

The Cost of an Election

by Ben Forbes



During the 1992 Presidential election, my daughter's grade 5/6 class did a lesson on the presidential race. They studied the candidates' positions, asked parents to tell about their experiences as campaign volunteers, and even invited a worker from the Paul Tsongas campaign to come speak. The lesson was to end with a mock election.

As a parent, I was glad my daughter's class was studying "real life" issues but, at the same time, I was worried. With all the focus on the elections, I feared that my daughter and her classmates might be left with the impression that the U.S. system of electing presidents presented real choices to the voters and constituted a real democracy.

Rather, I wanted my daughter's class to grapple with such critical questions as: who gets to run in presidential elections? Which of the candidates are considered "major" and how is that decided? Whose interests do those major candidates represent? How do the issues presented by the candidates reflect the interests of specific constituencies, especially working-class people, women, people of color, and other oppressed groups? I also wanted my daughter to be exposed to an alternative viewpoint: that progressive social change results when groups of people from the "bottom" organize themselves into movements, and not just from appealing to those on the "top" (including elected officials.)

When I voiced my concerns to my daughter's teacher, Polly Brown, she eagerly invited me to present these issues to the class. As a literacy teacher myself, interested in critical pedagogy and whole language development, I wanted to plan a lesson based on principles of active learning and direct experience. Rather than planning a session where I would present facts and figures, lecture about the inequities in the U.S. electoral system, and have the students passively listen (an example of what Paulo Freire calls the "banking" method of education), I designed a role-play. I thought an exper-

iential method, followed by group reflection, might be a good way to get the students as involved as possible within the hour and a half block Ms. Brown had given me. This is what happened.

Procedure

Role Play: "Where does the money come from?"

To introduce the theme of the role-play, I told the students about a recent newspaper article stating that campaign costs for the presidential election were totaling more than \$400 million. I then posed some questions.

- Where does the money come from?
- Why would someone give a large sum of money, like ten million dollars, to a campaign?
- What obligation would the candidate then have to that donor?

This initial questioning helped me get a sense of the students' prior thinking on the issue. I found that most of these fifth and sixth graders believed the presidential campaign was paid for by the contributions of ordinary people. Most thought that anybody with good ideas, who speaks about them loudly enough, will be heard by the candidates.

Next, I announced that we were going to act out a kind of mini-play to explore this issue more, and I briefly explained the role-play. I began by telling the students that, in keeping with the "American way," the CEOs and the major presidential candidate would have to be played by boys. Two students were assigned to be his campaign managers. I then randomly handed out construction-paper labels indicating various occupations and incomes. Next I distributed plastic bags of M&Ms to represent each student's annual income, based on the equivalence of one M&M per \$1000. (Any object that will dramatize the

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inequality may be used for this purpose, such as peanuts and paper clips.) The occupations and incomes are listed in the chart on the previous page.

The students gasped when they saw the gallon-size bags bursting with M&Ms I gave to the CEOs, in comparison with the almost empty pint-size bags the others received.

Scripts: “I want to talk to the candidate!”

I handed out script sheets for each role-player, which listed a few of their “wants,” and what actions they would take upon the arrival of the candidate. The Campaign Managers had the busiest role to play, acting as intermediaries between the candidate and the others. One by one the players acted out their scripts.

First, the students playing homeless persons approached the Campaign Managers to tell them they needed a place to sleep. After hurriedly explaining that the candidate was indeed concerned about homeless people, the managers told them they couldn’t stay near the candidate and physically escorted them off to the side of the classroom. The two homeless persons then got into an argument over how to split the one M&M representing their \$500 charity payment.

Next, the unemployed persons demanded that they get a chance to talk to the candidate. Again, the managers quickly said the candidate truly cares about unemployed persons, but he was not available at the moment. While being escorted to the side of the room, the unemployed began chanting “We want jobs!”

The farmers then told the Campaign Managers they wanted to talk to the candidate. The managers said to them that the candidate thought farmers are important and doing a great job, but that he was too busy to speak with them. The managers gave the farmers some campaign newspapers to read about the candidate.

When the factory workers asked to see the candidate, they were told that he was at an important meeting, but if they waited awhile they might get a chance to wave at him from a distance. The Campaign Managers then suggested to the candidate that he wave to the factory workers, and perhaps make a speech at a factory next week.

