

A Presidential Debate on Immigration

Introduction:

When the comprehensive immigration reform bill failed to pass the Senate in the summer of 2007, many members and observers of Congress predicted that there would be no significant action or debate on immigration until after the presidential election of 2008. Their predictions now appear to have been on target. In this lesson, students explore public opinion polls regarding the issues voters feel are most important, research the presidential candidates' views on immigration, and participate in a simulated presidential debate on the topic. *The lesson can best be used after students have completed other lessons on immigration, such as those in *The New Coloradans*, so that they have a grasp of some of the core questions related to immigration reform.*

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Analyze public opinion data about issues important to voters and assess immigration's importance in the election of 2008.
- Research presidential candidates' views on the issue of immigration.
- Take the role of a presidential candidate or a member of the press in a discussion of views on immigration.

Materials and Preparation: Students will need access to research materials on the presidential candidates, either Internet access or print materials, such as reports of debates and speeches given on the subject of immigration. The issues pages of the two candidates' website can be found at:

- <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/>
- <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/>

A number of sites include information on the candidates' views on immigration; for example, see <http://www.ontheissues.org/Immigration.htm>.

For the two candidate groups, you will need copies of **Role Card 1** with the applicable information about their assigned candidate filled in. Members of the press group will need copies of **Role Card 2**.

You will also need copies of **What Do People Care About?** for all students and a copy of the cartoon Transparency to display to students.

Procedure:

1. Show the cartoon on the Transparency and ask students to identify when it was drawn (*June 9, 1907*), the issue on which it focuses (*immigration*), the event that

seems to have precipitated its drawing (*the failure of Congress to enact immigration reform*), and the cartoonist's view of this event (*Congress has failed to do its job*).

2. Tell students that when the comprehensive immigration reform bill failed to pass the Senate in June 2007, many members and observers of Congress said they expected that no significant immigration legislation would be considered before November 2008. Ask students: What is going to happen in November 2008 that would affect whether Congress considers immigration legislation before then? (*The election*) Why would an election nearly a year and a half away stop Congress from acting on immigration? (*Accept all answers students can support. Possible answers include the following: members of Congress do not want to have a recent vote on their record that could alienate some voters; members of Congress want to be able to blame members of the other party for lack of action on the issue; because President Bush has little time left in his term—i.e., he is what is known as a “lame duck”—his support for immigration reform will not be effective in convincing members of his party to vote for a reform package; the new president may have a different approach to immigration and we should let him/her propose a reform plan.*) Do the people making these predictions seem to think that immigration will be an important issue in the 2008 election? (*Yes*) Do you agree or disagree (*Answers will vary.*)
3. Tell students they are going to have the opportunity to analyze some information from public opinion polls about the issues people think are most important. Pair students and give each pair a copy of **What Do People Care About?** Allow time for students to answer the questions on the handouts and then discuss student answers with the large group.
4. Close this part of the lesson by asking students to rate immigration's importance as an issue in the 2008 election, using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not important and 5 being very important. Tally the responses and calculate an average.
5. Ask: Given what we know about the importance of the issue, do you think the presidential candidates have developed positions on this issue? (*Students will probably say yes.*) Tell students they are going to have an opportunity to investigate the presidential candidates' views on the issue through a research and presidential debate activity.
6. Create three groups of students and assign each group a role, giving them the appropriate Role Card that you have prepared for them. Ask students if they have seen a presidential debate and make sure that they understand the format is more like a panel interview than an actual debate. Candidates generally make opening statements and then answer questions from journalists or citizens. Sometimes candidates address each other directly, but such exchanges are usually limited.

- 7 Let students know what resources you have gathered for their research; of course, they can also draw on sources they find themselves. Let them know how long they will have to prepare for the debate.
8. Allow one class period for the debate and debriefing. The following questions can be used in the debriefing:
 - How much did the two candidates' positions on immigration vary? Were there certain elements (e.g., border security) where there was more agreement than others (e.g., a path to citizenship for unauthorized migrants)? What does this suggest to you?
 - As you listened to the candidates, what arguments did you think were especially well articulated?
 - What questions were especially successful in getting the candidates to explain their positions more fully?
 - What questions would you like to ask the actual candidates about their positions on immigration? What information that you have learned about immigration would you like to make sure the candidates consider?
9. Return to the cartoon shown on the Transparency. Ask: Do you think the new president will be able to enact immigration reform? Why or why not? (Answers will vary; but students should recognize that, while the President can provide leadership on the issue, Congress must act in order for reform to occur.

Extension/Enrichment:

Students could conduct a debate on immigration between candidates for another office of interest (for example, candidates for Congress). They could also look at the views on immigration held by some of the smaller party candidates. Are the views of these candidates more variable than those of the major party candidates? Alternatively, students might conduct a debate on another issue of interest to citizens, such as the economy or foreign policy.

Transparency

Mike Keefe THE DENVER POST 06/09/07



Credit: Mike Keefe, the *Denver Post*, and InToon.com.

Handout

What Do People Care About?

