



## Unit 4

### Learning About Candidates: The Role of the Media

## Unit Overview

### Introduction

Students consider the role of a free press and the First Amendment in campaigns and the need for citizens to obtain information about candidates and issues from the news. Students learn about both traditional and newly emerging media forms and how they function to provide citizens with campaign information. They use media coverage to continue to collect information about the candidates and the issues they are studying in an upcoming election.

### Lesson 1: The Importance of a Free Press in Democratic Elections

Students consider the role of a free press in a campaign. They examine the First Amendment's influence on media coverage of campaigns and consider what campaigns and elections might look like in a society without the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.

### Lesson 2: The News Media, Candidates, and Issues

Students examine various forms of media and determine each form's strengths and weaknesses as a source of information about campaigns, using their research to fill out the "Candidates' Issues Position Chart."



## Overview

### Objectives of the Lesson

Students will:

- Examine citizens' information needs in a campaign
- Identify the role the media play in a campaign
- Understand the role of the First Amendment in ensuring access to information about campaigns

### Preparation before Lesson 1

- Remind students to bring their **Candidates' Issue Position Chart** to class.
- Make one copy of **What If There Was No Freedom of the Press?** chart for each student.
- Make one copy of **Media Coverage of Campaigns** handout.
- Have available copies of a news story about a campaign issue.

### ★ Project Idea

- Students compare the news media's coverage of candidates' issue positions with the way that candidates describe their positions on issues in their campaign advertisements or on their websites.
- Invite a journalist (editor, reporter, editorial page editor, columnist, cartoonist) from your local newspaper to come to class to talk about how the newspaper covers a campaign.



### Lesson Plan

1. Explain to students that today they will begin looking at how citizens can learn about candidates from the news media and the importance of the First Amendment for the media to provide independent information about candidates and issues in an election.
2. Remind students of the text of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Note that the only business mentioned is “the press” and the only institutions mentioned are “the press” and “religion.” Media provide a check on the government. The media are often a critical way for citizens to become informed about candidates. In today’s exercise, students will think about the various roles the media play and what would be lost if journalists were not able to play those roles. Discuss how and why the media are controlled in societies that are not free.

3. Hand out copies of **What If There Was No Freedom of the Press?** chart. Have students work in pairs or in small groups to fill out the chart, thinking about what kind of information each of the media forms provides in a campaign and what would be lost if they were not able to fulfill that role.
4. When students have finished, have them share their conclusions.
5. Hand out copies of the campaign news story and ask students to answer: How would this story be different if the First Amendment did not exist?
  - What is one piece of information about the issue that they have learned from the story?
  - What else would they like to know about the issue that the story did not answer?
6. Using the two exercises as a basis, brainstorm a list of roles that the media play in a campaign to provide citizens with the information they need to make decisions on Election Day. Write responses on the board. Ask students which role they think is most important to a democracy.



### Assignment Suggestions

- Assign students different news media to examine before the next class. They may include:
  1. Local newspaper news pages (city, community, ethnic, special interest, or weekly; specify day)
  2. Local newspaper editorial pages (editorials/letters/op-eds/editorial cartoons)
  3. Local TV news (early morning, noon, early or late evening)
  4. Radio news
  5. Internet news source

Using the **Media Coverage of Campaign** handout, ask students to examine their news source on a specific date (or a specific time period) and gather data on the information that source provided about the campaign and the class's Youth Issues Agenda, and on the value of the source. Was the objective of their source to simply inform or to sway the readers' opinions in some way? Remind them to add any relevant information they find to their **Candidates' Issue Position Chart**.

- Ask students to select one of the roles media play and write a paragraph about why they think that role is important to democratic society and what would be lost if there were no freedom of the press.
- Ask students to write an op-ed piece or a persuasive essay based on the following prompt:  
*A free and vibrant press is the cornerstone of a democratic society.*



### Overview

#### Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each form of media in providing citizens with the information they need to make decisions in democratic elections
- Research media coverage of the candidates' positions on their chosen issue
- Determine which roles the local media have played in covering their chosen issue
- Compare media coverage of the candidates to the ways in which candidates represent their positions in their advertising, on their websites, in debates and forums or at in-person meetings

#### Preparation before Lesson 2

- Remind students to bring their [Candidates' Issue Position Chart](#)
- Remind students to bring their [Media Coverage of Campaigns](#) handout with the results of their monitoring one media source for campaign information
- (Optional): Make one copy of [What are Sound Bites...and are they bad?](#) for each student.

