CIRCLE Fact Sheet

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A National Survey of Civics and U.S. Government Teachers

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Introduction

In May and June of 2013, CIRCLE surveyed a national sample of high school civics and U.S. government teachers. Complete survey responses from 720 teachers provided a wealth of information on more than 1,000 civics and government courses that they taught. The teachers responded to questions about key activities and topics; attitudes towards civic and democratic principles; confidence in teaching civics; knowledge of content; experience with key pedagogical strategies; and their training, preparation, and professional development.

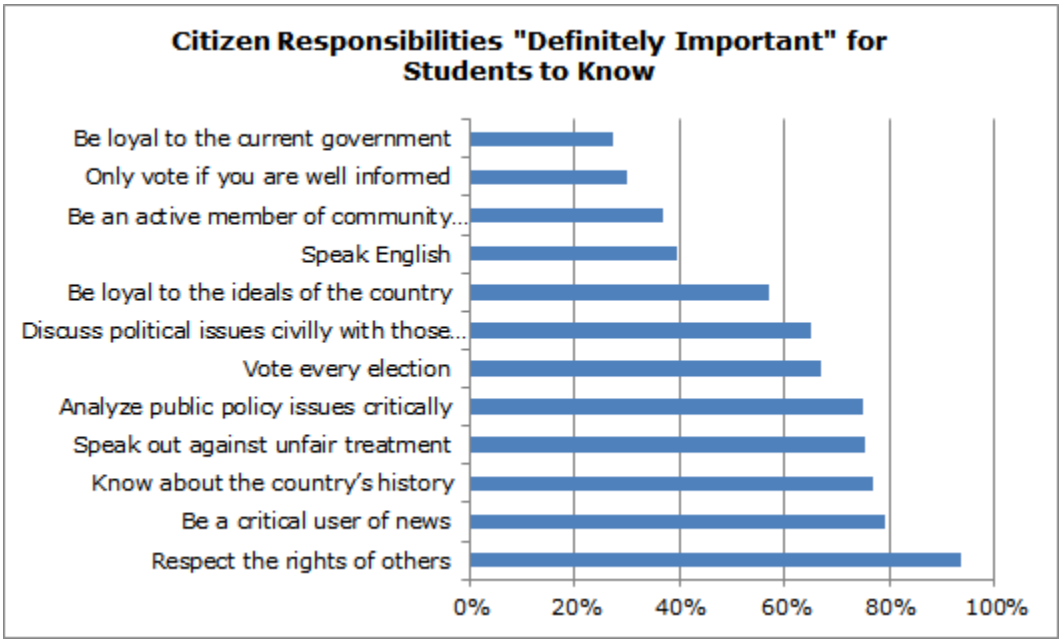
Key findings from the survey include:

- Teachers think citizenship education is important, but there is no consensus on what should be taught and prioritized.
- Critical thinking skills are taught more than civic engagement skills, with less emphasis on practicing deliberation and collaboration.
- Service learning and political volunteering are rare, though when they are present they appear to be of high quality.
- Teachers work in complex environments, with competing demands that often impact their ability to provide high quality civic education.

CIRCLE conducted this survey of teachers for its Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, which released the report "All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement" in October of 2013. The teacher survey was funded by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

Civic Education Important, but No Consensus on What it Means

Overwhelmingly, the teachers we surveyed felt that civic education was vital. Nearly all (98.0%) stated it was important for schools to teach students to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship, and 63.2% felt it was not only very important, but absolutely essential that students learn these lessons. Yet teachers did not fully agree on what those duties were, or what civic education skills and content should be taught.



Similarly, teachers differed on the importance of dialogue and diversity. Seventy percent of teachers responded that it was “definitely important” for people not to be criticized for having different points of view; however, far fewer said it was “definitely important” for people to consider everyone’s side of an argument before making a decision (54.7%).

Responses about how to incorporate citizen voice in decision-making were also mixed. Forty-nine percent said that it was “definitely important” that all kinds of people from the community be represented in decisions, that there should be lots of different opinions (34.9%), and that everyone present should participate (22.5%).

These varied views of what students should learn are reflected in how teachers structure their classes and the material they cover. About nine out of ten teachers indicated that, in the courses they taught, civics content (e.g. studying the U.S. Constitution) or critical thinking skills (e.g. analyzing the news) were the focus of two or more class sessions, and of related activities such as reading the news or conducting research. More than four out of five teachers (81.1%) said the same thing about topics and activities related to discussion, deliberation, current events or controversial issues. Fewer (65.9%) indicated that they discussed engagement skills and knowledge, such as how and why to vote, and complemented these discussions with a required activity (e.g. debates, mock elections, registering to vote).