The teacher and the small business owner told the Campaign Managers that they wished to talk to the presidential candidate. The managers said that, even though the candidate was extremely busy, he would talk to them for just one minute. But as soon as the teacher and small business owner told the candidate what they wanted, the managers told them their time was up and escorted them away.

The doctor and lawyer told the Campaign Managers they would like to talk with the candidate, and

Role-Play Annual Income Distribution

Occupations	Incomes
CEO of Finest Automobile Company	\$2,000,000 / 2000 M&Ms
CEO of Super Electronics Corp.	\$2,000,000 / 2000 M&Ms
Doctor	\$150,000 / 150 M&Ms
Lawyer	\$150,000 / 150 M&Ms
Small business owner	\$50,000 / 50 M&Ms
Teacher	\$35,000 / 35 M&Ms
Factory worker (boy, automobile)	\$30,000 / 30 M&Ms
Factory worker (girl, garment)	\$17,000 / 17 M&Ms
Farmer	\$20,000 / 20 M&Ms
Unemployed (unemployment comp.)	\$7,000 / 7 M&Ms
Homeless	\$500 in charity / 1/2 M&M

would be willing to pay \$1000 to have dinner with him. The managers let the doctor and lawyer shake the candidate’s hand and talk a few minutes, but then quickly showed them to seats at a table far away from the candidate’s own table.

Finally, the two CEOs told the Campaign Managers they would be willing to contribute \$10 million to the campaign—provided the candidate made his platform favorable to what they wanted. The managers encouraged the CEOs to make themselves comfortable at the table with the candidate. In a friendly tone of voice, the managers offered them something to eat and drink; inviting the CEOs to spend as much time as they like with the candidate. The CEOs then began to talk about what they want in return for their contribution. The candidate listened attentively.

I was pleased the students quickly got involved in the role-play, and even embellished their scripts with spontaneous gestures and dialogues. After acting out their individual parts, they easily became an attentive audience as they watched the drama unfold.

Discussion: “March or demonstrate!”

When the role-play ended, I asked the students how they felt about their roles and about what happened. One student exclaimed, “The more money you had, the more the candidate listened to you!” Another said, “He only promised things to

people with lots of money!" We then entered into a lively discussion on campaign financing and the relative influence different groups had upon the candidate's platform.

Then I asked, "what could you do if the candidate won't pay attention to your needs?" "What are some other ways you could get your needs met?" One student blurted out "Go on TV like Ross Perot!" but then thought for a moment and added, "If you're rich." Someone suggested that we could tell people the candidate is only listening to rich people. Someone else proposed that we could "march or demonstrate all around town." "Go on a bus to other states and spread the message," added another. One student despaired at the powerlessness of the homeless. Another lamented, "If all the candidates are slime balls, we have a really messed up country!"

After lots of animated, yet thoughtful discussion, I showed the students a copy of Business Week's 1989 Special Bonus Issue entitled "The Corporate Elite: Chief Executives of the Business Week 1000." I flipped through the pages showing them photos of the CEOs and read aloud some of their names. I asked them what they noticed. After a moment of silence, someone called out, "They're all wearing suits!" Another commented, "They're all White, male and rich!" Then I held up a Boston Globe photo showing all the presidential candidates—including socialist and alternative candidates. They seemed surprised at how many they hadn't heard of. We discussed why no one in the class had heard of Lenore Fulani, for example, and why there weren't more women candidates, particularly women of color candidates.

My time was up, but it was hard to leave the spirited discussion. I left the class with a copy of the Social Stratification Poster which graphically displays how wealth is distributed in the United States and Ms. Brown tacked it onto the wall for future discussion.

Reflections

Looking back, I realize I could have done some things differently. Next time, I would arrange the classroom with a table and row of five chairs in the front, facing the class, and describe the front of the classroom as the meeting room of a fancy downtown hotel. At the other end and the sides, toward the back of the classroom, I would post the following signs in different places: "unemployment office," "farm," "factory," "park bench," and "neighborhood." Doing this would set the stage for a discussion about grassroots organizing and alliance-building. I would ask the students to think about the effect and implications of each identified group standing in their respective places, such as the

homeless persons at the park bench and factory workers at the factory. After each person played their part, they would be asked to move to their designated places in the classroom. By raising questions related to their location, we could talk about factors such as social categories, labels, prejudices and physical structures (such as location of neighborhoods) that often prevent people from becoming friends and allies with one another.

