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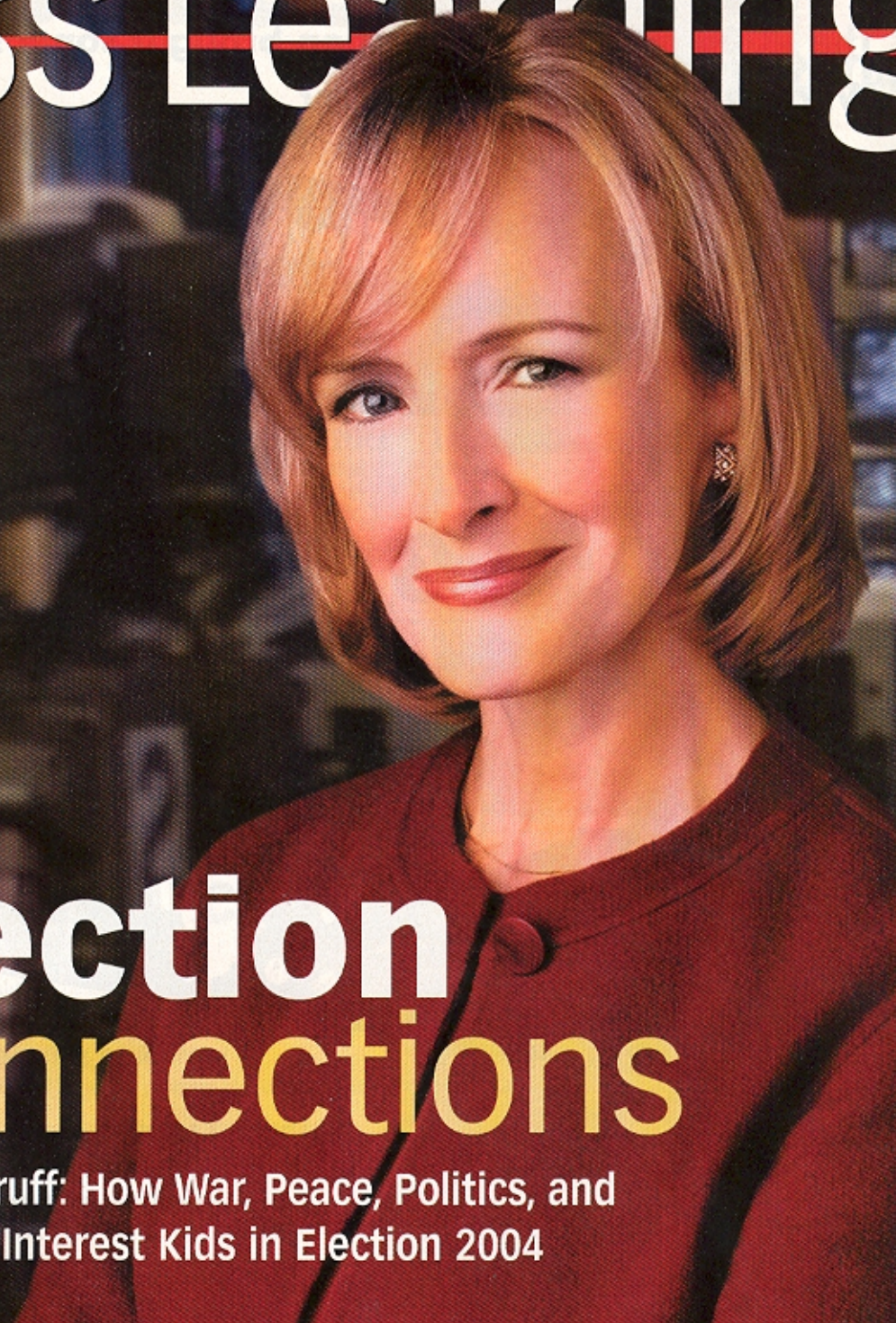
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How mock elections can engage and inform students about the electoral process—and involve the community in a school activity.

