

Mud-Slinging and Deadly Duels



Lesson Plan: Mud-Slinging and Deadly Duels

Overview: Negative campaigning has been a fixture of U.S. presidential elections since the nation's earliest days. Attacks in print or out loud often prompt observers to judge who landed the most effective blows. While these moments feel uniquely modern, going negative in politics is nothing new. This video explores how historical examples of negative campaigning helped set the tone for the divisive tactics seen in elections today.

Subjects: U.S. History, Civics/Government

Grade Level: 7-12

Lesson Duration:

- Two 40-55 minute class periods

Essential Questions:

- Does negative campaigning help or hurt democratic elections in the United States?
- Does negative campaigning help voters understand differences between candidates, or does it pull attention away from important issues?

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Develop a position and present a viewpoint based on historical evidence.
- Analyze the effects of negative campaigning on democratic elections by watching a video, answering questions, completing an outline and drafting a paragraph.

Materials:

- Retro Report video "[Mud-Slinging and Deadly Duels: How Negative Campaigning Evolved](#)" ([Transcript](#))
- [Video Guide and Question Sheet](#)
- [Video Guide Key](#)
- Paragraph Outlines
 - [No scaffolds](#)
 - [Partial w/Topic and Concluding Sentence](#)
 - [Partial w/Evidence to Sort](#)
 - [Full Scaffolding – Sorted Evidence](#)
- [Primary Source Pack](#)
- [Primary Source Analysis Activity](#)

Key Vocabulary:

- **Negative campaign / Negative campaigning:** Campaigning that focuses on criticizing an opponent's ideas, record or character instead of focusing mainly on one's own.

- **Factional politics:** Politics divided into competing groups, often within or between parties.
- **Contested election:** An election where the result is disputed or challenged.
- **States' rights:** The belief that individual states should have more power than the national government.
- **Ambitious:** Strongly wanting power or success.
- **Factionalized press:** Newspapers aligned with and supporting different political sides.
- **Assail:** To strongly attack with words.
- **Pseudonym:** A fake name used by a writer.
- **Electors:** People chosen to cast each state's official votes for president in the Electoral College.
- **Diametrically opposed:** Completely opposite.
- **Sedition Act:** A law passed in 1798 that made it illegal to publish false or malicious statements against the federal government or its officials.
- **Denounce:** To publicly criticize strongly.
- **Enmity:** Deep hatred or hostility.

Procedure:

1. **Review:** To get students thinking about the topic and activate any prior knowledge, follow this short physical activity: Put two huge signs on opposite corners of the room - HELPS DEMOCRACY and HURTS DEMOCRACY. Then, project or read a series of quick statements one at a time. After each one, students must move to a side of the room. Tell them they must commit to a side - no hanging out in the middle. Have them do this to the best of their ability. After each statement, ask 1–2 students from each side to give a 10-second defense of their position. Make it quick!
 - a. Calling your opponent names or using adjectives like “dangerous” or “incompetent” without any facts helps voters make better choices.
 - b. Negative attack ads or speeches just make people not want to vote.
 - c. If a candidate has serious flaws in character or ability, voters deserve to hear about them.
 - d. Personal attacks distract from real issues and make campaigns less about politics and more about personality.
 - e. Politics is a win or lose competition, so digging up dirt and mud-slinging should be part of the political process.
2. **Guided Instruction:** Segue to the Mud-Slinging video with “You just discussed current politics. But what if I told you... politicians - BIG NAMED politicians - were accusing each other of destroying religion and becoming kings... in the 1790s?” Have students watch the “[Mud-Slinging and Deadly Duels: How Negative Campaigning Evolved](#)” video.
 - a. This can be done as a whole class, or individually on computers or using the EdPuzzle platform.
 - b. The video guide and question sheet pose two guiding questions for the whole video, along with several sentence stems that students can complete as they watch.
 - c. After reviewing responses and highlighting exemplary answers, the teacher will distribute the scaffolded outlines to students.
3. **Outline and Writing Prompt:** Each version of the outline has the same writing prompt. For this activity, students will respond to the following prompt: **Does negative campaigning help or hurt democratic elections in the United States?**
 - a. Demonstrate how responses on the video guide and question sheet could be used to craft topic and concluding sentences.

- b. Guide students through creating categories and details on their version of the Outline form.
 - i. Depending on time and classroom set-up, students can work together or independently to turn their categories and details into full sentences.
 - ii. Be sure to emphasize that each detail can be more than one sentence.
4. **Primary Source Analysis:** Have students complete one or more of the Primary Source Analysis activities provided for this lesson.
 - a. Students are encouraged to draw upon one or more primary sources to support their answer and evidence while constructing their outline.
5. **Outline Construction:** Have students complete whichever scaffolded outline they were given.
6. **Paragraph Construction:** Using the outline that students completed, have them construct their full paragraph.
 - a. To learn more about the evidence-based instructional methodology used here for teaching writing, see: [The Hochman Method](#) | The Writing Revolution

Relevant Standards/ Frameworks:

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies

- **D1.5.6-8.** Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of views represented in the sources.
- **D2.Civ.2.9-12.** Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system, with attention to various theories of democracy, changes in Americans' participation over time, and alternative models from other countries, past and present.
- **D2.Civ.5.9-12.** Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.
- **D2.Civ.13.9-12.** Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.
- **D2.His.1.9-12.** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- **D2.His.4.9-12.** Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- **D2.His.5.9-12.** Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.
- **D2.His.14.9-12.** Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.
- **D3.1.6-8.** Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- **D3.3.6-8.** Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.
- **D4.1.6-8.** Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.

Common Core Literacy Standards

- **CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RI.11-12.3:** Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequences of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact or develop over the course of a text.
- **CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RH.11-12.7:** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information

presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

About the Author: Chuck Taft teaches eighth-grade American History at University School of Milwaukee. He is president of the Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies.