

Teachable MOMENTS

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Billboard Controversy Gives Lesson in Political Party History

To the Teacher

Presidential elections never fail to provide plenty of teachable moments, and the 2008 election season didn't disappoint. A set of controversial billboards appeared in key states announcing that "MLK was a Republican." The idea of Martin Luther King Jr. in the GOP contradicts many contemporary conceptions of what a Republican or Democrat is—and provides a good history lesson about the nature of political parties.

Use the MLK billboard story to help students explore what it means to be a "Republican" or "Democrat" and the themes of continuity, change, and historical context in party affiliations.

National History Standards Addressed

- The student is able to identify the temporal structure of a historical narrative or story.
- The student is able to reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded, and apply them to explain historical continuity and change.
- The student is to consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- The student understands the development of the first American party system.
- The student understands domestic politics in contemporary society.
- The student understands how a democratic polity debates social issues and mediates between individual or group rights and the common good.

Options for Using Student Activities and Worksheets

Before starting the activities, ask students to brainstorm the key characteristics of each party. Assess students' prior knowledge. What do they know—or what have they heard—about each party (e.g., core values, principles, types of people who would affiliate with one or the other party)? Record responses on the board or elsewhere so that you can reference them later during the Worksheet 2 discussion. Look for common misconceptions that will need clarification.

If students have little knowledge of or have never studied U.S. political parties before, work through Worksheet 2 prior to Worksheets 1 and 3. After completing the Worksheet 2 activity and discussion, assign students to read additional background on both parties (see Web Sites and Online References).

Remind students at the outset that the goal of the activities is to understand the nature of political parties and political affiliation, not to debate which party is better, pick sides, or draw any final conclusion about Martin Luther King Jr.'s political affiliations.

For Worksheet 2, the party comparison, have students work in pairs or small groups of 3–4. Ask each group to research *both* parties, complete the chart, and prepare responses to discussion questions. Discuss findings as a class.

If time allows, you can extend the Worksheet 2 activity by comparing Republican and Democratic positions at specific points in time (Lincoln/Douglas, Reagan/Carter, McCain/Obama). Consider having students form pairs and compare one position area covered by the 2008 platforms of both parties (environment, security, etc.).

Web Sites and Online References



MLK Billboard Controversy

National Black Republicans: Why Martin Luther King, Jr., Was a Republican

<http://www.nationalblackrepublicans.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.DYK-Why%20MLK%20was%20a%20Republican>

Rocky Mountain News: Was MLK a Republican or Not?

http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/aug/28/20080828_kopel/

Atlanta Journal-Constitution: MLK in GOP? Billboards Say So; Others Deny

<http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/printedition/2008/07/05/kingrepublicans.html>

Sarasota Herald-Tribune: Leader of Black Republicans Sparks a Backlash

<http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20080803/ARTICLE/808030351/0/SPORTS0401>

U.S. Political Party Web Sites

Democratic National Committee: Party History

<http://www.democrats.org/a/party/history.html>

The Republican Party: GOP History

<http://www.gop.com/About/AboutRead.aspx?Guid=a747a888-0ae6-4441-94f4-2a3a6561f872>

Reading Assignment for Worksheet 3

MSN Encarta Column: How Do You Tell a Democrat from a Republican?

http://encarta.msn.com/column_democratrepublicanmain_marthahome/how_do_you_tell_a_democrat_from_a_republican.html

Additional Background on U.S. Political Parties

Encyclopedia Britannica Online: Democratic Party

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/157244/Democratic-Party#tab=active~checked%2Citems~checked&title=Democratic%20Party%20—%20Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia>

Encyclopedia Britannica Online: Republican Party

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/498842/Republican-Party#tab=active~checked%2Citems~checked&title=Republican%20Party%20—%20Britannica%20Online%20Encyclopedia>

Teacher Background Information

Washington wanted unity. Jefferson favored France, a limited presidency, a strong Constitution, and less federal government. Hamilton wanted a strong activist government, a strong president, looser Constitutional interpretation, and good ties with England. Jefferson, with Madison's support, would soon form the Democratic-Republican Party to oppose Hamilton and his Federalists. And so the U.S. political party system was born. Never before in history had parties existed as a legitimate system in which one party could "rule" the government, while others opposed it.