BY M. RAE NELSON

AFTER MONTHS OF PREPARATION, the pre-election rally had begun. The sounds of Bruce Springsteen's *Born In the U.S.A.* blasted into the hall as supporters cheered and waved their signs. Behind a backdrop of balloons and streamers, the candidates—governors, state senators, U.S. representatives, local representatives, and judges—made their final stump speeches of this campaign to the packed room and TV viewers at home. Just a few hours later, the voting would begin and students at Leland High School would get a jumpstart at participating in the democratic process.

This mock election in Leland, Mich., is one of thousands held each election year at schools across the country. The elections help students develop an understanding of the political process and its importance—an understanding many young people don't have, according to "Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations," a 2003 study from Representative Democracy in America: Voices of the People. According to the study, eight of 10 15- to 26-year-olds know that the animated *Simpsons* family lives in Springfield, yet less than half know the political party of their state's governor, and only 40 percent can say which party controls Congress. Only 66 percent say that voting is a necessary

quality for being a good citizen, compared with 83 percent of those over 26 years old.

"The number one goal—and this is important at the local and the national level—is to help kids become informed voters and vote," says Roy Sovis, Michigan's mock election coordinator. "We want to provide students avenues to become informed. We want them to know how you vote, and how it makes a difference."

Educators can incorporate mock elections into their curricula by participating in one of the several nationally organized elections, each of which has a unique focus and set of resources. One of the largest organized programs is the National Student/Parent Mock Election, which has garnered more than 10 million votes by students, parents, and teachers in the last two presidential election years. In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, the vote tally was broadcast live on CNN and C-SPAN the evening of the election.

"I believe that, among all those millions of participants, there is a future president," says Gloria Kirschner, president of the National Student/Parent Mock Election, which serves as a parent organization for affiliated mock elections held in each state. "Every future president, senator, congressmen, secretary of state, and judge is sitting in a classroom today."

Educators can choose how long and in-depth their focus on the mock elections will be, depending upon their available time and goals. For two months leading up to voting day, Ed Wodek, Leland High's government teacher, leads a comprehensive project oriented around student groups acting as Republican and Democratic committees, and culminating in a community-wide rally. At Kuehn-Haven Middle School in Montrose, Mich., Nancy Hall weaves an election project into her lessons, in which each fifth-grade student acts as a campaigning candidate who prepares and delivers a speech. And Mark

Oglesby, a social-studies teacher at Howell High School in Howell, Mich., prepares for the election with a variety of projects that include town-hall-style debates and presentations. Building every project around and leading up to a vote gives students a reason to learn about the issues and electoral process.

These Michigan educators offer key strategies for making the most of mock elections.

Get Candidates In, Students Out

To add excitement and help students learn about the issues, many teachers invite candidates to in-school discussions prior to the election. Along with local representatives and city council members, Oglesby has brought in voting officials who talk about the voting process. To prepare for the visits, Wodek's students use their research and assigned tasks to compile a list of questions. At the beginning of every class, brief committee meetings determine what information they need to better understand the issue or candidate.

Students can also have a dialogue with candidates on interactive TV, if the school has the technology, which allows multiple classrooms to participate simultaneously. For Wodek, this meant that if a politician visited one school, three schools could participate. Wodek's students have also engaged in live conversations with candidates who were in the state capital, 150 miles away, through compressed video. Wodek's students asked the candidates questions from their classroom, and, working with a local college and Michigan Government Television (MGTV), a public service of Michigan's cable television industry, the video was sent out over a cable modem, compressed, and within a fraction of a second the discussion appeared live throughout Michigan on MGTV.

Democratic and Republican candidates for each office also appear at Wodek's culminating rally, and often stick around so students have time to talk with them when the rally winds down. Convincing campaigning candidates to visit the school, Wodek says, may involve some guile and patience. One method is to invite local media to cover the event, which can benefit both the school and the nominee. "The candidates get their faces out," he says, "and we get coverage." Another way to tempt candidates is to threaten to bring in their rival. "If one comes and other doesn't, it could look really bad in the news." Eventually, Wodek says, it gets to the point where the candidates call *him* to be involved!