In your opinion, what are the most important issues facing the United States today? Do you think most people in the United States agree with you? Public opinion polls can provide information about what people care most about.

CBS News Poll. July 31-Aug. 5, 2008. N=906 registered voters nationwide. MoE \pm 3.

"Which one issue would you most like to hear the candidates for president discuss during the 2008 presidential campaign?" Open-ended

	%
Economy/Jobs	36
War in Iraq	17
Gas/Heating oil crisis	9
Health care/Medicare/Medicaid	8
Environment	5
Immigration	2
Defense/Military	2
Taxes/IRS	2
Other	11
Unsure	8

CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll. July 27-29, 2008. N=914 registered voters nationwide. MoE \pm 3.

"Which of the following issues will be MOST important to you when you decide how to vote for president?" Options rotated

	7/27-29/08	6/4-5/08
	%	%
Economy	48	42
War in Iraq	18	24
Health care	13	12
Terrorism	9	11
Illegal immigration	9	8
Other (vol.)	2	1
Unsure	-	1

Source: Problems and Priorities, PollingReport.com, <http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>, accessed August 7, 2008.

CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll. June 26-29, 2008. N=906 registered voters nationwide. MoE ± 3.5.

"How important will each of the following be to your vote for president? Will it be extremely important, very important, moderately important, or not that important? . . ."

	Extremely Important %	Very Important %	Moderately Important %	Not That Important %	Unsure %
The economy					
6/26-29/08	58	35	6	1	-
The situation in Iraq					
6/26-29/08	50	34	13	3	-
Gas prices					
6/26-29/08	48	29	17	5	-
Health care					
6/26-29/08	47	36	14	3	-
Terrorism					
6/26-29/08	45	32	18	4	-
Education					
6/26-29/08	44	39	14	3	-
Social Security and Medicare					
6/26-29/08	41	36	18	4	-
Taxes					
6/26-29/08	40	34	22	5	-
Illegal immigration					
6/26-29/08	34	33	24	9	1
The environment					
6/26-29/08	33	33	27	7	-
Foreign trade					
6/26-29/08	29	36	27	7	1
Gun policy					
6/26-29/08	26	27	28	19	-
Abortion					
6/26-29/08	24	26	25	25	-
Race relations					
6/26-29/08	19	29	28	23	-
Policies toward gays and lesbians					
6/26-29/08	16	20	27	37	-

Questions for Discussion:

1. According to these polls, what do adults in the United States see as the three most important issues facing the United States?
2. How would you characterize the perceived importance of immigration? Does this surprise you? Why or why not?
3. If you were a member of Congress, would these results make you more or less likely to act on immigration before November 2008? Explain your answer.
4. If you were running for president, would these results influence your strategy? Explain.

Role Card 1

Candidate

Your group will represent _____ and his/her staff. You are seeking the Presidency as the nominee of the _____ Party. You are getting ready for a presidential debate on immigration. You will prepare a one-minute opening statement that explains your core view on immigration policy. Be sure to think about the purposes of immigration reform:

- Promoting the rule of law and enforcement of immigration laws.
- Strengthening national security.
- Providing assistance for immigrants to become citizens and assimilate into our society.
- Promoting economic growth and development.

The reporters will then have the opportunity to ask the candidates questions. They will likely ask about aspects of the immigration reform package that was considered by Congress in 2007, such as a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized migrants, a guest worker program, stronger enforcement of laws making it illegal to hire unauthorized immigrants, and fences and other methods of protecting the border.

Your candidate's web site can be found at _____. This will be a good place to start learning about his/her position. You may also want to look for newspaper or newsmagazine reports of your candidate's speeches and his/her performance in various debates.

While some group members prepare your opening statement, others should think about questions members of the press might ask and prepare possible answers.

Choose one member of your group to act as the candidate. During the debate, staff members can coach the candidate.

Role Card 2

Press

Your group will serve as members of the press asking questions of the presidential candidates. You are getting ready for a presidential debate on immigration. Following one-minute opening statements from the candidates, you will have the opportunity to question them about the details of their positions.

To prepare for the debate, plan questions that you think will elicit detailed answers. In framing your questions, be sure to think about the purposes of immigration reform:

- Promoting the rule of law and enforcement of immigration laws.
- Strengthening national security.
- Providing assistance for immigrants to become citizens and assimilate into our society.
- Promoting economic growth and development.

You may want to ask about aspects of the immigration reform package that was considered by Congress in 2007, such as a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized migrants, a guest worker program, stronger enforcement of laws making it illegal to hire unauthorized immigrants, and fences and other methods of protecting the border. You may also want to ask about more controversial proposals, such as denying citizenship to the American-born children of unauthorized migrants.

It may be helpful to know something about the candidates' positions prior to the debate. The candidates web sites can be found at:

Choose one member of your group to act as the moderator. Plan who will ask follow-up questions and in what order. You may ask specific questions to individual candidates. You may also ask both candidates to respond to some questions. While you should have at least five good questions planned, you should also listen carefully to the candidates' opening statements and follow-up on interesting, confusing, provocative, or vague points.