In this lesson, I also had to oversimplify many of the complex issues surrounding the electoral process since the exercise was just a brief, one-time activity. It omitted important topics like the struggles of women, African Americans and others to win the right to vote; the ongoing battle for equity in representation and related issues, such as the histories of the labor and the civil rights movements. These should be included in an expanded unit on the electoral process.

Even in this abbreviated form, however, the role-play succeeded as a catalyst for getting Ms. Brown's students to look more critically at elections. She told me later that the experience had a profound effect upon her students, with comments about it coming up over and over in class discussions. She mentioned one boy who was "radicalized" as a result of the role-play. Describing him as a student who "needs to act it out to 'have it,'" she felt it stirred up his strong sense of fairness and made him think about the issues with greater depth. One of the girls thought about her anger at not being allowed to play the part of the candidate. According to Ms. Brown, in their evaluations the students repeatedly referred to the role-play as a valuable part of the election unit. Several of them even ended up voting for alternative candidates in their class mock election!

As a lesson in critical literacy, the role-play experience helped my daughter and her classmates, in Freire's words, to "read the world"—know and understand the events going on around them—so as to "read the word"—know and understand the real meanings of particular words, especially those that are used sometimes to hide certain realities and effects. The role-play provided a means for these fifth and sixth graders to begin asking critical questions about race, class, gender and power in electoral politics (reading the world), about what constitutes authentic democracy (reading the word), and about the potential for progressive mass movements to attain social and economic justice. ✱

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Polly Brown, teacher at Touchstone Community School, Grafton, Massachusetts, for inviting me into her classroom. I also want to acknowledge Mike Charney, teacher and activist in Cleveland, and Bill Bigelow, an editor of Rethinking Schools, for providing me with powerful models for doing role-plays in the classroom.

Sample Role Play Scripts

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (male)

JOB: Boss of Finest Automobile Company

INCOME: \$2,000,000 per year.

WHAT YOU WANT: In return for your \$10,000,000 contribution, you want the government to:

- Limit the number of foreign-made cars that can be sold in the U.S. to reduce the competition.
- Keep wages low for your workers to hold your costs down in order to increase your profits.
- Force your workers to pay more for their health insurance because health care costs for your workers are rapidly going up for you.
- Make weak or no environmental laws because strong ones would increase your operating costs.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the presidential candidate that if his platform is favorable to the things you want, you will give him a \$10,000,000 contribution to his campaign.

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (male)

JOB: Boss of Super Electronics Corporation

INCOME: \$2,000,000 per year.

WHAT YOU WANT: In return for your \$10,000,000 contribution, you want the government to:

- Limit the amount of foreign electronic products that can be sold here to reduce the competition.
- Keep wages low for your workers to hold your costs down in order to increase your profits.
- Help make your workers pay more for their health insurance because health care costs for your workers are rapidly going up for you.
- Push for weak or no environmental laws because strong ones would increase your operating costs.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the presidential candidate that if his platform is favorable to the things you want, you will give him a \$10,000,000 contribution to his campaign.

Doctor at a community health center

INCOME: \$150,000 per year.

WHAT YOU WANT: In return for your \$1,000 contribution, you want the government to:

- Build new hospitals.
- Pay for health costs for more patients.
- Help poor people make more money so they can stay healthy.
- Make strong laws to make, and keep, the environment clean so that people don't get sick.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you want to talk to the presidential candidate. Tell them you will contribute to the campaign by paying \$1,000 so you can have dinner with the candidate and shake his hand.

Lawyer

INCOME: \$150,000 per year.

WHAT YOU WANT: In return for your \$1,000 contribution, you want the government to:

- Pay for new courthouses.
- Pay legal costs for poor people.
- Build better prisons.
- Protect the environment.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers what you want to talk to the presidential candidate. Tell him you will contribute to the campaign by paying \$1,000 so you can have dinner with the candidate and shake his hand.

Teacher

INCOME: \$35,000 a year.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Pay more money for education—for better schools, books and materials.
- Protect the environment.
- Help poor people to have better jobs so they can have better housing, food and neighborhoods.
- Pay for health care for all people.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you wish to talk to the presidential candidate about what you want.

Owner of a small computer store

INCOME: \$50,000 a year.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Give more loans to small businesses.
- Protect the environment.
- Pay for health care for all people.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you wish to talk to the presidential candidate about what you want.