Table 1: Topics and Skills Covered by Teachers in Civics Courses

	Civics Content / Critical Thinking	Discussion, Deliberation, Current Events, Controversial Issues,	Engagement Skills & Knowledge
Topic Focus	3.4%	8.1%	24.5%
Required Activity	2.3%	4.1%	2.1%
Both Topic and Required Activity	90.4%	81.1%	65.9%
Not Present in Course	3.9%	6.7%	7.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Facts, Local Engagement, and Media Literacy

Teachers were nearly unanimous (93.3%) in believing that basic knowledge (dates & definitions) enriches a student's understanding of issues. The activities and content they reported suggest that courses prioritized content mastery and critical thinking over understanding or practicing civic engagement skills. For example, the U.S. Constitution was a major emphasis or the entire focus of 86.0% of courses described by teachers. However, only around 40% of courses emphasized or were wholly about more practical dynamics of the U.S. political system: voting movements, controversial issues, election-related issues, differences between the two major political parties, the reasons citizens should vote, etc.

While teachers spent much less time on locally oriented content, more than 80% of classes included at least one session on local voting laws, or discussed issues related to local politics and government. Again, practical application of civic skills was rare, as few courses incorporated community service or political volunteering. For instance, approximately 13% of classes included service in the community as part of the curriculum, and less than 5% had more than half the class volunteering on a political campaign or in nonpartisan election-related activities. Qualitative research from three states (Florida, Tennessee, and Hawaii) indicates that there may be barriers to the implementation of programs or pedagogies that facilitate the teaching of civic skills. Examples of these impediments include a lack of teacher preparation and professional development, as well as a lack of understanding of how these programs or pedagogies align with state standards.

However, when community service and political volunteering were present in the curriculum, they appeared to be of high quality. Eighty-seven percent of courses with a community service orientation used class discussion and reflection on the service experience, and over 40% looked at root causes and solutions to the social problems they were addressing in their service projects. Most courses with a community service component (84.4%) also allowed students to do service related to campaigns and politics. However, less than half of these classes allowed students to *choose* to engage in such activities. Still, between 20%-25% of all courses provided credit for nonpartisan

participation in election activities (24.5%), volunteering on political campaigns (24.1%), communicating with the news media (22.5%), or attending political events (20.8%).

Another topic clearly prioritized by teachers was the development of media literacy skills. All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students needed such skills in order to discern credible information as distinct from raw data, opinion, or misinformation, and that students needed to be adept at gathering and seeking out such information. Almost all (98.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that students should also be able to produce credible information. In over 80% of courses, teachers asked students to read news articles, and more than half (51.9%) of courses included critical analysis of the news as a major emphasis of a unit or of the entire course. (See our previous fact sheet about Information Literacy in High School Civics.)

Discussion in the Classroom: Issues, Politics, and Controversies

Most teachers surveyed indicated that their classes included discussion of political and social issues. Nearly four in five of these courses engaged students in such discussions at least one to two times a week; in 35.0% of the courses, they happened every day. Nearly all teachers agreed or strongly indicated that they tried to bring in a variety of perspectives (cultural, ideological, and historical) and worked to present multiple sides of an issue when explaining it in class. However, teachers were less uniformly committed to teaching the skills and values necessary for successful deliberation. Only 42.1% practiced how to discuss public issues with civility on a regular basis, and 32.6% of courses focused on how to make decisions in small groups.

Teachers also didn't shy away from discussing controversial issues in the classroom. Most teachers (94.2%) indicated that they used controversies as teaching opportunities to get students engaged, and to model civil debate and discussion. A large majority (87.9%) also responded that students should explicitly discuss difficult and divisive issues, but only 31.9% "strongly agreed." It is interesting that this support for talking about controversial issues in the classroom is not often mirrored in their overall attitudes about dialogue and debate in the public sphere.

