

Why Has There Never Been a Woman President in the United States? An Inquiry Lesson

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While democratic nations like the United Kingdom, Australia, and Germany have elected women to the preeminent position in their governments, there has never been a woman president in the United States. The upcoming presidential election provides an excellent opportunity to have students consider why the United States has yet to elect a woman president, to examine the discourses surrounding women in politics, and to address gender equity issues. Based on our previous experiences addressing these issues in social studies classes, we have found that inquiry methods are particularly well suited for engaging students in these kinds of learning experiences.

The lesson described here was inspired by one of the authors' previous attempts to engage high school students in examining the underrepresentation of women in politics. While that lesson had many of the same goals as this one, including engaging students in the issue of gender equity, the representation of women politicians in the media, and the relationship between gender and power, the first lesson failed to provide a context for inquiry. Instead, in that lesson, students were given one resource—quotations from media pundits about Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin during the 2008 campaign—and were asked to respond to the quotations in a silent discussion (i.e., written conversation). In approaching the topic this way, students were left to draw on nothing but their own understandings of gender. This resulted in the unintentional circulation of a range of problematic responses about women. For example, below are some students' responses from the silent discussion:

- Most women in politics don't look good
- Women do house chores
- Women talk about women stuff rather than news and such/I agree. Women like women's stuff
- Women might not want to get involved with the government. IDK (I don't know) why but maybe they felt men handled things better?
- The women didn't want to get involved because they weren't ready for the responsibility of dealing with a large group of people.
- I don't believe our country is ready for a female pres. There are some things guys can do better than girls.

We've included these student comments from the earlier attempt to teach this topic in order to address an important issue: a social studies lesson that addresses gender is not the same as a lesson that addresses the Electoral College, for example. Although there may be a "first time" a student learns about a historical event like the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or a geographical concept like the equator, students' learning about gender and gender roles precedes their experience in the classroom. In fact, children learn to understand their gender and the gender of others at a very early age: the gender practices through which children position themselves in relation to others "provide the vehicle through which others will recognise that positioning as legitimate, as meaningful, as providing the right to claim personhood."¹ Students of all ages come to the classroom with specific understandings about gender. Their understanding of gender discourses and adherence to certain performances related to them are perceived as key to social acceptance.

It's important to remember, then, that students who encounter a lesson plan "about" women and gender in the classroom are bringing a complex knowledge of the gender discourses in which they are already acculturated. Those

discourses act as both a resource and a limit: they make some understandings possible, while at the same time constraining others. Without intervention, or what Valerie Walkerdine describes as the “production of different discourses,”² the understandings that teachers and students may give voice to during a class “about” women and gender are likely to be similar to the discourses they had when they walked into the classroom. Further, questioning notions of who and what girls and boys/women and men “are” and can “do,” and further, what gender “is,” can disrupt deeply felt and strongly clung to notions of how people see themselves and how they interpret the world around them. In this sense, when addressing issues of gender, there is quite a bit at stake for both teachers and students. It’s worth noting that teaching a lesson like the one described here requires not only the desire to promote gender equity through social studies but the ability to recognize students’ complex understanding of gender roles and the capacity to facilitate a discussion in a way in which problematic notions are not reinforced.

This lesson was designed to support students’ inquiry into some of the systemic and pressing issues associated with gender equity in American political, social and economic systems and to provide students with “different discourses” about women and about the relationship between gender and politics more broadly. The discussions encouraged students to consider a series of potential reasons why women have been excluded from the U.S. presidency, without further marginalizing women. Inquiry methods are well suited to these goals because they create a structure to explore controversial questions in systematic ways. The methods require that students interpret related sources as data (e.g., articles, graphs, political cartoons, media portrayals, quotations, etc.), and consider the bias within those documents. Students evaluate the value of the data in relationship to the inquiry question to develop a broader and deeper understanding of

the issue. The inquiry described in this article, which was conducted with 9th graders and would be appropriate for students in grades 8–12, explicitly promotes teachers’ use of the C3 Framework in curricular and instructional decisions. The C3 Framework offers teachers a set of applicable guidelines to analyze their curricular and instructional decisions to promote students’ thoughtful engagement within each of the social studies disciplines. This lesson illustrates the ways the C3 Framework can be used to guide pedagogical decisions in the planning phase and to analyze the quality of a learning experience in the assessment phase.