Today, the United States' Democratic and Republican parties still rank as the oldest political parties in the world. However, parties and platforms are not frozen in time. Often, especially amidst the frenzied posturing and positioning of national elections, they recast and reinvent themselves (e.g., Clinton's "New Democrats" or Reagan's "new conservatism").

Sometimes we encounter a situation that reminds us that party affiliations have an historical context—as when the National Black Republicans ran a billboard campaign earlier this year proclaiming "MLK was a Republican." If true for some portion of his life (some members of King's family and closest friends agree; some do not), the news should not be as surprising as many people find it. Before the 1960s, many African Americans, particularly those from the South, were Republicans. The Republican Party was Lincoln's party, started by antislavery activists in the 1850s. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, had been dominated for nearly a century by white southerners who blamed Republicans for the Civil War, Reconstruction, and enfranchisement of African Americans. It would take the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s to break apart these longstanding affiliations.

Worksheet 1: Was Martin Luther King Jr. a Republican?

During the summer of 2008, billboards claiming “MLK was a Republican” popped up in the battleground state of Florida and in Denver, Colorado, where the Democratic National Convention was held.

Use your web resources to learn more about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the MLK billboard controversy. Answer the following questions.

1. Why might it make sense that Martin Luther King Jr. was a Republican?
2. Why would the National Black Republicans (NBR) want to say King was a Republican? What is the goal of the billboard campaign?
3. Whether you like the billboards or not, do you think they are effective? Do they achieve what you think the NBR hopes they will?
4. Both parties often try to link a party or candidate with someone else. Sometimes the parties try to separate themselves or a candidate from someone people don't like. Why do you think this is? Can you think of other examples?

Worksheet 2: How Do You Tell a Democrat from a Republican?

U.S. political parties have been around a long time. The Democratic Party traces back to Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson. Antislavery activists formed the Republican Party in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Beliefs held by political parties change over time. The MLK billboard reminds us of such changes. For example, a Republican of the 1950s might be more like a Democrat of the 1960s. So, what exactly is a Republican? A Democrat?

Visit the official web sites of the Democratic and Republican parties. Find out their roots. What were their values in the past? What are they now? Use your research to fill out the chart. Compare and summarize your findings.

| | Democratic Party | Republican Party | Similarities | Differences |
|---|------------------|------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Founding Principles What party founders believed in, party values | | | | |
| Historical Achievements Examples of important policies or progress party claims | | | | |
| Core Principles Today Principles and values party supports now | | | | |

Discussion Questions

1. What is the same about both parties? What is different?
2. Was it easy or hard to tell the difference between the two parties? Explain.
3. You read what each party wrote about its own history. Are there any examples of "spin" or bias in what they wrote? If so, list them. Can you identify any examples of what was written to persuade a reader and how?

Worksheet 3: Parties in Flux

Read the MSN Encarta column “How Do You Tell a Democrat from a Republican?”
Answer the following questions.

1. Think about the author’s point of view. Do you share this point of view? Explain why or why not.
2. According to the article, why might a political party change beliefs? What would cause a change in positions, philosophy, or identity? Include at least two examples.
3. What is the purpose of a political party? List some pros and cons of a party system.
4. What is the author’s conclusion about parties? What might this mean to you and other future voters?

Answer Key

Worksheet 1: Was Martin Luther King Jr. a Republican?

1. The majority of white southerners were Democrats, a legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction, which the South blamed on Lincoln and the Republicans. It would make sense for King, like most African Americans in the pre-Civil Rights era, to affiliate with the Republican Party.
2. Answers will vary but should reflect some of the following:
Today, the majority of African Americans vote Democratic. The National Black Republicans want to recapture a share of that vote. This is especially important this election year because a Democrat, Barack Obama, is the first African-American candidate for president. Associating King with the Republican Party provides an ideal way for the NBR to call attention to the party's civil rights legacy and highlight trouble spots in the Democrats' legacy in this area. In this way, they can undermine any notion that the Democrats "own" civil rights and push African-American and other voters to question assumptions they hold about the Democratic Party.
3. Answers will vary.
4. Answers will vary but may include the following:
Association:
Barack Obama compared to John F. Kennedy
Barack Obama linked to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton
Disassociation:
Michael Dukakis linked to Willie Horton (convicted felon)
Hillary Clinton \ Bill Clinton
John McCain \ George Bush

Worksheet 2: How Do You Tell a Democrat from a Republican?