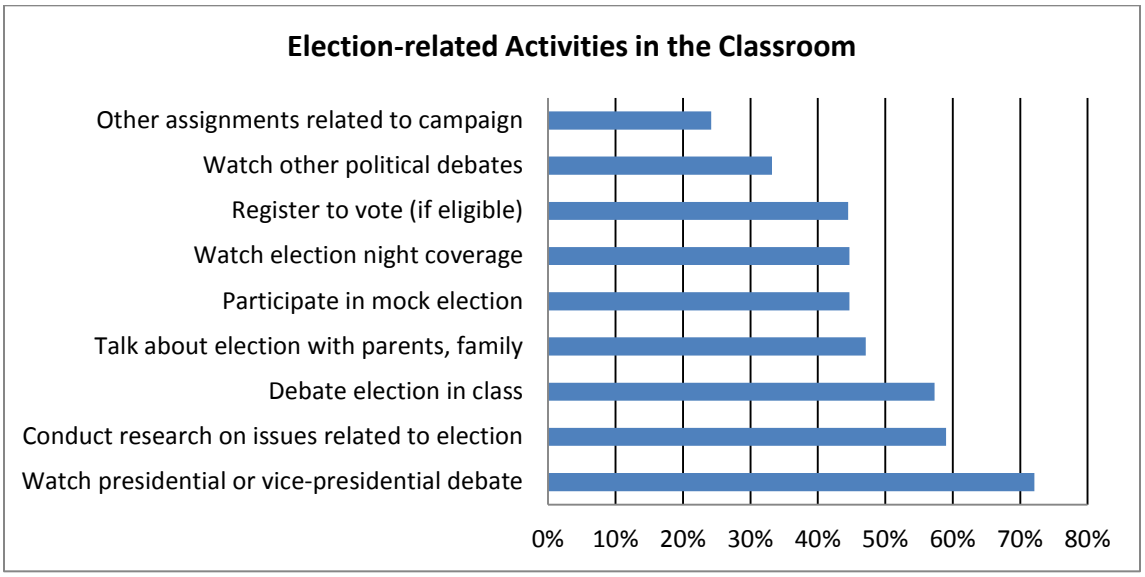
Table 2: Teacher Views about Classroom Discussion of Social Issues

	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Students are encouraged to make up their own minds about issues	32.0%	68.0%	100.0%
Teacher encourages students to discuss political/social issues about which people have different opinions	48.7%	50.6%	99.3%
Students should explicitly discuss difficult and divisive issues	56.0%	31.9%	87.9%
Class discussion is a matter of personal choice	42.4%	5.3%	47.5%

Teachers were also favorably predisposed to discussing current events in their classrooms. A significant percentage of courses (88.5%) discussed current events at least once a week, and they took place every day in over half (53.9%) of courses. Most teachers described electoral discussions, especially, as well-received among their pupils; 84.6% agreed or strongly agreed that students liked to discuss elections in their class. Most did not think that elections were too controversial for their students, or that they would be uncomfortable with issues raised as a result of discussing elections.

In fact, because the survey was conducted in mid-2013, many of the responses described courses taught during the 2012 election season, allowing a concrete glimpse into how U.S. government and civics educators tackle a national election in their classrooms. Almost all courses (88.6%) included some material or discussion on the 2012 election, specifically, or about voting in general.

Most commonly, teachers incorporated watching the presidential or vice-presidential debates (72.1%); courses also included watching election-night coverage (44.7%) or other political debates (33.2%), but to a much lesser extent. Over half of the courses also involved research on campaign issues and classroom election debates. (See *Appendix A* for other examples of classroom activities related to campaigns and the 2012 election.)



All teachers agreed (32.0%) or strongly agreed (68.0%) that students in their classes were encouraged to make up their own minds about issues, and nearly three-quarters of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they tried to keep their own political opinions to themselves so students wouldn't know what they believed.

Who Gets High-Quality Civics?

Civics and current events classes are not only offered to high-performing students: 20%-25% of civics courses were offered to classes where the majority of students could be classified as having performance barriers (e.g. at high risk of dropout, in special education, or English language learners). More than half of course offerings were in

classrooms with a majority of low-income students. It is likely students in these classrooms experienced civic instruction differently than students in the nearly 20% of courses offering AP level instruction. Previous CIRCLE research has shown that low-performing students do not enjoy the same high-quality civics instruction as higher-performing and more well-off students (Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013).

Many teachers adjust their courses to meet high, medium, and low student performance levels. When comparing tracked and non-tracked courses, there were minimal differences between topics covered or the types of activities used. The main difference between tracked and non-tracked courses was that tracked courses were more likely to focus on key factual content as a major emphasis of one unit or whole. Students in tracked courses were also more likely to engage in watching election-night coverage (52.2% versus 42.8% non-tracked), and do assignments related to campaigns (29.5% versus 22.8% non-tracked).