Engaging Students and Eliciting Hypotheses

The C3 Framework promotes students’ engagement in various forms of critical thinking, including developing questions, planning inquiries, evaluating sources and using evidence. As Parker indicates, “the inquiry process is exalted as the highest form of higher-order thinking or critical thinking”³ This lesson required that students develop hypotheses, test hypotheses against evidence and draw conclusions, supporting the development of critical thinking skills.

To begin, students were asked to engage with the problem through a personalized question. Using the four corners method (where each corner of the room represents a position), students were asked, “Has anyone ever told you that you could be president one day?” (See Handout A). Students identified the corner of the room that represented their opinion, got up from their chairs, and moved to that corner.

Students were then asked to “describe who should be allowed to be president?” Asking this question provided opportunities for students to share their opinion and allowed us to explicitly address the standards: attention to the requirements for the U.S. presidency is often outlined in the Civics/Government portion of many state standards documents. Throughout this discussion, students

volunteered both formal and informal requirements for the presidency. As they suggested personal characteristics, we encouraged students to consider whether these qualities were the result of gender or other aspects of a president’s life experiences. Further, when students offered qualifications for the presidency addressed in the Constitution, we confirmed the accuracy of their comments and corrected their misunderstandings. At this point of the lesson, teachers may find it productive to introduce or remind students of the two-party system that has dominated elections throughout U.S. history and encourage them to consider how this has contributed to the patterns they recognized of who has been “allowed” to be president. This is an opportunity to point to the relationship between the structure of the American political system and the continued exclusion of women from the top elected office.

Following that discussion, students were presented with a collage of images of the U.S. presidents in chronological order from Washington through Obama and asked, “What does this tell us about who can be president of the United States?” Displaying the image and asking students to analyze it served several purposes: (1) it kept students’ interest and attention in the inquiry, (2) it invited them to begin analyzing evidence and (3) it primed them to begin considering how visual images contribute to our impressions of what is “normal” and “natural.” In this case, students’ responses to the collage and our question about what it said about “who can be president” were a mix of comments about the gender and race of the men depicted, which led to an interesting and important conversation about who has been excluded from political office. Collectively, these opening activities provided students with a shared context through which to consider the topic of the lesson—the absence (so far) of women from the U.S. presidency—and allowed them to engage in their exploration from three specific perspectives: who can be president, who is encouraged to think about becoming

A

B

Yes, people tell me that all of the time.

Handout A

Yes, one or a few people have mentioned that to me.

Four Corners:
Has anyone ever told you that you could be president one day?



No, I have never heard a reference to becoming president.

No one has told me that, but I've heard people encouraging others by saying that.

C

D

Handout B

Inquiry Lesson Resource Analysis Form

Resource Title or Description: _____

Evidence from this resource supporting my hypothesis:

Evidence from this resource refuting my hypothesis:

What bias is identifiable in this resource?

Use evidence from this resource to answer the inquiry question:

Why has there never been a woman president?

president, and who has and has not been a president.

Continuing to draw on guidelines set forth in the C3 Framework, Dimension 2, as well as Parker's Stage 2 for inquiry lessons,⁴ the next stage of this lesson called upon disciplinary tools and concepts through a process of eliciting hypotheses that could potentially answer the question, "Why has there never been a woman U.S. president?" Students were asked to consider the inquiry question and use the question and corresponding hypotheses as a backdrop for their analysis of evidence. The students informally generated hypotheses, shared their hypotheses in their collaborative groups, and select students volunteered to share their hypotheses with the whole class. Hypotheses generated by this class included: There has never been a woman president because "women are not seen as equal to men," "women are seen as sex objects," "women are not seen as having the qualities of a leader." These state-

ments echo the same discourses present in the student comments described in the first lesson, but because they were presented in the form of hypotheses in response to an inquiry question, "different discourses" and a different kind of learning experience were accessed in this lesson, as we will describe.

Analyzing Evidence through Documents

In the next stage of the lesson, students were divided into collaborative groups and tasked with answering comprehension and interpretative questions about a variety of different resources. We created a graphic organizer to be completed with each resource to support students' analysis of the evidence and to check for their understanding. (See Handout B)

The texts and media chosen as resources allowed students to work on important critical reading, evaluation, and interpretation skills while exploring a variety of different reasons to explain

why the United States has yet to have a woman president. Several texts were chosen specifically to encourage students to consider the ways that politically active women have been represented in the media, now and in the past, and to consider how those representations might influence the public's perceptions about women's suitability for office. For example, students viewed clips from the 2012 documentary *Miss Representation* describing the attention paid to attractiveness and appearance of current women politicians and compared modern media to historical political cartoons attacking suffragists. This provided the opportunity for a robust discussion about bias and the importance of critical media literacy.

