

## MEDIA MOMENT MINI: Midterm Elections

**Time Needed:** 1 Class Period

**Lesson Objectives:** The student will be able to...

**Materials:**

- Student worksheets
- Student internet access -OR- a classroom computer and projector with internet access

- Define midterm elections
- Describe the impact midterm elections have on the executive and legislative branch
- Identify horse race journalism
- Explain how horse race journalism can affect the public

**Handouts:**

- Reading (2 pages; class set)
- Activity (1 page; class set)

**For more on elections, visit iCivics' Politics and Public Policy unit.**

### Step by Step

- ANTICIPATE** by asking students what they would like, or need, to know about the candidates before a midterm election. Record students responses on the board for later.
- DISTRIBUTE** the reading to the class. Read Side A with the class, pausing to discuss. Alternatively, have students read in groups or independently.
- CHECK** for understanding by asking: When do midterm elections occur? Why are midterm elections significant? Why does the president want his or her political party to become or remain the majority party in Congress during a midterm election? Why is a midterm election referred to as "referendum on the presidency"? How can a midterm election create balance?
- TRANSITION** to Side B. Tell students that Side B will teach them about horse race journalism.
- READ** Side B with the class, pausing to discuss. After reading, ask students to consider whether horse race journalism provides information voters need to know. Refer students back to the list of responses you recorded at the start of the lesson.

**NEWS LITERACY ACTIVITY** (INDIVIDUAL OR WHOLE CLASS)

- DISTRIBUTE** The Great Race activity page to the class. The activity features a real news example from *Politico*\* (<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/23/don-blankenship-west-virginia-senate-primary-546410>).
- ASSIGN** students to complete the activity independently or in pairs. Alternatively, complete the activity with the whole class using a class computer and projector or interactive whiteboard.
- CLOSE** by asking students to brainstorm resources they can use to find the information they'd like to know about the candidates running in a midterm election. Refer students back to the responses you recorded at the start of the lesson.

*\*Optional Extensions:* Consider having students investigate the news provider's media bias rating (left-center, lean left) using a source like AllSides.com. Encourage students to find news sources across the political spectrum to compare how the event's coverage may have differed. For more on media bias, visit iCivics' News Literacy unit.

Assign students to watch for current events that will impact or may be impacted by the midterm election (i.e. Supreme Court nominations, legislation, etc.). Discuss how these events may be affected by the midterm.

To teach students how to research and evaluate candidates before an election, use this lesson in conjunction with iCivics' *Candidate Evaluation* and *Candidate Report Card* lessons.



**Midterm elections** are non-presidential elections. They happen exactly two years after a presidential election (like 2018 and 2022), and they’re a big deal for Congress. During midterms, every seat in the House of Representatives and one third of the seats in the Senate are open. Because midterms happen smack dab in the middle of a president’s term, they have the potential to impact legislative and executive agendas.

**Power Struggle**

Midterm elections are all about control—of the House and the Senate anyway. When you’re a Representative or a Senator trying to get things done, it’s beneficial to be surrounded by colleagues from your own political party. You all will want to accomplish similar goals. And usually you’ll agree about the best approach for accomplishing them. That’s not to say you won’t have differences, but people of the same political party tend to share a set of common government values and ideals that make writing, negotiating, and passing legislation easier.



*People of the same political party tend to share a common set of government values and ideals.*

The political party in control of either chamber of Congress is called the **majority party**. Democrats and Republicans hope to make, or keep, their party the majority during a midterm election. But midterms aren’t just about the legislative branch. The person heading the executive branch matters, too. The president can’t write or pass laws; Congress does that. And Congress can’t just turn bills into laws; the president has to sign (or veto) them first. Presidents often find it easier to get legislation passed that aligns with their agenda when working with a Congress controlled by their own political party. Likewise, Congress doesn’t fear the president’s veto power when the majority party is the same as the president’s.

In 1993 and 1994, Congress and the White House were both controlled by the Democratic party. That period saw 370 bills signed into law. No bills were vetoed by then President Bill Clinton. During the 1994 midterm election, however, the Republican party regained control of the legislative branch. President Clinton vetoed 17 bills from 1995-1996, including Republican spending and tax cuts. Only 311 bills were signed into law, and the government shut down twice because the President and Congress could not agree on a budget.

**Finding Balance**

Even though midterms are congressional elections, the president has a lot to do with their outcome. That’s why midterm elections are called a “referendum” (or vote) on the presidency. By the time midterms come along, the American people have been closely following the news coverage of the president’s every move. And if enough people don’t believe the Commander in Chief is doing a satisfactory job, they show it during the midterms by voting members of the president’s political party out. Legislators from the president’s party are more likely to gain seats during a presidential election year and more likely to lose them during a midterm. That’s exactly what happened in 1994. For the first time in 40 years, Republicans gained control of both the House and the Senate.



Midterms can have striking effects in the Capitol. While a government divided—one political party in control of one or both congressional houses and the other party controlling the White House—can pose challenges, it can also even the scales. The legislative and executive branches check and balance one another. And that means compromising across party lines becomes a greater priority for everyone involved when different parties are in control.