### ★ Project Ideas

- Develop Voter's Guides on Candidates' Backgrounds and Positions on Issues and display in a brochure or on a website. (See [How to Create a Voter's Guide](#) handout for tips.) Think about translating the Guide into other languages, if such a guide would be helpful to residents of your community.
- Write letters-to-the-editor or op-eds for the local newspaper about the candidates and their positions on the issues. (See [How to Write a Letter-to-the-Editor, Tips for Writing an Op-Ed](#), and [Sample Op-Ed](#) for tips.)
- Create editorial cartoons about the candidates and the campaign and send them to your school or local newspaper.



- Hold a mock editorial board meeting, in which some of the students portray the board while others portray the candidates and their advisors. After listening to each “candidate” present his or her case for election, the editorial board members choose which candidate to endorse and write an editorial. (See [How to Hold an Editorial Board Meeting](#) handout for tips.)
- Write Web Logs or “Blogs” in which students make observations about the campaign, the candidates, and the issues.
- Make a video about the candidates and their positions on the issues and show it in your school or on your local public access channel.



### Lesson Plan

1. Ask students to report on their findings from monitoring different media sources. Each report should begin with a description of what the students expected to find, followed by a description of what information the students were able to find about the campaign or about their issues. Students should also share whether the information they gathered helped them add to their **Candidates' Issue Position Chart**. Ask students what they think the value of the source was for information on the campaign, the candidates, or the issues. Write on the board the name of the media source and its pros and cons as a source of information.

*Example: Newspaper story about Candidate's Plan to Lower Taxes—Presents plan and analysis of plan*

*Example: TV News story showing Candidate's Endorsement by Police Union—Gives important information in short amount of time; lets voters hear candidate speak in his/her own words in acceptance*

*Example: Editorial cartoon—uses visuals and humor to get an important point across about a candidate*

2. Ask students to compare the information they found in their media source to what they learned about the candidates and the issues from the candidates' own words—on their websites, in their advertising, in debates and forums, or in in-person meetings. Discuss the importance of having *independent* sources of information about the candidates.
3. Discuss with students the information they did NOT find in their media source that they would have found useful about the candidates and the issues.

*Example: Information on where the candidates stand on issues*

*Example: Coverage of minor candidates on the ballot*

4. What are some of the reasons why the media source may NOT have provided that information?
  - Limited number of reporters, limited time to research and find information
  - Limited space for coverage
  - TV needs visual stories
  - Radio needs sound
  - Media need to attract audiences and only want to devote a certain amount of time and space to political news
5. (Optional discussion extension): Hand out one copy of **What are Sound Bites...and are they bad?** to each student. Discuss the reading as a class.
6. Ask students how they think citizens might work with the media to bring to light information about candidates and issues NOT found in the media.
  - Writing letters-to-the-editor and op-eds about issues and candidates



- Creating Web Logs (Blogs) about the candidates, the campaign and the issues
- Creating Voter's Guides
- Working with public access television to disseminate information

### Assignment Suggestions

- Using the [How to Write a Letter to the Editor](#) handout, have students write a letter to their local newspaper or to the media source they monitored, either in response to something they read in the newspaper or saw in the source, or to recommend that the media source change its coverage, or to offer information not available in the newspaper.
- Write an essay explaining the reasons for any differences between the media's coverage of candidates and how the candidates represent themselves in their own words. Refer to research from Unit 3 to develop your comparison.
- Write a 1-page essay analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of one of the forms of media you monitored in providing citizens with the information they need to make decisions in democratic elections.
- Compare media coverage of the candidates to the ways in which candidates represent their positions in their advertising, on their websites, in debates and forums or at in-person meetings.