We also gave students short, abridged news articles regarding the gender wage gap. These articles reported identical data about the pay gap but gave contrasting explanations for its origins: one article stated that the pay gap was a result of gender inequity and the other provided explanations related to women's choices in the work world. Our purpose for including both texts was twofold: first, it provided an ideal opportunity to demonstrate that statistics do not speak for themselves, and secondly, it made students aware that a gender wage gap exists, dispelling the commonly held notion that women have achieved economic equality. While this data did not directly address politics, it provided additional context for thinking about gender equity in American society.

Finally, students were provided with a chart ranking countries on the basis of the percentage of women elected to national parliaments. Only 19.4 percent of the members of the U.S. federal legislature were women in 2015: as such, the U.S. ranks 71st on this list. In addition to the benefit of giving students the opportunity to practice interpreting quantitative data, this information was included as a resource to help students see that the exclusion of women from political office is neither universal nor inevitable. The partial list of media and texts used

Sidebar 1. Inquiry Resources

1. Video on women's representation in visual media:
Newsomm, J. (2011). Trailer from *Miss Representation*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5pM1fW6hNs
2. Data comparing women in elected office by country:
Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2015). World Classification of Women in National Parliaments. www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm
3. Wage Gap Articles:
 - a. Zumbrun, J. (2014, April 11). "Is the Gender Pay Gap Closing or Has Progress Stalled?" *Wall Street Journal*. blogs.wsj.com/economics/2014/04/11/is-the-gender-pay-gap-closing-or-has-progress-stalled/
 - b. Lane, A. & Robbins, K.G., (2014, May 3). "The Wage Gap Over Time". National Women's Law Center. www.nwlc.org/our-blog/wage-gap-over-time
4. Quotes about women candidates:
Conte, K. (October, 2010). *Top 50 Most Sexist Quotes on the Campaign Trail*. The Stir, thestir.cafemom.com/in_the_news/110242/top_50_most_sexist_quotes
5. News article on women's participation in political office:
McGregor, J. (May, 2014). "Why More Women Don't Run for Office". *Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2014/05/21/why-more-women-dont-run-for-office/

in this lesson, including links, is listed in Sidebar 1.

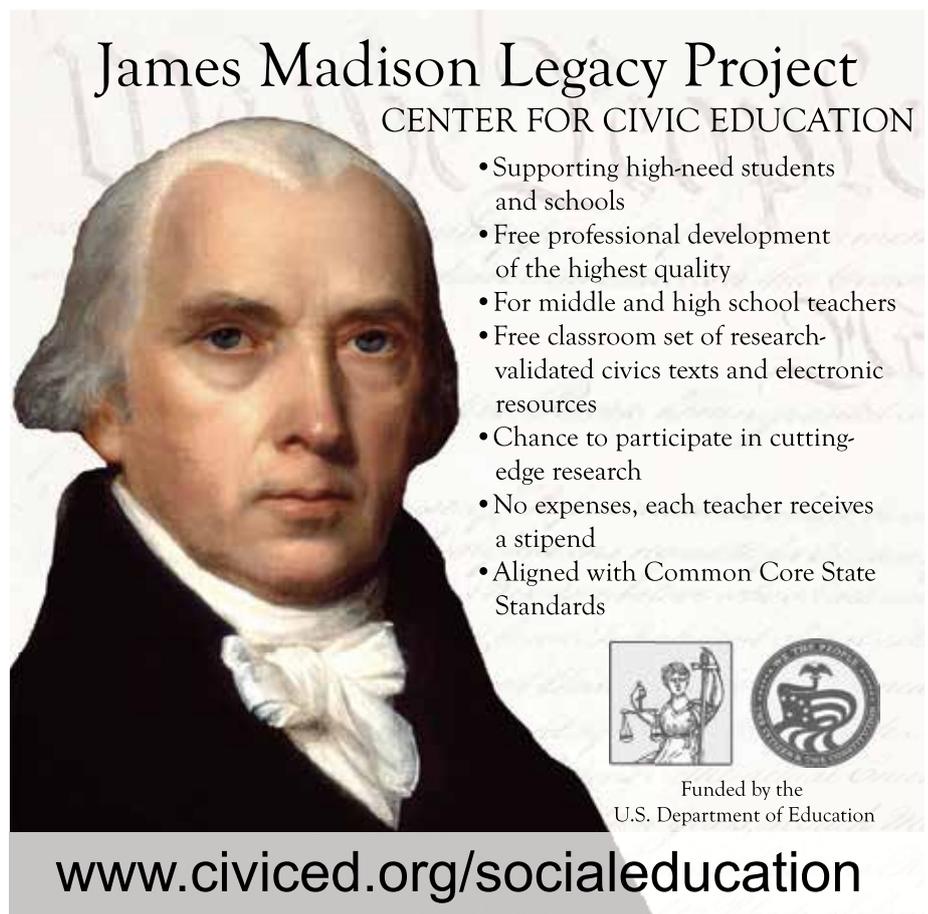
This stage of the lesson—viewing parts of a documentary and analyzing evidence through images, articles, charts and graphs—addressed Dimension 3 of the C3 Framework, which encourages teachers to create learning experiences that include the evaluation of sources and the use of evidence. We encourage teachers to model at least one round of resource analysis with the whole class by using the analysis form (Handout B) to work through one text or resource. This can be done by choosing one group’s hypothesis and leading the class through the evaluation of the text on the basis of that hypothesis. While this adds to the time required to complete the lesson, the benefits to students’ development as researchers and text evaluators is a critical component of completing an inquiry. Working through this form with and in front of the whole class provides the teacher the opportunity to model the type of evidence analysis they expect students to demonstrate on their own.

