

GoodCharacter.com Monthly Newsletter

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Theme of the Month: Character in Politics

Election campaigns provide a great opportunity to explore issues of character with your students. There is something about running for high public office that seems to bring out the worst in people, especially if they think they've got a good chance of winning. Honesty, in particular, seems to get trampled as things heat up. As a wise man once observed, "To succeed in politics, it is often necessary to rise above your principles."

Because the entire spectrum of character traits is on display at these times, we find ourselves presented with countless opportunities to help our students look critically at who these candidates really are, how they function, and what they're made of. This issue of the GoodCharacter newsletter is aimed at helping you do just that.

The following questions and activities are designed to trigger spirited discussions in your classroom and get your students to think critically about the opinions they hold, as well as to see their own character reflected in those opinions. We haven't made much effort to differentiate this material by age, but there should be enough here for you to pick and choose what's appropriate for your students and modify it to match their age level.

Drop us a line and let us know how this material works for you.

Sincerely,
[David Elkind and Freddy Sweet, Ph.D.](#)



"Everything is changing. People are taking the comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke."
—Will Rogers

Questions & Activities

Is there anybody running for a political office right now whom you especially like or admire? What is it that you like about that person?

In deciding which candidate to vote for, or campaign for, or just to root for, what do you consider important? Rate these qualities on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being of highest importance.

- honesty – doesn't try to mask the truth, doesn't lie
- trustworthy – can be relied on to do what he says he'll do
- doesn't misrepresent opponent's record or his/her own record
- speaks about others with respect
- takes responsibility for his/her own mistakes and failings
- has a high likelihood of winning
- has strongly held principles
- is deeply religious
- is wealthy
- is not wealthy

Is there something you'd like to add to this list?
Is there anything you'd like to delete?

Do you think that a candidate of good character has a better or worse chance of winning an election?

Does the character of a candidate for public office matter? Why? How much?

Would any of the following actions by a candidate influence your vote? Why, or why not?

- cheating on spouse
- lying about his/her opponent's record or actions
- frequently referring to his/her religious beliefs
- prior ethics violations (while in government service)
- making personal attacks on opponents and critics
- religious affiliation
- gender or sexual preference
- not having a spouse or children
- spending a lot on advertising

Political campaigns are especially unkind to honesty. That's probably because candidates just naturally "spin" the truth in their own favor. Here's an example (purely fictional, of course) of how that might work. Suppose the whole country is in an economic recession and in one state a candidate for Governor makes the following true statements:

"Just two years before Governor So-and-So took office, the economy of this state was strong and unemployment was the lowest in the nation. Since Governor So-and-So took office, the economy is terrible and tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs."

What does this statement imply? That the downturn is the Governor's fault. Is it the Governor's fault? Of course not, the whole country is in a recession. Has the candidate made any false statements? No, but by putting those two true statements together in this way, the candidate has delivered the false message that it is the Governor's fault.

- Is there anything wrong with campaigning in this way?
- Is the candidate being honest?
- Is the candidate lying?
- When a candidate does this, does it matter to you?
- Is it okay to say things in ways that are intended to make people think or believe something that you know is not true?
- When we do that, are we being honest?
- Listen carefully to what the candidates say during this election campaign, and try to find examples of misleading statements. Write them down.

Analyze a political campaign ad.

- What does it want you to think?
- Is that the truth?
- If not, how is it being untruthful?
- How does that make you feel about the candidate?

Is there a difference between a half-truth and a lie? Explain your answer.

Watch a political debate and write a critique. Who displayed good or bad character? Give details and support your position.

Which is more important to you, the candidate's policies or the candidate's character? Explain.

The famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright said "The truth is more important than the facts."

- What does this mean?
- Do you agree with it? Why, or why not?

Recently, one candidate criticized the actions of an opponent saying "just because you have the right to do something, doesn't make it the right thing to do."

- Do you agree?
- Why, or why not?
- Can you give any examples?

What is the single most important quality you look for in a candidate for public office?

What role does trust play in government?

"He who slings mud generally loses ground."
—Adlai Stevenson

Other Lesson Plans on Elections

On our Live Wire Media website we have posted the [discussion guides](#) for all the videos we produced. You can find guides about Honesty and Trustworthiness from our "In Search of Character" series for grades 7-12. You could make use of these guides to produce very fruitful classroom discussion with or without the accompanying videos.

[On the Stump: Examining the Form and Function of Campaign Speeches](#) is a lesson plan from the New York Times in which kids analyze and write political stump speeches.

LearnNC has assembled [lesson plans for all ages](#).

The National Constitution Center in Philadelphia has designed [lesson plans for K12](#).

Let's now break down these lesson plans by age groups.

Elementary School

Here are two collections of lesson plans that you will find useful:

- [Lesson Plans By Teachers For Teachers](#)
- [Election Lessons](#)

Middle School

A [few good suggestions](#) for your middle school classroom.

High School

A large collection of [high school lesson plans](#).

"If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?"
—Abraham Lincoln

Articles

You might have your students read one or both of these articles and write their own commentary on the article.

[Some Civility...Please?](#)

A highly relevant article about the benefits of civil behavior in political debate.

[Must Politicians Be Phonies?](#)

An article from British Columbia on why politicians often have such an uneasy relationship with the truth.

"If elected, I will win."
—Pat Paulsen

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