## Horse Race Journalism

On your mark. Get set. Go! Those probably aren't the words you'd expect to hear in a lesson about journalism. But during election season, it's pretty common for media providers to get caught up in the race. **Horse race journalism** is a term used to describe news coverage that focuses most of its attention on which candidates are winning (and losing) the race—hence the name. In this type of media coverage, you hear less about candidates' actual platforms and policies and more about their potential to come out as a winner.

### Following the Race

If your news provider is focusing on the "horse race", they're reporting frequent updates that let you know where the candidates stand in the election. You might hear or read statements like:

- Candidate A showing a *strong lead* among voters according to...
- The latest survey is predicting a *tightening race* between...
- Among young voters Candidate B is *gaining ground*...
- Candidate C is *trailing just behind*...

And on election night, you'll see round the clock coverage highlighting states and districts showing you which candidate has the most votes at any given moment and where. Sometimes news broadcasts will even "call the election" by projecting the winner before all the votes have been counted.

Depending on the election, the media might start reporting about potential candidates' likeliness to win a race very early on. Wondering where the media gets all their stats? Results from primary elections and early voting give some insight into who the election front runners could be. But in most cases, they're using some sort of **poll**. A poll measures people's probability to do something or their opinion about a topic. In other words, a question might be framed in a way to ask *if* a voter will vote for a particular candidate or how they *feel* about him or her. The most reliable polls are conducted scientifically, have a slim chance of error, and are expertly analyzed before the media tells you about them. But even carefully conducted polls can predict wrong.

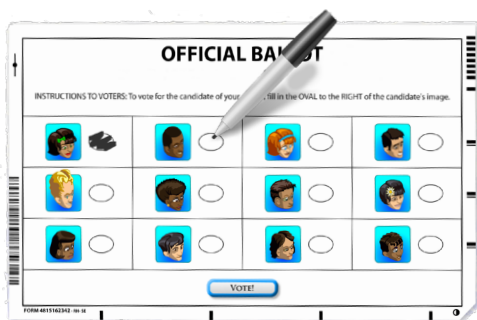
**NEWS SKILLS AT WORK**

If the headline sounds like a sports announcer wrote it, you're probably reading or watching horse race journalism. Other words like "fighting", "battle", "heavy favorite", "front-runner", "edge", or "final stretch" are good indicators that you're following the race.

### A Major Impact

Presidential campaigns tend to receive a lot more news coverage than midterm and especially local elections. No matter the election, it's important for voters (and you, a future voter!) to pay attention to how the media is covering it. Are you learning about the candidates' platforms or are you just getting stats? Do you seem to only hear about the candidate that's in the lead? Is the coverage influencing you? Probably. As media consumers, we tend to think most about what's right in front of us—on our TV screens, the internet, our news feeds, the newspaper. If only a few candidates are getting coverage or if one candidate is getting far more coverage than the others, who do you think Americans will be

talking about most? Coverage about a candidate's lead certainly isn't negative news. It's positive or neutral at best, and that influences our thoughts, too. It can be helpful to know where the candidate of your choice stands in the race. But if you're noticing that the news is focusing more on the race and less on what the who involved in the race stands for, then you'll want to turn to other sources that can better inform you of the issues. Realizing the media's influence on your decision as a voter can help you make an independent and informed decision at the polls.



**A. The Great Race.** Read the excerpt from the news article below. The article was originally published on Politico.com. Consider the influence media coverage can have in shaping voter’s opinions by answering the questions that follow.

# POLITICO

## **Poll: Coal baron Blankenship fading in W.Va. Senate primary**

The formerly imprisoned GOP candidate has been attacked heavily by groups aligned with Washington Republicans.

By: Alex Isenstad | 04/23/2018 07:26 PM EDT | Updated 04/23/2018 08:50 PM EDT

WHEELING, W.Va. — A new poll out Monday evening shows recently imprisoned coal baron and Senate hopeful Don Blankenship fading in the Republican primary, amid an avalanche of establishment attacks aimed at stopping him from winning the nomination.

With the primary two weeks away, the survey shows Blankenship, who spent a year in jail following the deadly 2010 explosion at his Upper Big Branch Mine, falling far behind his more mainstream rivals, GOP Rep. Evan Jenkins and state Attorney General Patrick Morrisey. The poll found Morrisey leading with 24 percent, followed by Jenkins with 20 percent, and Blankenship trailing with 12 percent. Thirty-nine percent were undecided.

The survey, which was conducted April 17-19 and has a margin of error of 4.9 percentage points, came as Blankenship squared off against his rivals in a 90-minute debate held at Wheeling Jesuit University. The candidates spent much of the evening aligning themselves with President Donald Trump, and beating up on Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin.

They will also meet on Tuesday, and again next week for a nationally televised debate hosted by Fox News. [...]

1. What words from the article help you follow the race? Circle them.
2. Underline details that tell you about candidate Don Blakenship.
3. How much did the article tell you about the candidates’ political beliefs, positions on the issues, or leadership skills and qualifications?

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4. How might this article influence a voter? \_\_\_\_\_

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