In order to encourage students to avoid generalizations, it is important to require students to draw directly from the texts as they complete the analysis form and think about how the texts relate to these issues. The modeling stage of the lesson presents a powerful opportunity to show students how evidence is defined. For example, as the teacher models how to identify evidence from the text and evaluate whether it confirms the chosen hypothesis, it may be beneficial to provide students with contrasting examples from the text: one exemplary example of how to use evidence from the text and a “non-example” of evidence resulting from a thin interpretation of the text, or relying primarily on prior knowledge of the topic. Further, during the modeling round (and throughout their interactions with individual students and groups), the teacher’s use of questions such as “What makes you say that?”, “How do you know that?”, “Where does

the author say that?” and “How did you arrive at that conclusion?” draws students’ attention back to the text or resource and focuses their attention on the evaluation of evidence rather than on opinion. These sorts of questions model the types of questions that students should be asking of each other and of themselves as they work through each resource and use the analysis form to evaluate each text in relation to their hypothesis. Building on their experience with the teacher and the class to evaluate the first resource together, the collaborative groups were then tasked with applying their own hypothesis to the rest of the texts and using the resources analysis form to evaluate each one. As described in the following section, the evidence was used during the concluding activity to help the students determine whether their initial hypotheses about why a woman has not been president of the United States were accurate.

Drawing & Publishing Conclusions
To scaffold students’ efforts to synthesize their understandings and develop their own conclusions about the inquiry question, the teacher used a modeling approach similar to the one described in the previous section to guide students through the process of developing conclusions through revisiting the evidence and corresponding analyses. Students were prompted specifically to reference information they learned from the documents analyses to support their conclusions as they prepared responses to two questions.

The first concluding question was the original inquiry question hypothesized in the beginning of the lesson: “Why has there never been a woman U.S. president?” The second concluding question personalized their interpretations of the evidence while also asking the students to make some predictions about the future of the gendered political landscape in the United States. It asked, “Do you think it



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is possible that there will be a woman U.S. president in the next 20 years?” Students wrote their responses to these prompts in another graphic organizer. Below we describe how they discussed their conclusions with their peers. Both of these tasks follow guidelines outlined in C3 Framework, Dimension 4, which

encourages the promotion of activities in which students communicate their conclusions during the inquiry.

A fishbowl discussion was the final task in this lesson: this semi-structured discussion method gave students another opportunity to communicate and “make public” their conclusions.⁵ Other discussion methods, such as a Structured Academic Controversy or a Silent Discussion, would serve similar purposes. Guidelines for engaging in fishbowl discussion were presented to the class. (See Sidebar 2).

