



Elementary Election History

Lesson Name: Why Re-elect the Incumbent?

Time Allotted: Series of 2 20-30 Minute Lessons

Critical Question:

What factors often cause voters to re-elect incumbent candidates?

Assessment of Mastery of Objectives:

Students will determine the pros and cons of electing incumbent candidates.

Students will identify, discuss and explain political and social factors that lead to incumbencies.

Question or Problem for Students:

What is an incumbent candidate?

What are some reasons voters choose to re-elect the incumbents?

When might an incumbent lose re-election?

Special Directions for Cooperative Grouping:

Session 1: Students will chart reasons for and against re-electing an incumbent candidate.

- Students should read provided explanation of incumbency and the advantages and disadvantages associated with incumbent candidates
- Students may also want to look at information pertaining to specific incumbent and non-incumbent candidates at the local, state or national level
- Use given information to complete the graphic organizer to describe reasons for and against re-electing incumbent candidates. Encourage students to think of real-life examples or reasonable hypotheticals to illustrate each point they make.

Session 2: Students will return to their graphic organizer and use the information to write a persuasive letter to a voter. The student will choose a position for or against re-electing incumbent candidates and will support their position using information gathered from readings in previous lesson session. Children should not necessarily endorse one specific candidate in their letter. Rather, students should be discussing the pros and cons surrounding incumbency and re-election of those candidates in general.

Resources for Groups:

Graphic organizer to compare pros and cons of incumbency (attached)

One page description of incumbency (attached)

BrainPop, Time for Kids and Scholastic News all have extensive sections of their sites that explain different aspects of the election. Information on how candidates are voted into office or how a candidate runs for office can be used to provide additional background or build knowledge before incumbency is discussed with students. They also provide information about national candidates running for office. Much of the content is free, but some does require a subscription to access.

Background for educators: http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/Renka/ps103/Spring2010/congressional_incumbency.htm

Why Vote for the Incumbent?

Use the chart below to keep track of reasons why voters would or would not want to re-elect incumbent candidates. Try to think of real life examples that could support each of the reasons for or against voting for an incumbent.

Reasons FOR Re-electing an Incumbent Candidate		Reasons AGAINST Re-electing an Incumbent Candidate	
Reason	Example	Reason	Example

The Concept of Incumbency

Incumbent:

1. the official who holds and office
2. currently holding an office; “the incumbent governor”

Similar words: “office holder”

<http://dictionary.kids.net.au/word/incumbent>

What’s an Incumbent?

In politics “incumbent” is the word that describes the existing holder of a political office. This term is usually used when talking about political elections, because many political races are between an **incumbent and non-incumbent(s)**.

For example, in the current 2012 United States presidential election, **Barack Obama** is the incumbent because he is our president for this term right now, while the election is going on. The current election will decide who will be president for the next four years, which is the following term. The Republican candidate **Mitt Romney** is a non-incumbent candidate for this election, since he does not hold the office of president.

In an election, there can be more than one non-incumbent running against the incumbent. In this presidential race, Libertarian candidate Governor Gary Johnson is a non-incumbent opponent, along with many other independent candidates. While there can be **many** non-incumbents running for office, important to remember that in the presidential election there is only **one** incumbent, President Barack Obama.

A race without an incumbent is referred to as an **open seat**.

What are the advantages of being an incumbent?

There are some advantages of being an incumbent in a political race. Here are a few:

1. Name recognition—the candidate is already known in the political spectrum
2. \$\$ Campaign funding is easier
3. They have safe seats because of their experience

What are the advantages of being a non-incumbent?

1. They have a fresh face in politics
2. They are not considered to be a “political insider”