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Comparing Candidates on Issues when Voting: Resources for Teaching Media Literacy in Special Education

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Comparing Candidates on Issues when Voting

Resources for Teaching Media Literacy in Special Education

By the Partnership for Media Literacy for Exceptional Populations

Abstract

While voting rights for adults with disabilities vary across states, the skill of voting is one important practice of citizenship, and thus active engagement in community. The skills required to inform voting require reading comprehension to reason with information, and self-determination to make choices based upon that information. This resource supports special educators of high school or postsecondary individuals with intellectual disabilities to articulate personal opinions on political issues, and to then compare political candidates using those issues.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Autism, Intellectual Disability, Voting



Cover art by Jordan Muñoz

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About Media Literacy Resources for Teaching Special Education

This publication is a collaborative product of the **Partnership for Media Literacy for Exceptional Populations**. This project is specifically about supporting the teaching of media literacy skills to teens or adults with autism or intellectual disabilities. Each issue focuses upon a specific narrow knowledge or skill that may be particularly challenging for individuals with common characteristics of those disabilities. Though created for a specific population and age range, each may be refined to work for individual needs or for learners with other disabilities.

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Comparing Candidates on Issues when Voting

For all individuals, but especially for individuals with disabilities, success in adult independent living involves, even requires self-determination. For the past two decades, special education practices have promoted instruction and development of self-determination.

“Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults (Field, et al., 1998, p.2).

When youth with disabilities can demonstrate stronger self-determination skills, they also experience better academic and independence outcomes (Denney & Daviso, 2012). Especially for young adults with intellectual disabilities, researchers demonstrated the significance of self-determination for adult independent living skills such as grocery shopping, managing personal finances, living independently, and successful employment (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Instruction to develop self-determination skills requires opportunities to make choices and problem-solve across academic content, choices about learning priorities, and taking direction toward transitions to adulthood (Denney & Daviso, 2012; and Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

For localities, states, and America, self-determination extends to individuals voting for representative leadership. Voting rights for individuals with disabilities vary by state. “Indeed, the majority of states today do have some sort of legal provisions that deny the right to vote to people with mental incapacities. Some states do this in their state constitutions, other by statute. ... The rationales given for this restriction include protecting the validity of the voting process by distinguishing voters who intend to express some preference and affect the election results from those who do not understand the nature of voting, and the preventing voter fraud, by ensuring that mentally incompetent persons are not manipulated into voting for other people’s

preferences” (Disability Justice, 2020). While critically important to disability rights, this manuscript does NOT address instruction about voting rights for individuals with disabilities in each specific state (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 2018), advocacy for representation through voting, or accessibility rights in polling locations. This manuscript also does not teach processes for voter registration (USA.gov, 2020) or using the various types of voting machines in use at various voting precincts or states.

Instead, this manuscript focuses narrowly upon young adults with disabilities engaging in self-determination to make political choices based upon personal opinions. The National Association for Media Literacy Education lists seven core principles for teaching media literacy. Among those are principles that education about media literacy “...develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society”, and “...that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization”, and that through teaching media literacy we support our students to “...use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages” (NAMLE, 2007).

Applying core principles of media literacy, Siegel (2017) explicitly taught skills to students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders, emphasizing skills to critically analyze social media messages about presidential election candidates and to engage in socialization to discuss those messages. In focusing upon what works to teach reading and literacy skills to students with intellectual disabilities, Copeland and Keefe (2017) emphasize that comprehension involves multiple skills including language comprehension, use of text structures, and reasoning with executive functioning to remember, organize and use information (p.333). Using information in the context of voting requires skills to judge trustworthy sources,

to compare facts versus opinions, to judge bias, and to reason to inform voting choices. One specific literacy skill for voting involves comparing candidates on specific issues.

Ultimately, preparing adults with disabilities to vote for their own preferences, improves their skills for actively engaged citizenship. To teach such self-determination effectively, a teacher must approach such teaching as nonpartisan, laying aside personal politics and perspectives on issues. The lesson that follows focuses narrowly upon the skills of articulating issues that matter to the individual and comparing candidates on those specific issues.

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Lesson Outline for Comparing Candidates on Issues when Voting

Target Population	<p>This lesson specifically targets individuals who have autism spectrum disorder or an intellectual disability, who are of voting age. This lesson is most practical in those states where your students are actually eligible to vote, not limited by their disability status.</p> <p><i>In those states in which your students' rights to vote are more limited by their disability status, a lesson on voting might more appropriately focus upon how to access voting rights or how to advocate for such rights.</i></p>
Narrow Skills Focus of this Lesson	<p>This lesson targets two specific skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • articulating issues that matter to the individual, and • comparing candidates on those specific issues.
Requires these Skills or Background Knowledge	<p>This lesson requires two pre-requisite skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ability to articulate a personal value or opinion on a political issue, and • the ability to compare and contrast.
Lesson Objective	<p>Students will articulate one or more issues that matter to them and then compare two or more candidates on those specific issues.</p>
Helpful Resources	<p>You may reference a novel recently used in class in which a character wrestles with issues. Examples include: <i>A Dog Named Homeless</i> in which it matters to Cally that people not forget her mother; and <i>Song for a Whale</i> in which it matters to Iris that a lone whale has a way to communicate.</p> <p>Kelly, L. (2019). <i>Song for a Whale</i>. New York: Random House.</p> <p>Lean, S. (2012). <i>A Dog Named Homeless</i>. New York: Harper Collins.</p> <p>Find information on registering to vote and sample ballots at https://www.usa.gov/voting</p> <p>Locate nonpartisan voter guides or candidate comparison charts by specific issues at https://www.usa.gov/voting or https://www.procon.org/ (a list by Britannica).</p> <p>While this issue does not specifically address disability-related limitations to voting rights, teachers may find it helpful to review limitations to voting rights for individuals with disabilities in a specific state:</p> <p>Disability Justice. (2020). The right to vote: Interplay of federal and state law on voting rights. <i>Disability Justice Resource Center</i>. Retrieved September 6, 2020 at https://disabilityjustice.org/right-to-vote/</p>
Materials Needed	<p>For each student: 1 highlighter, paper and pencil/pen Non-partisan comparison chart, comparing candidates by issues</p>

