

How to Create a Middle-School/High-School Political Science Club

by Mardy Freeman

1. Put out the call to teens and parents that you're starting a political science club. Network the students, not the parents! Help your core group to set up their own e-mail list or telephone tree, with the last caller checking in with a parent.
2. Educate members on the basics. Reading the U.S. or state constitution is a must. Knowing the "Basics" of politics is also important (see side bar). Have members research and teach the "Basics" in 5- or 10-minute reports at club meetings.
3. Teach protocol. How far must one stand from a polling place? How does one formally address a legislator? Form a Protocol Committee of club members, or let someone who prefers behind-the-scenes work take it on as their assignment. The Elections Office can answer most questions. Make sure protocol is covered before you send them out in person or by letter!
4. Teach members to interview or survey a candidate. Teach them to detect bias in news writing, to discern between opinion and fact. Have them clip and chronicle newspaper articles, editorial pieces, or political cartoons as they follow certain issues. See if they can rewrite a biased article and eliminate the slant. Have them write letters to the paper using the resources they just researched. Dedicate part of a club meeting to writing and editing letters.
5. Invite a candidate or legislator speak to your group.
6. Make sure EVERY club member has a job! Each member needs to be working on something between club activities. Electing officers is an option.
7. Let members pick a candidate and jump into a campaign! Every candidate appreciates help in stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, canvassing door-to-door, and holding up signs on election day. Sending teams of two or more can help dispel initial fears. Is your club split on whom to support? Let each support the candidate whom he believes best, and "campaign" for them within the club. A little rivalry (in the right attitude) is healthy, and good reparation for real-life politics.
8. Plan an election night celebration for the 2000 elections. Can your group watch the returns from a wide screen at City Hall? In someone's home late into election night? With the candidate at campaign headquarters? This can be more fun than the awards ceremony, especially if the candidate your club members worked for wins by a hair. Who knows if all those bright young faces in that parade, or on that street corner made the difference that sent your candidate over the top?

9. Have an awards ceremony based on hours or events in which members participated. The 4H teens I interviewed heartily agreed that the awards played a considerable role in their project efforts during the year. Let your students know they are not competing with each other, but only against themselves for recognition for a job well done.

10. Ask a local candidate to help present awards, or the supervisor of elections, a county or city commissioner. Officials respond enthusiastically to student's requests, so don't be tempted to step in and take over the invitations. Find someone who is highly visible, and is proud of your club. A warm handshake and hearty congratulations from the mayor for a job well done can influence a young person for a lifetime.

The Basics

What are the qualifications for President? Senate? Representative? House?

What races will be run on the national/state/county/city level in 2000?

How long does each term run?

Who are the national/state/local candidates?

What are the issues?

What is each candidate's stand on the issues?

In which U.S./state/county/district do you live?

Who is your U.S./state senator? U.S./state representative?

How does the two-party system work?

Explain the Electoral College.

What is the history of the GOP? The Democratic Party?

What is an Opinion Poll? Its purpose?

What is the structure of the Republican Party? Democratic?

Who are the National/state/local Committee Chairs?

What is a caucus?

What is a lobbyist?

Highlight the stand of each party on the current issues.

How does one write a formal letter to the

President/senator/representative/Governor, etc.?

What are the major sources of campaign contributions?

What sources are prohibited by law from contributing to a political campaign?

How much money was spent on the last Presidential campaign? Where were most of those monies spent?

What rules govern the spending of campaign money?

What is a referendum/statute/proposition?

Were your state district lines redrawn? How and why?

Which Florida state district lines have been redrawn?

What other local issues or referendums that will appear on the November ballot?

When and where can you obtain a copy of the November ballot?

What is a "qualifying fee"?

Can a candidate offset a qualifying fee through voter signatures?

How many signatures in each race?

How much is the qualifying fee in each race?

Define "bi-partisan."

Is your local race a bipartisan election?

What is the distance a poll-worker must keep from a polling place?