Factory Worker in a garment factory

INCOME: \$17,000 a year.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Increase the wages.
- Pay for health care.
- Improve the schools in your community so your children can get a good education.
- Encourage the companies to increase their benefits, like paid time off to be with your family when they are sick.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you want to talk to the presidential candidate. If they won't let you, go to the side of the room marked "factory" and wave to the candidate.

Factory Worker in an automobile factory

INCOME: \$30,000 a year.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Increase the wages.
- Pay for health care.
- Improve the schools in your community so your children can get a good education.
- Encourage the companies to increase their benefits, like paid time off to be with your family when they are sick.
- Stop clean air laws, because they might cause your company to lose money, and cause you to be laid off.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you want to talk to the presidential candidate. If they won't let you, go to the side of the room marked "factory" and wave to the candidate.

Farmer

INCOME: \$20,000 a year.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Give you loans.
- Get cheap gas to enable you to run your farm equipment.
- Pay for health care.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you want to talk to the presidential candidate. If they won't let you, move to place in the room labeled "farm" and read about the campaign in their newspaper.

Unemployed Person

INCOME: \$7,000 you receive from unemployment compensation.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Create more jobs so you can work.
- Give more money for Food Stamps to help you buy food.
- Pay for health care.
- Provide better services, like public transportation, schools, housing.

WHAT YOU DO: Tell the Campaign Managers you want to talk to the presidential candidate. If they won't let you, start chanting: "We want a job! We want a job!" Then go line up at the Employment Office to collect your Unemployment Compensation.

Presidential Candidate (boy)

WHAT YOU WANT: \$20,000,000 (20 million) to pay for your campaign costs.

WHAT YOU DO: Wait until your Campaign Managers tell you who has appointments to see you. When the doctor and lawyer are introduced to you, quickly shake their hands, smile, thank them for their small donation, and walk away. When the CEO of Finest Automobile Company and the CEO of Acme Electronics Company come to see you, have them sit down and be nice to them. Agree to put what they want on your platform so you can get the money they are offering to contribute to your campaign.

Homeless Person

You are a war veteran, unemployed for many years due to disabilities as the result of war injuries.

INCOME: None; you must share \$500 the local charity gave to you and the other homeless persons.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Provide a clean and safe place to live.
- Provide rehabilitation treatment, and job training.
- Create well-paying jobs that will hire people with disabilities.
- Pay for health care.
- Make laws for a cleaner environment.

WHAT YOU DO: Go to the Campaign Managers and tell them you need a place to sleep. When you are thrown out, get into an argument with the other homeless persons about who gets the \$500 given by the charity. Then walk around the room looking for the place marked “park bench.”

Homeless Person

You are a homeless mother of two small children. You’ve been unemployed for several months since the sewing factory closed when the company decided to move it to a foreign country so they can pay the workers less money than they were paying you.

INCOME: None; you must share \$500 the local charity gave to you and the other homeless persons.

WHAT YOU WANT: You want the government to:

- Provide a clean and safe place for you and your children to live.
- Pay for you to enroll in a job-training program.
- Create well-paying jobs that match your training.
- Pay for health care and day care.
- Make laws for a cleaner environment.

WHAT YOU DO: Go up to the Campaign Managers and tell them you need a place to sleep. When you are thrown out, get into an argument with the other homeless persons about who gets the \$500 given by the charity. Then walk around the room looking for the place marked “park bench.”

Campaign Manager

Your job is to do everything possible to get your candidate elected.

- Tell the homeless people the candidate is concerned about their needs, but they can’t stay near the candidate. Escort them to the side of the room.
- Tell the unemployed people the candidate cares about them, but he is not available. Escort them to the side of the room.
- Tell the farmers the candidate thinks farmers are important and are doing a great job, but he is too busy to see them now. Give them a newspaper to read about the candidate.
- Tell the factory workers the candidate is not available at the moment—he’s at an important meeting.
- Tell the candidate to wave to the farmers.
- Tell the candidate he should make a speech at a factory next week.
- Tell the teacher and small business owner that the candidate is very busy, but they may talk to him for just one minute. Give them a few minutes to tell him what they want; interrupt them before they are finished and tell them their time is up.
- Tell the Doctor and Lawyer that they may sit down at the dinner, but don’t let them sit too close to the candidate. Let them shake hands with him but quickly take them to their seats.
- Nicely invite the CEOs to sit down and make themselves comfortable. Tell them to spend as much time as they like with the candidate. Offer them something to drink and eat. Be really nice to them.