Another way for students to learn about the electoral process, and how community mem-

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bers are involved in it, is to volunteer in a campaign. “Volunteering gives students an understanding of an election, an understanding of what candidates are about,” says Wodek. “Even if they’re just mailing letters, they are still going to learn something about the candidate and the the issues by being there.”

Use Tech Tools

From online voting to Webcasts to cable television, the use of technology can strengthen a mock-election project. During the broadcast of the 2000 Mock Election, students from across the country discussed national issues via a CNN Webcast. To delve into political advertising, Wodek’s students produce their own commercials for each candidate, using digital pictures and Power-

Point. Oglesby shows his students an episode of C-SPAN’s *Road to the White House* that examines the commercials released by both parties. “We want them to break down this stuff and think critically about what is being given to them,” Oglesby says.

Many of the mock-election organizations’ Web sites offer free lesson plans and other resources, from information about the branches of government and political parties to teaching techniques and links to candidates’ sites, which educators can adapt to suit their needs. Hall uses these Web-based teacher materials to prepare for the lessons. “You have to know your material before you present it,” says Hall. “Once you get into this, students are very inquisitive and you need to know the answers.”

Many mock elections also offer an online voting component. For the Student/Parent Mock Election, state coordinators generally set up their own online voting system, and each state forwards the results to the national headquarters. If a state does not have online ballots, students and parents can cast their vote through the national site. Participants always have the option to send in their vote the old-fashioned way—or fax or even call it in. But Kirschner believes that online voting is preparing students for the way people will vote in the future. “The students are the pioneers,” she says.



Ed Wodek and students prep for the Student/Parent Mock Election.

Educators may also be able to connect with their local cable stations to help produce mock-election forums and presentations, such as Michigan’s culminating *Mock Election Extravaganza*. Produced by MGTV and Genesee ISD staff, with support from Comcast and ABC 12 in Flint, the *Extravaganza* was a mix of mock-election results, taped and live interviews with politicians, and input by students. MGTV also hosts interviews with candidates and covers mock-election events—such as Leland’s rally—in the months prior to the elections.

Extend the Boundaries

There are inherent content goals related to the election process for social-studies and government classes, says Sovis, yet teachers of all subjects can apply some part of the election process. Math teachers, for example, may end up talking about statistics and polling data; science teachers could find a lesson inside a campaign issue, such as drilling for oil. Oglesby applies many of the electoral issues to his U.S. history lessons. Wodek pulled music students into the process when they performed at the rally.

Another method of building a richer, longer-lasting learning experience is to include parents and community. “Mock elections are a unique tool to get parents involved in political discussions about election issues,” says

Related Resources

Cable Programming

Road to the White House, C-SPAN, Sundays, 6:30pm, 9:30pm ET

Online

Kids Voting USA

www.kidsvotingusa.org

Nonpartisan organization; educates and involves young people in civic engagement

Michigan Student/Parent Mock Election

www.virtualpolls.org

Information, links for statewide mock election

National Student/Parent Mock Election

www.nationalmockelection.org

Information, curriculum, and links for national mock election and state coordinators

Teaching Democracy Appreciation

www.ncsl.org/public/trust/democracylesson/contents.htm

National Conference of State Legislatures lesson plan for high-school teachers of civics, government, and U.S. history

We the People: Project Citizen

www.civiced.org/project_citizen.php

Portfolio-based civics project for middle grades from Center for Civic Education and National Conference of State Legislatures

The Youth Leadership Initiative

www.youthleadership.net

Mock election, online legislative simulation, interactive CD for middle and high school

Report

Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations

Karl T. Kurtz, Alan Rosenthal, and Cliff Zukin (Trust for Representative Democracy, National Conference of State Legislatures, 2003) www.representativedemocracy.org

Kirschner, “and teachers can go on from there. It’s much less threatening for parents to participate in a mock election than to help with advanced math homework.”

For Hall’s project, parents attended the speeches made by the fifth-grade candidates. Wodek invited parents and other community members to the pre-election rally. As Wodek’s project has grown every year, student involvement with parents and community has also increased. “That’s a fun part of it,” he says. “The kids start talking about it at home. When most of the parents come in, they sure know a lot about the election and when the kids come back to visit, they talk about it—they never forget it.” <