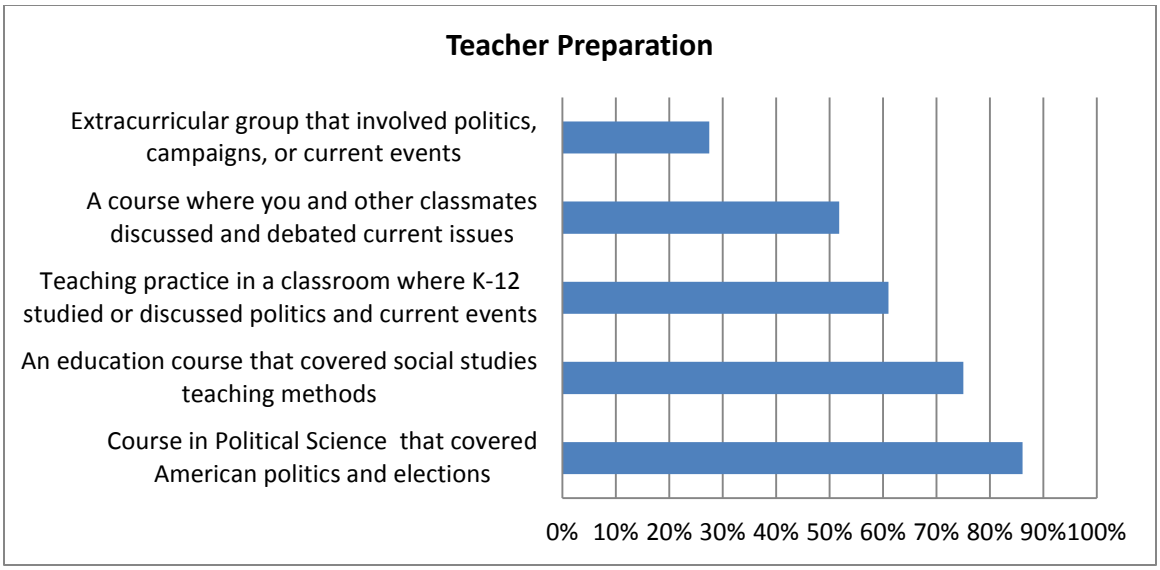
Of these tracked courses, 49.1% were offered to high-performing students, 38.6% to medium-performing students, and 12.3% to low-performing students. In these classes, high-performing students were more likely to engage in discussion around current events, social issues, the 2012 election, and local politics. They were also more likely to engage in activities such as reading news, following news on social media, conducting issue research, and participating in mock elections.

Supports & Challenges to Teachers' Potential

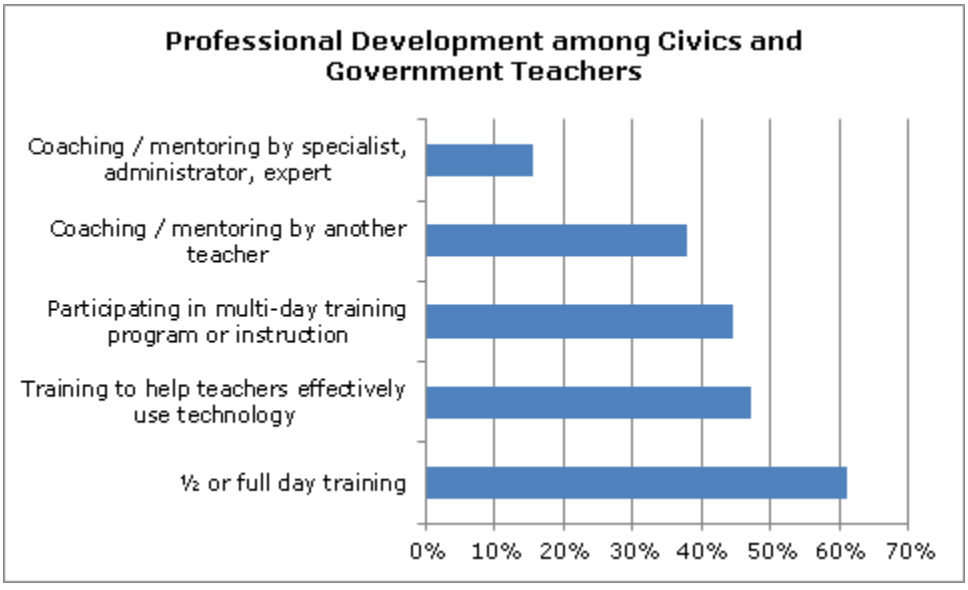
In general, most teachers said they felt confident in teaching critical thinking skills. However, in other areas, many felt underprepared. For example, less than half of them reported knowing "a lot of resources" to teach students how to sort fact from fiction in a digital age (38.9%), consume and create credible information (42.9%), and gain greater understanding of free press in democracy (49.8%). Over 80% of these teachers were somewhat or very interested in having more resources at their disposal to teach topics like media literacy.

