

Lesson Title: “Two is Company, Three’s a Crowd”

Subjects

U.S. History, U.S. Government, Civics

Suggested Time

One to two 50-minute class periods

Grade Level

7-12

Essential Question

How have third parties changed the outcomes of U.S. presidential elections?

Objective

To examine the two-party political system in the United States and the effect upon it that third parties have had.

Overview

The Founders did not intend to create a two-party system. As John Adams wrote, *“There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.”* However, as the country grew in the 1800s and the Electoral College, as outlined in the Constitution, evolved into a “winner-take-all” system in which three or more strong parties would make it impossible to get to the required 270 electoral votes to win a presidential election, a two-party system emerged. In this lesson, students watch the *We The Voters* film “American Party Animals” to better understand the two-party system, and then break into groups to study three U.S. elections with major third party candidates: the 1912, 1992, and 2000 elections. They conclude by applying their findings to Gary Johnson’s Libertarian Party candidacy in 2016.

Materials

- *We The Voters* film, “American Party Animals”
- Copies of Student Handouts
 - Handout #1: Third Party Obstacles
 - PBS NewsHour article “Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process”
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/politics-july-dec04-third_parties/
 - Handout #2: Election Investigation
 - American Experience article on 1912 Election
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wilson/portrait/wp_election.html

- American Experience article on 1992 Election
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/bush-election92/>
- PBS LearningMedia video on 2000 Election
<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/0aa0d45c-ce10-48d5-a525-1976ee1ba6c6/third-parties-an-unreasonable-man-film-module/>
- PBS Education Electoral Decoder Interactive
<http://www.pbseduellectioncentral.com/electoral-decoder>
- Johnson/Weld 2016 Website: <https://www.johnsonweld.com>

Procedure

Introduce students to the popular saying, “Two is company, three’s a crowd.” Not only is this a popular saying, but it is also applicable to presidential elections when examining political parties.

Warm Up: Begin by asking students: What third parties can they think of? Why did they not win?

Film Viewing: Play the *We The Voters* film, “American Party Animals.” Ask: Does our Electoral College, as outlined in the Constitution, lend itself to three or more viable parties in its current structure?

Examining Third Party Obstacles: Have students read the PBS NewsHour article “[Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process](#)” and complete Handout #1: Third Party Obstacles. Review as a class.

Election Investigation: Next, divide the students into three groups. Have each group investigate one of the above-mentioned elections and complete Handout #2: Election Investigation for their election, drawing on the resources listed above and on the handout. Then, have the groups present their findings and have the other students complete the handout for the other elections.

Gary Johnson is running as a third party in 2016, and will be the only third party candidate to appear on the ballot in all 50 states. Have the students take a brief look at Gary Johnson’s [position](#) on four issues to complete the second part of Handout #2. Have students discuss Johnson’s candidacy and possible effects on the 2016 election using their newfound knowledge, and citing evidence.

Extension Activities

1. Have students go to the [New York Times Room for Debate](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/07/27/could-third-parties-determine-this-election/third-party-candidates-need-to-get-on-the-debate-stage-to-make-a-difference) <
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/07/27/could-third-parties-determine-this-election/third-party-candidates-need-to-get-on-the-debate-stage-to-make-a-difference>>. Assign them an opinion article on third party

- candidates or select a few to jigsaw. Have the students take notes on their readings.
2. Watch PBS NewsHour interviews with third-party candidates [Gary Johnson](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/why-a-former-governor-thinks-2016-could-be-a-third-party-year/) <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/why-a-former-governor-thinks-2016-could-be-a-third-party-year/>> and [Jill Stein](http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ab77daa3-5653-4c33-9f5b-dea2822add5a/jill-stein-and-the-role-of-third-party-candidates-in-presidential-elections-pbs-newshour/) <<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ab77daa3-5653-4c33-9f5b-dea2822add5a/jill-stein-and-the-role-of-third-party-candidates-in-presidential-elections-pbs-newshour/>> and discuss the following questions as a class or in pairs:
 - What issues are they concentrating on? Are these different issues than the ones you hear Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump discuss?
 - What are some reasons voters may want to vote for Johnson or Stein?
 - Should the candidates be allowed to participate in at least one of the three presidential debates?
 3. Come back together as a whole class and conduct a [Socratic Seminar](https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar) <<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar>> on “Two is Company, Three’s a Crowd” using their notes from the article(s), interviews, and the handouts, citing evidence as they make their claims and counterclaims.

Standards

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Standards from Social Studies for the Next Generation: the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

D2Civ.4.9-12 Explain how the U.S. Constitution establishes a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits that have changed over time and that are still contested.

D2Civ.9.9-12 Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education)

Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society

Standard 20: Understands the role of political parties, campaigns, elections, and associations and groups in American politics.