

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Facts/Kamy Akhavan Interview

During this week's audio lesson, we discussed some of the reasons why facts and fact-checking seem to be playing such a prominent role this election season.

While some people have proposed that the latest campaign techniques and media technology might mean we are entering an era when political candidates do not make statements that can be validated for truth or falsity, some other explanations for the frustration that's been demonstrated regarding the inability of facts and fact-checking to provide us "the truth," include:

- Facts are a component of logos, and logos alone is rarely all that is needed to understand an issue or make a decision
- Even within the realm of logos, facts must be combined with logic. And because even the most thorough fact-checking sites don't go through the process of *logic-checking* the arguments these facts are used to construct, facts alone can only be of limited use
- Since the best political arguments are deliberative (i.e., about the future), we cannot know all the facts about events that have not yet taken place

Some other insights derived using the critical thinking tools discussed during this series include:

- Because the media often sets the terms and boundaries around campaign events, candidates must make use of the tools of rhetoric and other traditional persuasive techniques to work within these rules
- The power of the Internet to allow anyone to locate and communicate information dramatically reduces the barrier to entry for would-be fact checkers, which is why we have seen an explosion of fact-checking sites this election
- Bias may also play a role with regard to this year's obsession with facts, given that one of the candidate's primary skills is the ability to remember and utilize facts during campaign activities like speeches and debate performances

Finally, we were joined by Kamy Akhavan, President of ProCon.org, a site dedicated to providing the facts behind both sides of controversial issues. Some of the insights Kamy provided during this interview included:

- The technique of presenting Pro- and Con- arguments to important issues goes back to America's Founding Fathers and continues to be an effective way to present controversial issues
- There is a hunger for well-researched, honestly presented background knowledge on key issues among students, policy-makers and the public
- When provided with both sides of an issue, presented with respect for the best arguments on each side, people have demonstrated an ability to change their mind, even about important subjects they thought they understood

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Terminology

Important vocabulary terms used in this lesson include:

- Procatalepsis
- Sophists

Goals

The goal of this lesson is to give students an understanding of:

- Why the media and public have demonstrated such high interest in the truth or falsehood of facts presented by the candidates during the campaign
- Why there has been such a dramatic expansion of fact-checking services and sites this election
- Where facts fit into Aristotle's three Modes of Persuasion
- Why deliberative arguments (arguments about the future) cannot be thoroughly checked for factual accuracy since all facts related to future events cannot be known
- How the media sets many of the terms of the campaign and how the candidates make use of traditional rhetorical techniques to work within these boundaries
- How the tools of Information Literacy can be used to perform fact-checking activities using the Internet
- What role bias may play with regard to our current interest in which candidate is presenting the most accurate and honest facts
- Why presenting the best arguments for both sides of a controversial issue (the Pro and Con) provides one of the most effective ways for students, policy makers and the public to obtain the background knowledge they need to fuel their decision-making*

Primary Resources

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

- **Critical Voter Podcast 013 – Facts and Interview with Kamy Akhavan:** A 30-minute audio lesson that discussed our obsession with facts and fact-checking this election, followed by an interview with Kamy Akhavan, President of ProCon.org
- **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 October 28, 2012).

* As discussed during the interview with Kamy Akhavan, President of ProCon.org

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Additional Resources

ProCon.org

[New York Times Stone column on whether the candidates are making verifiable factual statements](#)

[New York Times Stone column on why fact checkers should be logic checking as well](#)

Suggested Activities

Activity	Notes on this activity
Have students listen to the podcast and answer the quiz questions to ensure they have listened to 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.
Have students review the analyses presented by more than one fact-checking site on the same statement made by a candidate during a speech or debate.	Fact checking sites you can use for this exercise include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• FactCheck.org• The fact-checking information provided by a major news site• Fact-checking from a biased source (such as a site dedicated to fact checking the statements of just one candidate) Use this exercise to explore why it is so easy for people to get into the fact checking "business" and analyze how fact-checking requires some level of interpretation, meaning it may not be purely objective.
Have students go through the candidate information and voter survey form at ProCon.org to (1) review candidates stands on important issues and (2) see if their own preferences on issues aligns with what ProCon determines should be the candidate they support for President.	In addition to discussing what background information is provided to support the analysis of where candidates stand on particular issues, this exercise can also be used to see if alignment on issues is an accurate determiner of candidate preference. If not, this can serve as the basis of discussion of what other factors go into someone's choice for President (such as emotional or character issues).