2010 Midterm Elections – Lesson Plan

By Greg Timmons

Lesson Overview
How important are midterm elections? How might the upcoming midterm election affect the balance of power in Congress and the national agenda? In this lesson, students will discover the importance of midterm elections and explore some of the similarities and differences between the 1934 and 2010 congressional elections. In a final activity, students will track key races and try to predict the winners before the November 2, 2010 midterm election.

Curriculum Links
The 2010 Midterm Elections lesson would be useful in history, civics, U.S. government, social studies, and current events courses. It is recommended for seventh-grade students and above. It connects with many state and national standards and curriculum benchmarks in history, civics, and social studies.

National Standards for History and Social Studies
The activities in the lesson follow Standards in Historical Thinking in the National Standards for History:

- Standard 2: Historical Comprehension
  2I. Draw upon visual, literary, and musical scores including:
     (a) photography, paintings, cartoons, and architectural drawings

- Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
  2A. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas
  2C. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships, bearing in mind multiple causation including:
     (a) the importance of the individual in history
     (b) the influence of ideas, human interests, and beliefs
     (c) the role of chance, the accidental, and the irrational

Objectives
Students will:
- Understand the importance of congressional midterm elections
- Compare and contrast the 1934 and 2010 midterm elections
- Keep a weekly record of polling data and news reports of key Senate and House races
- Analyze weekly data and project a winner in their assigned congressional race

Historical Background Essay
Congressional midterm elections take place every four years, between presidential elections. During this time, all 435 members of the House of Representatives and one-third of the 100 seats in the Senate are up for grabs. Midterm elections are important because they determine the majority in Congress and often set the course for the country in the two remaining years of a presidential term.

In nearly every midterm election for the past 100 years, the party of the president has lost seats in Congress. The reasons for this pattern vary. A president’s popularity can wane after the inauguration. Domestic or international issues or concerns can persuade voters to make a change. Or, as some political analysts believe, the American people simply feel the government governs best when different parties represent the executive and legislative branches. One of the most notable exceptions to the pattern was in 1934, when Democrats gained members in both houses of Congress. In 1962 and 1998, Democrats gained seats in the Senate and House, respectively, and in 2002, Republicans took control of both the House and Senate in midterm elections.

The upcoming midterm election presents an opportunity for a similar surprise. Voters are grappling with many issues—immigration debates, two wars, a growing national debt, and concerns over health care legislation. But the issue that may be most important to Americans is the state of the economy. The economic downturn of 2007–2008 has been compared to the Great Depression of the 1930s: high unemployment, a slowdown in manufacturing, regulatory problems with the banking and investment industries, and intense political partisanship. In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt swept into the presidency on a wave of optimism and promise for change, and the Democratic Party won sizable majorities in both houses of Congress. The 2008 election brought in a similar wave of hope and majorities for the Democratic Party. In the first half of his first term, President Roosevelt inaugurated dozens of federal programs designed to provide economic relief for many unemployed workers. The New Deal made sweeping changes to the American economy; President Barack Obama enacted similar programs and policies in his first two years.

President Roosevelt met resistance to his programs from political opponents. Many felt that he was changing things too fast, that the uncontrolled spending would bankrupt the country, and that many of his policies went against traditional American economic principles. The challenges went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where several of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies were declared unconstitutional. The current administration has faced similar challenges to its policies, from partisan politicking on both sides of the aisle and threats of repealing legislation if and when a Republican majority takes control of Congress.

By 1934, the economy was still struggling, and political experts felt the midterm elections would swing to Republicans. However, Democrats gained nine seats in both the House and Senate. Though the economy hadn’t improved (for many it had grown worse), many voters felt the president’s policies were what the country needed. Will the 2010 midterm election prove to be a repeat of the 1934 midterm election, or will it be like most midterm elections?

**Activity Instructions**

**Opening Activity:**
Before class, prepare five index cards, with each card having one of the following questions at the top. Then distribute the cards randomly when students arrive.
Form five groups of students, one group for each of the cards.

- What are the five issues most important to voters at this time?
- What are three adjectives or phrases that describe how well the president has done since the last election?
- What are three adjectives or phrases that describe how well Congress has done its job since the last presidential election?

Have the groups discuss their question. They should try to reach a consensus and record it on their card. If there are differing views, have them record those, too.

Then ask a spokesperson from each group to report the group’s findings to the class. Encourage the other groups to comment on these reports.

**Video-Viewing Activity:**
Have students read the Historical Background Essay (this can be assigned as homework) before conducting the next activity.

Then have students view the three History.com videos and discuss the questions that follow.


- Besides the poverty that people were thrown into during the Great Depression, what kind of psychological effect do you think the era had on the generation of people who lived through it?
- Why do you think the immigrants who came to the United States before the Great Depression were able to endure its hardship?
- How do you think the Great Depression rebuilt the American spirit and character?


- Describe the similarities and differences in the economic conditions facing the two presidents when they took office.
- Describe how each president brought confidence and hope to the American public at the beginning of their first terms in office.
- What obstacles did each president face in addressing the economic problems of the country?

Next, have students create a list of key issues of concern to voters in the 2010 midterm election. (See the list of possible topics, below.) Have students prioritize the top 10 and divide the class into 10 small groups, assigning one topic to each group. Have each group research the issue, describing the surrounding facts and the various political positions held by Americans on the issue. Have each group report their findings to the class.
Possible topics for discussion:

- Immigration
- Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq
- Domestic security (homegrown terrorism)
- Political corruption
- Economy: budget deficit, taxes and tax cuts, unemployment
- Environment: global warming, toxic waste, oil spills
- Energy: offshore oil exploration, coal extraction, alternative fuels
- Education
- Financial reform
- Health care legislation
- Approval and job performance of Congress

Main Activity: Tracking the Midterm Election
Tell students that, over the next several weeks, they will be tracking the campaigns of congressional representatives in this year’s midterm election. In small groups of three to four, students will review the links in the Resources section below to identify “toss-up” states (that is, states where the congressional race is close and will be highly contested). They will then pick one of these races (or you can make assignments) and, once a week, they will track the congressional race using the tracking sheet in this lesson guide. Students can submit written or oral reports on their campaign’s progress. One week before election night, have each student write an essay predicting the winners and outlining how the election results might affect the majority in Congress and the president’s agenda. After the election, have students compare their predictions to the actual results.

Resources
Election-Tracking Sites:

  Click “Senate” and “House.” Also look at the “Latest Polls” (http://www.politico.com/2010/pollingcenter.html) for the latest information about how candidates in “toss-up” campaigns are doing. These polls are updated very frequently.
  Click “Senate” and “House.” Also, click the toss-up states or congressional districts for further information.
  Check Senate and House 2010 Polls in the left-hand column.
Midterm Election-Tracking Chart

Name of Congressional District or Senate Race

Names of Candidates in the Race

**Directions:** Every week, record your data about the campaign on the chart. One week before the election, write an essay predicting the winner and how the results will affect the majority in Congress and the president’s agenda. Support your prediction with the date you’ve recorded below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (begin with this week)</th>
<th>Polling Data (record the percentage of support among voters)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Candidate</td>
<td>Issues Helping and/or Hurting the Candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Candidate</td>
<td>Issues Helping and/or Hurting the Candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent (if any)</td>
<td>Issues Helping and/or Hurting the Candidate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>