Donkeys and Elephants and Voters, Oh My!

Subjects: Language Arts/Social Studies

Estimated Time of Completion: six fifty minute class periods

I. Summary

It is a difficult skill for students to recognize government at its national level. Also, the concept of political action, political parties and their role in the democratic process is hard to teach in a conventional way. These hands-on activities are designed to help students journey through politics from its "grass roots" to a national convention through the creation of a new political party and the development of the convention's national platform.

II. Objectives

- Students will increase their knowledge base about politics and elections.
- Students will use political terms and increase understanding of their meanings.
- Students will improve writing and communication skills.
- Students will express their opinions on issues and compare and contrast them to the opinions of others.
- Students will compare and contrast factual information.
- Students will identify the geographic themes of place and location.
- Students will work cooperatively to achieve tasks.
- Students will creatively express their ideas through the arts.

III. Materials Needed

- Computers with Internet access
- White Board or Chalk Board
- Sentence Strips
- Newsprint or Poster Board
- Crayons, Markers, or Coloring Pencils
- Tape
- Party Hats and Favors
- Picture of the Republican elephant and picture of the Democratic Donkey
- Encyclopedia
- Map of the United States, or atlas
IV. Procedure

1. Distribute party hats and favors to class members. Label party hats with numbers 1-5 before distribution. Announce to the students that a party is going to start. Allow students an opportunity to quietly celebrate. Then tell the students that this will be a different type of party that they will create themselves: a political party. Ask students if they've heard this term before, or the terms "Republican" and "Democrat."

2. Explain that government is all around us and that decisions made by government affect us. Often in cities, states and countries, groups of people who share the same political opinions and want their government to make decisions in a certain way. Many times the people which hold opinions in common form a group that elects leaders who best promote those ideas. These groups are called political parties.

The political parties encourage voters to support their candidates through many methods such as sponsoring debates, advertising, fundraising, letter or e-mail writing campaigns, slogans, making speeches and hosting big meetings called conventions.

3. Divide students into five groups. The number on their party hat determines to which group they belong. Each group will form a political party. The group is responsible for identifying their group with a name, an animal symbol, slogans, a site for their convention, campaign hats, buttons, pennants, etc., an issues platform and an opening speech for their convention.

4. Student groups will choose a party name and design an animal symbol. Begin by sharing pictures of the Democratic donkey and the Republican elephant: why were these symbols chosen? What qualities does each animal possess? (Background information may be obtained at these links for the Democratic donkey and the Republican elephant.) Students should be encouraged to develop a name and animal symbol that are connected in some way to a quality they think government should possess. Discourage the use of names of sports teams or other unrelated names. Each group will be given a large sheet of newsprint or poster board. They will design a political poster incorporating their party's name and animal mascot. Afterward each group will explain their poster, and then the posters will be displayed in the classroom or hallway.

5. Ask each group to think about the issues that bind its members together. What are the best things about America? What are America's biggest problems? Each group should create a list of the most important issues and the party's position on each issue.

6. Next the group will select a city and venue in which to hold their mock convention. Using a United States map, atlases and encyclopedias, the student groups will make their choices. What are important considerations in choosing a convention site? Brainstorm a list before each group makes its final decision.

7. Explain to students that political parties use conventions as a way to publicize the party's platform and choose candidates. To illustrate the idea of a platform, lay out sentence strips with school-related opinions on each strip (e.g., "school lunch should be ten minutes longer," "more swingsets should be built on the playground," etc.). Step on the "platform" of strips and model a short speech about the ideas presented there. Discuss the connection of your "platform" to your speech's content.

Explain that political parties build an "idea platform" for their conventions. This platform of ideas is the stand that the parties take on certain issues. Give each group ten sentence strips. On each of the strips they write their party's position on the issues they chose. Use this sentence strip platform for the group's opening day speech at their convention.

8. The students will design campaign hats, pins, buttons and pennants. Museums in your area may have extensive collections of campaign materials or a guest speaker who is a
collector might offer advice. If no resource person or collection is available, then examples can be seen at Duke University’s "America Votes."

Paper or straw campaign hats may be purchased inexpensively or donated by political action groups, or they could be constructed using simple construction paper methods. Ribbon and paint pens could be used for slogans on campaign hats or paper strips and crayons or markers are inexpensive options. Dowels or straws may be used to hold pennants. During the opening speech activity the "convention crowd" will use the campaign items.

9. The students prepare their opening day convention speech based on their party's platform. Teacher suggestions for speech material: a welcome, use of slogans, talk of issues, hopes for the future, encouragement to voters and closing statements. The students may select one of their members to deliver the speech, or each member may give a portion of the speech. Other members of the group will become a part of the convention crowd. On the opening day of the mock convention, each group will don their campaign items. As each group takes its turn, the group members will position their sentence strip issues platform. The speaker(s) will then stand on the platform and deliver the speech. Video taping speeches is recommended if possible. After the completion of these activities, the issues platform and examples of the campaign materials may be placed on display.

10. At the conclusion of all conventions, students will choose the parties that they liked the best and explain their reasoning verbally or in writing. Explain to students that in some states, voters must choose or "declare" a particular party when they register to vote. Learn more about voting and voter registration by playing the interactive game, "Inside The Voting Booth."

V. Classroom Assessment:

- Teacher checklist of completed tasks and deliverables
- Teacher checklist completed during speeches
- Written or verbal defense of party name and animal symbol
- Identification of geographic location of convention sites on a United States map
- Sequence steps in preparing mock convention
- Students' oral or written evaluation of the most persuasive parties

VI. Extensions and Adaptations

- Record data and votes from student choices and graph results.
- Prepare pretend news reports from the mock convention for television or newspaper.
- Write acrostic poem using the name of their political party.
- Select or write a theme song for the mock convention.
- Compare democratic process in the United States to other republics, such as India.
- Contrast the democratic process in the United States to communist nations like Cuba or China.
- Estimate cost of a political convention.

VII. Relevant National Standards
These are established by McREL:

Social Studies
• Knows how state and local government officials are chosen (i.e., by election or appointment)
• Knows the fundamental principles of American democracy (e.g., the people are sovereign; the power of government is limited by law; people exercise their authority directly through voting; people exercise their authority indirectly through elected representatives)
• Knows how the values and principles of American democracy can be promoted through participating in government (e.g., voting, keeping informed about public issues, writing to legislators, serving on juries)
• Understands why it is important for citizens to monitor their local, state and national governments; and knows ways people can monitor the decisions and actions of their government such as reading about public issues, watching television news programs, discussing public issues and communicating with public officials
• Knows ways people can influence the decisions and actions of their government such as voting, taking an active role in interest groups, political parties and other organizations that attempt to influence public policy and elections; attending meetings of government agencies (e.g., city council, school board); working in campaigns, circulating and signing petitions; taking part in peaceful demonstrations; and contributing money to political parties, candidates or causes