

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Bias

Overview

During a political campaign, we frequently hear accusations of bias directed against individuals or “the media.” But bias, which includes the tendency to filter and judge information based on pre-existing beliefs, may actually be part of our human make up.

In this lesson, we look at biases that affect all people (called *cognitive biases*) and see why they may be the result of how our brains are “wired.” In addition to looking at one of the most important biases that relate to politics, called *confirmation bias*, we also look at ways to deal with our own biases and those of others, including use of the Principle of Charity.

Terminology

Important vocabulary terms used in this lesson include:

- Anchoring effect
- Bias
- Cognitive biases
- Confirmation biases
- Framing
- Principle of Charity

Goals

The goal if this lesson is to give students a better understanding of how the brain processes information and how this can lead to certain types of biases, called cognitive biases. Students should also be able to see how these cognitive biases can manifest themselves in political discussion and debate, as well as understand ways that bias can be managed in order to increase the quality of political discussion and understanding.

Primary Resources

The following resources are available at the www.criticalvoter.com web site to support this lesson:

- **Critical Voter Podcast 002 – Bias:** A 30 minute audio lesson covering the human mind, cognitive biases and how biases can be managed.
- **Quiz** – A short quiz designed to determine if someone has listened to and understood the podcast.
- **Blog Entries** – The Critical Voter blog contains multiple blog entries dealing with the issues covered in the podcast (look for entries the week of August 12, 2012 or use the categories menu to look for stories in the category of Bias).

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Additional Resources

In addition, the following linked resources are mentioned during the course of the podcast:

- [Cognitive illusion example](#)
- [A list of cognitive biases](#)
- [Daniel Kahneman’s Thinking Fast and Slow \(Review\)](#)
- [Kevin deLaplante’s Critical Thinker Academy](#)

Suggested Activities

Activity	Notes on this activity
Have students listen to the podcast and answer the quiz questions to ensure they have listened and understood the concepts covered in the lesson.	The podcast can be played in class or assigned as homework. The quiz is made up of four questions which were designed to be easily answerable by anyone who has listened to the podcast lesson in its entirety.
Show students the cognitive illusion example linked above and ask them how many students “fell for” either this illusion or the example of a cognitive illusion given during the podcast (the question of how many of each animal did Moses bring on the ark).	In addition to using answers to these questions to demonstrate our susceptibility to cognitive illusions, students should also be able to explain the results in terms of the description of how the brain works covered in the podcast. Ask students to think of how these illusions might impact real-life situations (such as the reliability or unreliability of eyewitness accounts to a crime or accident).

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Activity	Notes on this activity
Have students look through newspapers, magazines or online news sources and try to identify examples of: • Associations • Anchoring • Framing	These examples could include: • Advertisements that create a positive association between a candidate or product and positive images and ideas • Advertisements that create a negative association between an opposing candidate or a competing product with negative images or ideas • An attempt to anchor an audience to a specific quantitative value (such as opposing candidates pushing positive vs. negative economic news in their speeches and advertisements) • An attempt to present information or question around a specific frame (such as presenting a piece of legislation as either a tax increase vs. closing of a tax loophole)
Have students list the newspapers, radio programs, television shows, and online sources they read, listen to or watch to follow current events.	Ask students to evaluate whether those news sources were chosen to conform to vs. challenge existing beliefs. Ask them to explain their answer in terms of confirmation bias.
Select an issue (which can be political or non-political – whichever is most appropriate for your classroom) and ask students to select which side of the issue they would like to argue. Once students have self-selected into two groups, tell them that they will actually be “switching” with each group having to argue the side originally chosen by the other group.	In addition to evaluating the arguments each side generates, discuss how it felt to have to defend a position that was not their original choice.
Present students with one or more statements (possibly taken from newspaper editorials) and ask them whether it conforms to the “Principle of Charity”.	In addition to evaluating these statements, the class can work together to reword the original statement so that it better conforms to the Principle of Charity.