of money to run a campaign. Introduce the idea that “working on a campaign” is another way people participate in democracy.

4. Elaborate

- Divide students into small groups. Challenge each group to imagine they are a team for someone running for president and create a mini-campaign plan. Provide them with the *Campaign Planning Graphic Organizer* handout.
 - Have them invent a candidate or use a historical figure.
 - They should decide on a main message or a few key ideas they want to tell voters about this candidate (Policy).
 - They should think about how they will get their message out (Communications). Will they make speeches? Create posters? Use social media (Relate to modern tools vs. historical)?
 - They should think about where their candidate will campaign (drawing on historical examples like traveling or meeting groups).
 - How will they get people to actually go vote on Election Day? (Field/GOTV).

- Who will work on their team to help them? (Introduce the idea of campaign staff and volunteers.) They can assign roles to group members based on the jobs discussed.
- Groups work together to fill out the organizer and prepare a short presentation or create a campaign poster summarizing their plan.

5. Evaluate

- Have each group present their campaign plan to the class.
- Observe student participation and understanding of the different campaign roles and activities.
- Ask students to recall the month of the presidential election. This can be a quick verbal check or a single question on a handout.
- Discuss as a class: What did you learn about what it takes to run for president? What was the most challenging part of planning a campaign? How do campaigns help people understand the candidates?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Research a specific historical presidential campaign (e.g., the 1888 “front porch” campaign, the 1960 Kennedy/Nixon debates). How did that candidate reach voters?

Research an organization mentioned in the sources that supports campaigns or works on voting rights. What do they do?

Have students research the requirements to be president according to the U.S. Constitution (not detailed in these sources, but a natural extension).

RESOURCES:

- Bernard Koteen Office of Public Interest Advising, [Guide to Working on Political Campaigns](#), Harvard Law School.
- Library of Congress, [Where and Why?](#), Presidential Elections and Voting in U.S. History.
- [usa.gov](#), [Overview of the Presidential Election Process](#).
- Voice of America, [Why are US federal elections always held on a Tuesday? The history behind weekday selection](#), November 4, 2024.