Answers may vary but should reflect some of the following:

| | Democratic Party | Republican Party | Similarities | Differences |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Founding Principles | Anti-Federalist Decentralized government with limited powers | Anti-slavery Equality Jeffersonian ideals | Both parties trace their philosophical roots back to Jefferson and his Democratic-Republicans ("the best government is that which governs least") | The Republican Party was decidedly anti-slavery from the start. Democrats were significantly divided on this issue. |
| Historical Achievements | League of Nations Federal Reserve Board First labor and child welfare laws New Deal programs Social Security Marshall Plan NATO Man on the moon Peace Corps Nuclear weapons test ban Civil Rights Act Voting Rights Act Medicare Camp David peace accords | Emancipation Proclamation 13th Amendment (outlawing slavery) Granting free land to settlers 15th Amendment (voting rights for African Americans) 19th Amendment (women's right to vote) First woman in Congress Winning the Cold War | Both parties cite achievements in similar areas: civil rights, voting rights, peace negotiations | Republicans cite constitutional amendments; Democrats cite programs and institutions |
| | | | | <i>(continued)</i> |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Core Principles/ Values Today | Expanding opportunities Strong economic growth Affordable health care Retirement security Accountable government National security Protection of civil rights and liberties Energy independence | Individual dignity and responsibility Equal rights, justice, and opportunity Free enterprise Fiscally responsible government Local control/local government Limited central government National strength/security Global peace, freedom and human rights | Both seem to want many of the same things: strong economy, fiscally responsible government, national security, civil rights, etc. | Republicans highlight individual, local control, and extension of U.S. ideals abroad. Democrats highlight individual needs (health care, retirement security). |
|--|--|---|---|---|

Discussion Questions

1. See compare and contrast matrix above.
2. Answers will vary. Many students may find it challenging for reasons including:
 - Both parties use very similar language and rhetoric. They sound as though they both want many of the same things.
 - You have to know how to read between the lines to identify any real differences.
 - Differences seem more like issues of perception, stereotype, current spin, or current party marketing.
 - There are so many splits, factions, and realignments. Unless you really know the history, it's difficult to keep track of who believes what.
 - Party platforms seemed to change depending on issues and leaders. It's easier to compare them at a particular point in time than to identify general differences.
3. Both sites definitely present carefully constructed accounts of their history. Examples:

Democratic Party Site

- Makes a clear connection to Jefferson (a limited presidency, a strong Constitution, less federal government) and immediately emphasizes that it was the “party of the common man”
- Skips over the Civil War and Reconstruction period—a low point in Democratic Party history—and jumps to the early 20th when a changing America started to cause changes in the parties
- Uses powerful, heroic words and phrases to describe the accomplishments of Democratic leaders
- Outlines failures of Republican leadership (budget deficits, high unemployment, crime, etc.)

Republican Party Site

- Makes a connection to Jefferson
- Emphasizes how often and how long the Republicans have held power
- Touts civil rights achievements (African Americans, women) and emphasizes that these were early causes, accomplished despite Democratic opposition
- Praises the hard work of volunteers and party members

Worksheet 3: Parties in Flux

1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary but should include some of the following:
 - Candidates change platforms or positions in order to attract votes
 - Demographic realities, changing demographics

- Philosophical alignment, e.g., abolitionists → temperance activists → suffragettes
 - Geography
 - Globalization
3. Answers will vary but should reflect the following:
- Purpose: mobilize people with a shared agenda; win elections so that those interests can be advanced; organize to achieve political power or influence; present organized opposition
 - Pros: unite people; more power to advocate positions and promote candidates; communicate issues and positions; raise funds and volunteers
 - Cons: partisanship can impede progress and solutions (parties want credit, want to block action or create a stalemate for political reasons); encourages patronage and political favors; strongest force wins—not best or most representative
4. • Conclusion: Who Democrats and Republicans are and what they stand for changes, even flip flops completely, and will change again in a relatively short matter of years (decade or so).
- Implications: Answers will vary.