	<p>For each student, one small printed picture of each leading candidate in an upcoming political race, approximately 2" x 3".</p>
<p>Pre-Instruction</p>	<p>Advanced preparation: Find one nonpartisan comparison chart that compares candidates on specific issues.</p> <p>To start the lesson, first, Gain Attention: “Say, imagine I will start class every day by playing one song, the same song every day. Write down what song I should play.” Students vote. Read and report the anonymous votes. Explain that you are not really going to start every class with playing just one song, but if you were, the winner would have been _____.</p> <p>Activate prior knowledge: Ask, “What does it mean to vote? Who gets to vote?” Discuss responses. Say, “In just a few weeks/months, we will be voting for our next [senator, president, etc.]”</p> <p>Build Expectancy: “Today, you are going to identify issues that matter to you in this election and then compare candidates based upon those issues that matter to you.”</p>
<p>Instruction</p>	<p><i>This lesson can occur across two days, or more, as appropriate for your specific student audience.</i></p> <p>Using a novel or story used in a recent lesson, Model writing down issues that mattered to one character in that story. Be sure to think aloud as you write down those issues, and avoid organizing as you brainstorm. Then model prioritizing those issues. For example,</p> <p>Next, Model listing issues that matter to you, the teacher, about your school. Prompt students to contribute to this list (i.e. lunch options, friendliness of faculty, community of students, sports, etc.).</p> <p>Explain that in a story, or in real life there can be issues that matter to us. Explain that one topic in the news is the upcoming elections. Specifically state positions that will be elected in the upcoming election (president, senators, representatives, etc.).</p> <p>Make a list of priority issues: Direct students to write a list of issues that matter to them. First think about and then write down issues they care about. Prompt as needed for broad topics relevant to the upcoming election (i.e. economy or education), letting individuals refine those broad topics to express more specifically what each issue means to them. Individualize time allotted</p>

and scaffolding. Demonstrate respect of each individual's ideas about issues. Promote mutual respect of classmate's opinions if individuals talk during this part of the lesson.

Model comparisons using three to four fairly neutral voting issues that do not typically align to a particular political party. *For this specific population of young adults with disabilities, you may choose to extend modeling to include the stands taken by candidates specifically on topics of disability rights or one closely related issue. To carefully maintain a nonpartisan approach to this lesson, you may choose to avoid this specific topic as it may appear more partisan.*

After the initial brainstorm list is complete, prompt students to **circle three to five priority issues** that feel most important to them that are relevant to the identified election. Prompt as needed.

Find candidate positions on priority issues:

Open a nonpartisan resource, that charts the positions of candidates on varied issues. Using any one issue that was NOT on the priority list of any individuals in the class, **model** finding one issue and following along that line to see how each candidate stands on that specific issue, pro or con.

Direct students to **read** through the listed issues **and highlight those issues** that were on their priority list or were close to issues on their priority list. Support as needed, with gestures or questions. Avoid interpreting for the student so they practice using the skills to find information and comprehend that information as autonomously as possible.

Next, direct students to follow the line in the chart for each of those highlighted priority issues. Use a paper or ruler to follow lines if helpful. **Highlight the positions of each candidate on that issue.**

Organize candidate positions on priority issues:

Next **model** creating a **three-column graphic organizer**. In the top row of the columns, in the left column write "issue", in the middle column write the name of one candidate, and in the right column write the name of a second candidate. Again model using the issue that was not on the priority list for any students in the class. In the second row left column, write a phrase to identify that modeled issue. Then in the middle column, model referencing the highlighted information in the nonpartisan chart. Write down either "pro" or "con" or "yes" or "no" to record information from that more complex chart onto the more simplified graphic organizer.

	<p>Direct students to create their own 3-column graphic organizer to record candidate’s positions on their personal priority issues. Prompt to reference their highlighted lines on the non-partisan chart. Support as needed, ideally with gestures, so the student is interpreting the information and practicing a skill to organize that information.</p> <p>Identifying matched positions: Again use the issue that was not a priority for any student in the class. Model identifying the candidate whose position matches your own, circling the word, “pro” or “con” or “yes” or “no” in that line that matches you opinion on that issue.</p> <p>In each row on the resulting graphic organizer, direct students to circle positions that match their own opinion on an issue.</p> <p>Discuss how you can use such a list of positions to guide your choices when you vote. As appropriate prompt how to extend research into positions when it appears both candidates take similar stands on the issues a student chose to compare.</p> <p>Possible Extension: Follow-up with a lesson about the procedures for using a specific type of voting machine or ballot, and practice voting.</p>
Post-Instruction	Reinforce that we can compare political candidates matching how they stand on our priority issues.
Assessment	<p>Summarizing Strategy Have the student glue each picture of political candidates onto the left side of a paper, writing the candidate’s name below each picture. To the right of each picture, students will write one short paragraph summarizing that candidate’s position on their list of priority issues. (Possible adaptation: Instead of a paragraph, have students make a bullet point list with a phrase for the issue and one word, “pro”, “con”, “yes” or “no”.)</p>