Many factors affect teachers' ability to realize their potential for providing high-quality civic education. Pre-service and in-service training in civics are two important examples. Of the teachers surveyed, more had been history (55.3%) or education (49.9%) majors than political science or government (35.0%) majors in college, although more than half (52.7%) had more than one major.

Despite the differences in major, 86.1% of teachers reported that they had taken a course that covered American politics and elections. Three-fourths also reported taking a social studies methods course. However, fewer teachers indicated having experience practicing in a K-12 classroom where students discussed politics and current events (61.0%), or taking a course themselves in which current issues were debated or discussed (51.8%). In general, the data indicates that civics/government teachers may not have much hands-on experience involving discussion or debate of current issues or politics, either as teachers or participants.



Furthermore, there is a lack of opportunities for in-service teachers to practice or experience new methods. Less than half (37.9%) of civics/government teachers reported having intensive professional development training or support via coaches or mentors, or training to use technology in their classrooms (47.2%). Only 61.0% reported participating in half-day or full-day trainings, and just 44.5% reported participating in a multi-day training program. In general, teachers had inconsistent access to professional development experiences, with 39.8% reporting having three or more opportunities, 23.8% having two, 18.0% having one, and 18.5% having none.



In addition to training, teachers were interested in teaching material related to state standards or standardized tests and agreed that teaching about elections could help with the tests. For example, 78.0% of teachers reported that spending time on elections would help meet their state standards for social studies, while 64.5% said it would help

prepare students for an important test. According to previous research, all states include the civics theme of "power, authority, and government" in their state standards, while eight states have statewide standardized tests in civics/American government.

Among the teachers surveyed, many held multiple responsibilities at school in addition to their role as a civics or government teacher. Almost a quarter (24.2%) advised two school clubs and almost a fifth (17.9%) advised three or more. Teachers were most likely to report advising a sports team (30.5%), student government, (15.2%) or a service club (14.8%).

There were mixed perspectives about teachers' autonomy in the classroom. While 69.1% of teachers felt that they had "a great deal of control" over the topics and pace of instruction in their classrooms, 26.2% reported having some control and 4.6% had little to no control.

Teachers indicated that they felt relatively supported in teaching about possibly controversial topics. Ninety percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their principal and other school administrators would support their teaching about elections. Over 85% also felt district leaders and parents would support the teaching of election material. However, their assertions were not as strongly felt, with more agreeing rather than strongly agreeing. Despite having support from principals and administrators, teachers were not as confident that they would find support from parents or other adults in the community if they were to discuss politics in the classroom. Only 24.8% agreed to some degree that parents or other adults would object to such discussions and 22.4% were on the fence, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Table 3: Support Felt by Teachers for Discussing Politics in the Classroom

	Principal / Administrators	District Leader	Parents
Agree	43.5%	48.1%	57.1%
Strongly Agree	46.5%	38.5%	28.5%
Total	90.0%	86.6%	85.6%

Lastly, most teachers indicated that their classrooms are open to student voice, with 95.1% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their schools are places where students can express their opinions or disagree with teachers (95.8%). Over 90% indicated that every student had a responsibility to contribute to class discussions. In fact, almost all teachers indicated that they respected students' opinions and encouraged them to express their thoughts during class, and most said that students should feel free to openly disagree with them about political and social issues. However, teachers were split in how much say their students actually had in how their school is run: 36.3% agreed or strongly agreed that students had a say, while 41.6% did not think this was the case.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Teachers play a critical role in educating youth for democracy, and they are prioritizing it in their classrooms. However, they have varied views on what should be taught, with

many teachers prioritizing critical thinking and media literacy skills over skill-building for deliberation and collaboration. Similarly, service-learning and promoting political engagement and volunteering are rare in classrooms, though when these opportunities are present, teachers indicate providing high quality opportunities. Teachers are faced with competing demands (such as meeting state standards and tests) in complex environments that impact their ability to realize their potential for providing high-quality civic education. Although many teachers report being provided resources for teaching some aspects of civics, more opportunities for learning new methods or pedagogies seem critical to promoting teacher growth.

