



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Third-Party Presidential Candidates: Barriers to Ballot Access

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: U.S., State, and Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing.

Duration: 2 class sessions

Description: This lesson provides an introduction to the barriers to accessing the ballot faced by third-party Presidential candidates.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

- A. Social Science:* 14A, 14B, 14C, 14D; 16A, 16B; and
B. Language Arts: 1A, 1B; 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B.

Objectives:

1. Learn what it takes for a candidate to get his or her name on the ballot in Illinois;
2. Understand that the system for how third party candidates get on the ballot in Illinois is different from other systems; and
3. Evaluate the Illinois system regarding third-party access to the ballot.

Materials:

1. Pen or pencil; and
2. 'Debate Worksheet' – attached.

Introduction and Background

Candidates for public office must decide whether to run as a member of an established party within the two-party system (Republican, Democrat), as a third-party candidate in a party outside of the two-party system (Green, Libertarian, Reform, etc.), as a member of a new party, or as an independent. Each individual state legislature controls the process by which candidates are placed on the ballot. In Illinois, different requirements are mandated for third-party candidates compared to the requirements for the candidates of the established Democratic and Republican parties. For example, Illinois Election Code dictates that, in order to access the ballot in a presidential race, a third-party candidate must file a petition signed by 25,000 qualified Illinois voters, whereas a Democratic or Republican candidate needs to gather only 3,000-5,000 signatures. Moreover, Illinois law requires that all signatures be submitted by a much earlier date than required in many other states. So established Democratic and Republican candidates

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may have 8 months to gather 3000-5000 signatures, vs. Independent candidates who have to gather 25,000 signatures in 6 months

Instruction and Activity

Divide the class into small groups. Within each group, further divide into two debate groups: one debate group will argue in favor of the current Illinois law for accessing the ballot and the other debate group will argue in favor of reforming the law to make it less difficult for a third-party candidate to gain access to the ballot.

During the first class session, the students should brainstorm and discuss within their debate groups the reasons in support of their positions regarding the Illinois law for accessing the ballot for third-party candidates. As part of this process, students should research the history of third-party candidates in recent presidential elections as well as the election systems of other countries. For example, how effective is a system with 100 or more candidates for president? Have students work through the 'Debate Worksheet' attached at the end of this lesson plan. Each debate group should form arguments for their own side of the issue, but should also be able to identify the opposite point of view in order to more successfully address arguments likely to be made by their opponents during the debate.

During the second class session, students will debate the issue within their small groups. Allow each side 7-10 minutes to present their arguments. After the debate, the two debate groups should come together to see if they can come to a consensus as to how elections should be run in Illinois, in terms of allowing third-party candidates access to the ballot. Each small group should then report to the class as a whole.

DEBATE WORKSHEET

Introduction

The U.S. Constitution gives every citizen over the age of 18 years a fundamental right to vote. By participating in a vote for President, U.S. Senator, or any local government official, citizens become involved in their own governance. They choose people to represent their beliefs and concerns. Current national politics is dominated by two major political parties, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. In most other democracies, more than two major political parties compete in elections.

State legislatures control the process by which candidates are placed on the ballot for Presidential elections. In Illinois it is more difficult for a person who is not a Republican or a Democrat to get their name on the ballot as a candidate for President. Third-party or independent candidates must collect many more valid signatures in support of their candidacy compared to the number of signatures required for Republican or Democratic Party candidates. As a result, the number of candidates on the ballot is limited and citizens have fewer choices in voting for President.

Question: Is it good public policy to create higher barriers for third-party or independent candidates to get onto the ballot? What are the arguments to justify the barriers? What are the arguments for making the requirements equal to those of the Democratic and Republican parties?

In order to access the ballot in Illinois, a third-party or independent candidate must submit petitions containing the signatures of 25,000 qualified voters, whereas Democrats or Republicans need only submit 3,000-5,000 signatures. This discrepancy in the number of required signatures creates a significant burden for third-party and independent candidates. Moreover, the date for filing petitions is much earlier in Illinois compared to other states.

Discussion Questions

1. U.S. citizens have the right to associate and to form their own political beliefs. Do barriers to third-party or independent candidates hinder the rights of American citizens in voting for candidates who most closely represent their beliefs and concerns?
2. What are some reasons you think why the Illinois State Legislature decided to make it more difficult for third-party or independent candidates to get their names on the Presidential ballot compared to Democratic and Republican candidates? What are the advantages of keeping a small number of candidates on the ballot? What are the advantages of opening up the ballot to all comers equally? What are the disadvantages of having a large number of people on the ballot? What is accomplished by having a large number (25,000) of petition signatures required? What are the disadvantages to that requirement?
3. What are the downfalls of having barriers of entry to the ballot? What citizen rights are at stake when ballot access is more difficult for some potential candidates than others?

4. What are the effects of having a third-party candidate on the ballot for a presidential election? Are the Republican and Democratic Parties equally affected by a third-party candidate in any given election? Or does the effect of the third-party candidate depend on how closely that candidate may or may not resemble either of the two major political party candidates? Should it matter?

Preparing for the Debate

What are your strongest arguments to support your position on barriers to third-party candidates accessing the presidential ballot? Examples: Efficiency, Fairness, Practicality, Policy

What are some of the weaknesses of your argument? Even understanding the weaknesses of your argument, why is your position superior and why would citizens benefit from it?