

The Internet: A Tool for Voters

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Why I Taught These Sources

Above all, I think students need to learn to be effective monitors of government activity. Being a responsible adult citizen means having the tools to investigate on one's own the linkages between money, politicians, and policy outcomes. To me the Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP) is a wonderful place to give students the opportunity to learn about these connections online in a search-friendly and highly accessible format. Knowing how to conduct a study like this can encourage students to learn about the credibility of online information, to get a sense of the sort of information that is available, and to make critical decisions about what sort of information is most valuable for assessing candidates. With this information in hand, citizens can make more informed choices in general elections as well as primaries where candidates are often more difficult to assess because of limited media and public attention. The official state Board of Elections website offers additional details about specific elections, including county by county and city by city breakdowns, that can help in the discussion of how politicians draw district lines, which is a key factor in determining what sort of candidates are likely to be nominated from each party, or even if a party can find any candidate to run in the district.

How I Introduce These Sources

I introduce the students to the two primary sources after providing students with an introduction to Virginia nomination politics. Key issues to explore with the class before embarking on this case study include the great range of voters within each party in Virginia (e.g., differences in the state Republican party platform and the presentation of a Republican candidate in a swing district like the 42nd-Springfield); the differences in the primary electorates during conventions and primaries; the historically poor turnout during nomination contests in the state; the fear of other party "intruders" voting in party contests in a state without voter registration by party; and the greater Democratic preference for primaries and the Republican preference for conventions.

The two candidate websites listed here demonstrate how candidates present themselves in order to appeal to voters in one of the state's most competitive legislative districts. The Republican presentation in the Springfield case is very different than the Republican presentation of House of Delegate candidates in more conservative areas, and from the Republican Party of Virginia website. To make the same point, I also use an example of a conservative Democrat like Senator Edd Houck of Spotsylvania, who has a more Republican district than most other Democrats. VPAP and the Board of Elections websites can demonstrate the voting patterns in national and state elections in these individual districts and in different jurisdictions within those districts to make some of these comparisons clearer.

Reading the Sources

I teach this case study in a computer lab, where each student has access to his or her own computer and can work individually. I have them complete the "First Time Users Tour" on the VPAP website so they can see what sort of material is out there. I encourage students to search for answers to particular questions (e.g., Who runs the "Dominion Leadership Trust" PAC?

What organization was the top recipient of funds from the Democratic Governors Association? Which counties and cities did Brian Moran win in the 2009 Democratic primary for governor, and how many of them voted for a Democratic gubernatorial candidate in the 2005 general election?) This helps students become familiar with the web page. I use the same question and answer approach to introduce students to the Board of Elections website—like “How many votes did Brian Moran win in his brother’s congressional district?”

After they have had some experience with the websites, I then have them look at the primary contests for the House of Delegates or Senate of Virginia in their own communities (if they are residents of competitive districts in Virginia) or in competitive districts that I select for them. You can also use the candidate websites and website data from the 2009 Democratic gubernatorial campaign, which had three viable candidates. For high school audiences, of course, groups of students can be assigned different districts in different parts of the state and can compare the findings in oral reports. I just use a general conversation to illustrate the differences, but written assignments and more formal presentations could be used.

Students seem to really enjoy digging into this material. One of the potential problems, though, is that students can be overwhelmed by all the material available on these sites such as, bill sponsorship, registered lobbyists, and a lot of other things that may be useful for more specialized assignments. I have been able to minimize this problem through the use of specific questions like those suggested above, and by watching the students as they conduct these searches (there is also a tendency for some to leave the assignment behind for Facebook).

Reflections

Students who have been exposed to these websites often return on their own time to look up the answers to other questions they have about what is going on in Virginia politics. State government is often less familiar to students than national government, and this case study can help them put together some of the pieces of campaign contributions, lobbyists, lawmakers and policy-making within Virginia. More than a few students have found relatives and parents of friends on the contribution lists. The main value of this unit, to me, is increasing the curiosity of students and giving them the tools to learn about key factors regarding which candidates emerge where in Virginia politics. Students can learn about the composition of the districts (and see gerrymandering in action), and how that line drawing can affect the choices that voters have (or do not have) in primaries and conventions. They see how individualistic campaigning can be, and how individual politicians have to be very careful to tailor their messages to win those voters likely to turn out, even if that means putting forward messages that are quite different from the party’s messages statewide.

Primary Internet Sources

- Virginia Public Access Project: <http://www.vpap.org/>
- Virginia State Board of Elections: <http://www.sbe.virginia.gov/cms/Index.html>

Supplemental Internet Sources (to be replaced from election to election)

- Greg Werkheiser, Democratic Candidate for VA House of Delegates (District 42): <http://gregfordelegate.com/>
- Del. David Albo, Republican incumbent for Virginia House of Delegates District 42: www.davealbo.com