To increase teacher capacity to effectively teach civics in the classroom, teacher groups, school administrators, local leaders, and policymakers at all levels should:

- Give teachers more practical experience with civic skills in the classroom (e.g. small group decision-making, dialogue, and deliberation).
- Provide resources and create knowledge-sharing opportunities that help teachers integrate practical civic engagement skills and activities in the classroom (e.g., meaningful community service, simulations such as mock elections).
- Create opportunities for teachers to build upon their critical media literacy skills.
- Support learning exchanges and other mechanisms for teachers to share and grow their teaching repertoires while creating systems of peer support for teaching civics in the classroom.
- Strengthen teacher education as well as professional development to help teachers build both the critical and conceptual skills for teaching civics and the practical skills required for engagement.

Methodology

In May and June of 2013, CIRCLE surveyed a national sample of high school government and civics teachers. Teachers were recruited through an email list provided by a firm called MDR, and the survey was available online. The survey asked about teachers' own professional practices and objectives, their perceptions of prevailing practices in their schools, their perceptions of students' and community members' opinions about the purposes of education, and some general information about their students' overall demographics. They were asked about standard teaching practices of the type that are generally encouraged in public school systems. The survey was anonymous and 720 complete responses were collected.

Over 92% of respondents indicated that they had taught one or more courses that involved civics, contemporary American government, or significant discussion of current social and political issues during the fall 2012 semester. Of these, almost two thirds had taught two or more such courses. The majority of respondents (62.1%) were veteran teachers with over 10 years of teaching experience and almost a quarter (23.1%) had over 20 years. Over two-thirds held a Master’s or Doctorate degree. A little over ten percent (11.4%) were new teachers with five years or less of experience.

APPENDIX A – 2012 Election

Activities and assignments related to electoral campaigns

In addition to fixed responses, the teacher survey asked respondents to share any classroom activities related to the 2012 election that they implemented in their classrooms. Their open-ended responses fell into six key areas: 1) media and political communication; 2) analyzing campaigns and campaign strategies; 3) focus on key issues related to elections or part of electoral debates; 4) analyzing electoral data or conducting election-related research; 5) experiential learning related to elections and 6) understanding one's own beliefs and political ideology in relation to election-related issues and debates.

Media and Political Communications

Activities mentioned within this category included the deconstruction of political messages (e.g. campaign advertisements, political speeches, and other news coverage) as well as the construction or creation of political messages. Students were often asked to analyze and compare competing messages as well as form completely new messages based on the techniques they found in existing political communications. Sometimes these focused on party platforms or individual candidates; other times, students were asked to look at third-party competitors or create their own competing party or individual campaign.

Analyzing Campaigns and Campaign Strategies

A number of teachers detailed classroom activities that asked students to critically analyze campaign platforms in the 2012 election. Sometimes the assignment was about comparing and contrasting differing positions on domestic and international issues. One class was asked to compare and contrast Barack Obama's 2008 campaign to his 2012 campaign. Students were asked to assess biographical reports on the candidates and to explore the party nomination process. One class read *How to Win an Election* by Marcus Tullius Cicero.

Focus on Issues

A number of teachers used the elections as a way to look at issues like the validity of the Electoral College, campaign finance, the role of political parties and interests groups, and the state ballot initiative processes. One teacher assigned students to respond to the issue of limiting government spending by creating an app that would help voters see the tradeoffs. Other classes tapped into key issues relevant to the 2012 elections, such as health care reform, responses to the great recession, and immigration reform.

Data and Research

There were also responses about using election-related data and research. Teachers indicated using poll data and election results to look historically at election trends as well as predict outcomes. Some also detailed activities focused on tracking campaign spending and researching issues and ballot initiatives.

Experiential Learning

There were many examples of hands-on, experiential learning. Students attended campaign events, caucuses, local government meetings, and state legislative meetings. Some students also volunteered for campaigns and trained to become poll workers. Others helped register their classmates to vote and went to the polls on Election Day, either as an educational field trip or to allow eligible class members to vote. There were also many instances of students being asked to create mock elections and to run mock campaigns. One class even created a play on how a bill becomes a law.

Understanding One's Own Beliefs

There were also examples of teachers who asked their students to deconstruct the beliefs of various party platforms and candidates in an effort to personally identify where the student stood in relation to the candidate. Some teachers used political attitude questions and sites like ISideWith.com to help students place themselves along the political spectrum and align their issues with various candidates. Others detailed student voice activities that asked students to debate or advocate for their own position.