Sidebar. 2 Fishbowl Protocol

- Students can choose to be either participants or observers.
- Chairs are placed in a circle in the middle of the room.
- Several extra empty chairs are available.
- Large pieces of blank white paper are taped in at least three places around the room, with (approved) writing utensils made available close by.
- Observers are encouraged to participate non-verbally, responding in writing to the discussion on the white paper.
- Observers are encouraged to join the fishbowl at any time if a seat is available.
- Participants can leave the fishbowl at any time.
- Teacher may develop the initial question for the discussion, or students may generate the question before the fishbowl begins.
- Additional protocols can be put in place, such as:
 - Limiting the time that participants can stay in the fishbowl (2–5 minutes);
 - Limiting the number of comments that participants can make before leaving the fishbowl (2–3);
 - Asking observers to assess the contributions of fishbowl participants.

During the fishbowl discussion regarding why a woman has never been president, the students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the issue than indicated in their initial hypothesis.

Approximately half of the class participated in the verbal discussion in the center of the classroom, while the other half self-selected to participate in the written discussion that took place on sheets of poster paper hung around the room. The discussion focused specifically around the two concluding questions mentioned previously: (1) “Why has there never been a woman U.S. president?” and (2) “Is it possible that there will be a woman U.S. president in the next 20 years?”

During the fishbowl discussion regarding why a woman has never been president, the students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the issue than indicated in their initial hypothesis. For example, one student, who identifies as an African American man, contended that because women have only had the right to vote since 1920, it was perhaps too early to expect significant change in people’s attitudes about women in politics. He noted that African Americans (Authors’ note: *some* African American men) had

the right to vote since the late 1800s, it made sense that African Americans had made “more progress.” While there are many interesting elements of this argument worthy of unpacking for what they reveal about the student’s understanding, in this instance, we point to the fact that the student likely drew upon two tasks from this lesson to come to this stance: our preliminary review of the photographs of all of the presidents (and the resulting discussion of the presidency, race and gender) and the examination of the political cartoons of the suffragists. Another student, who identifies as an African American woman, argued that the reason there had never been a woman president was because parents, teachers, and the media influence women in ways that limit their options: she concluded that these factors build upon each other in a way that makes change difficult. Again, in this argument we could see traces of our opening four corner exercise, in which students were asked to identify whether they had ever personally been told they could be president, as well as the students’ examination of several texts about women, politics, and the media. Throughout the discussion of both questions, students used the activities and resources from the lesson to support their arguments and justify their stances.

As a final metacognitive task, and a strategy for completing the entire inquiry process, students compared their initial responses to the question from the beginning of the lesson to the conclusions they drew in response to the question at the end of the lesson. After spending some time reviewing the differences and similarities between these two answers to the same question, students were asked to “record two things that you learned about why there has not been a woman U.S. president” and “explain why you think you learned that.” This kind of concluding task takes only moments to complete, but provides a meaningful opportunity for students to reflect on what impacted their thinking during a learning experience like an inquiry lesson.

Moving Forward

The upcoming election season provides a rich opportunity for teachers to engage students in the consideration of why women's representation in major political offices does not mirror their representation in the population. Given predictions that Hillary Clinton is likely to be the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency in 2016, the issues discussed in this lesson—like whether a woman is capable of serving as the leader of this nation—are going to be topics that circulate in the news, around dinner tables, on social media, etc. Inquiry methods offer a promising approach to addressing gender inequity in politics in ways that enable different discourses to be accessed. The way students talked about these issues—and about women in general—was significantly different than the conversation that we had seen in the previous attempt to teach this topic. While there could be a vari-

ety of explanations for this (different students, different school, etc.) we do believe that the structure of this lesson, and in particular, the inquiry method and the resources made available and explored, allowed students to access different discourses about women and politics. This in turn contributed to an entirely different kind of conversation about women and politics than the silent discussion we described in the introduction. The second lesson provided a fuller context for societal representations of women and resulted in discussions that better accounted for the ways complex discourses of gender contribute to the

underrepresentation of women in political office in the United States. 🌐

Notes

1. Bronwyn Davies, *Frogs, Snails, and Feminist Tails* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2003), 13
2. Valerie Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions* (London, UK: Verso Books, 1990), 9
3. W.C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, 14th ed. (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2012), 332.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, 334

References

National Council for the Social Studies (2013). *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, www.socialstudies.org/c3

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