



LESSON PLAN

Media Literacy for Elections

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine a case study about how corporate donations to American political campaigns influence elections. Students will use film clips from the documentary *Dark Money* to learn how donations where the donor is undisclosed are used to finance political campaigns and how investigative journalism revealed the harm of this type of political spending in Montana. Students will increase their critical media analysis skills, their knowledge of campaign finance and their understanding of why an informed citizenry is necessary to a strong democracy. Students will apply what they learn to an election in their own community and gain a deeper understanding of how campaigns are funded and how money may influence elected representatives in local, state or federal office.

Note to Educators: *Dark Money* is an accessible yet complex story of campaign finance and corruption that touches on many critical issues, from the First Amendment to the Citizens United decision. This lesson focuses on strengthening media literacy to increase understanding of free and fair elections. See the Extensions/Adaptations section for resources related to other key issues raised by the film.

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

- Define “dark money” and identify its impact on elections
- Analyze how media is used in the service of dark money-funded campaigns and how it was used in the film to shine a spotlight on them
- Practice critical media literacy skills in analyzing election materials and news coverage of them
- Investigate candidate funding in an upcoming election in their community and write letters to the local candidates expressing their support and/or concerns.

GRADE LEVELS: 10–12

SUBJECT AREAS

Civics, History, Social Studies, ELA, Speech and Debate

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to watch film clips from *Dark Money*
- Access to the Internet and/or local newspapers to analyze current and past campaign materials (physical mailers, digital and print advertisements)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

Two class periods plus time for any extension activities and homework

FILM CLIPS

Film clips provided in this lesson are from *Dark Money*. Access the streaming clips for free on POV’s website by visiting www.pbs.org/pov/educators. Borrow the full film from our DVD Lending Library by joining the [POV Community Network](#).

Clip 1: Dark Money and Elections (7:22 min)

This clip offers an overview of Montana's citizen legislature and the basics of dark money. It begins at 2:50 and ends at 10:12 with FEC commissioner Ann Ravel saying, "Campaign finance is at the heart of all the policy decisions being made."

Clip 2: Free Press Threatened in Montana (6:51 min)

Investigative journalist John S. Adams launches the independent and nonprofit *Montana Free Press* when the state political bureau of the Great Falls Tribune closes and he loses his job. This clip starts at 58:04 with someone saying, "It really was a cool place to work." It ends at 1:04:55 with someone saying, "I've raised enough money this week to cover the reporting I put in."

Clip 3: Montana Legislator Found Guilty of Campaign Finance Violation (7:39 min)

An overview of the trial of state representative Art Wittich for campaign finance violations, this clip starts at 1:11:20 with trial testimony from Sarah Arnold, who was employed by American Tradition Partnership. The clip covers her testimony regarding services coordinated with Wittich and why they were illegal. It ends at 1:18:59 with the sentencing of Wittich and someone saying, "One of the largest fines ever levied in a campaign violation case in Montana."

ACTIVITIES**Step 1:**

Come to a class consensus on the role and meaning of fair elections in a democracy, wherein people elect representatives to government to represent their interests and values.

Discuss:

- What influences representatives to vote certain ways after they are elected? Possible answers include money, constituents' interests and thoughts about re-election.
 - What is the connection between money and re-election?
- What is the danger of having elected officials who do not represent the interests of those who elect them?

Watch Clip 1. Then, as a class, discuss the following:

- In this clip, Llew Jones says, "Dark money is the advertising where you don't know who's paying for the ads." After watching the clip, how would you define dark money?
- How does the system of dark money campaigns threaten a fair election in Montana?
- How do critics of dark money think it might influence elections? How might dark money influence representatives after they are in office?

Step 2:

Conduct a Google image search for "campaign mailers" or "attack campaign mailers" to find copies of campaign mailers for students to analyze in groups. If there is an election currently happening in the students' community, consider asking them to collect and bring in campaign mailers they receive at home.

Teacher Note: Remind students the idea of this exercise is not to debate a specific policy or candidate mentioned in the ads, but rather to analyze the content of the ads and the way their arguments are presented.

Use a jigsaw model to break students into small groups and use the questions in Handout One

to analyze one or more campaign ads. Have students briefly present to one another what they determine about each piece and why.

Discuss as a large group:

- Was it clear who paid for the campaign ad? Was it from the campaign or from an “outside group” (aka third party group)?
- If a third party paid for the ad, what were you able to learn about this group? Were you able to determine where this group receives their funding?
- How does knowing that a third party paid for the ad influence how you feel about the message that it is communicating?
- In general, was it easy or challenging to find the information you wanted about the campaign ads?
- Do you suspect that any of the campaign mailers you analyzed were influenced by dark money? Why or why not?
- Were third party groups more likely to engage in negative attacks, instead of positive portrayals of a candidate or issue?

Step 3:

Before screening Clip 2, inform the class that in the course of the film, Montana’s largest two largest newspaper chains, covering almost all of the major cities, made the decision to close their Capitol Bureaus that cover the state legislature. A news program said of the layoffs, “Montana will lose more than just experienced journalists. It will also lose a great deal of its institutional memory.”

Watch Clip 2 and then pose this question: What do you think the filmmaker and the journalists in the film see as the role of a free press in a democracy?

On August 15, 2018, *The Boston Globe* [issued a call](https://apps.bostonglobe.com/opinion/graphics/2018/08/freepress/?p1=HP_special) to editorial boards in newspapers across the country to write editorials about the importance of a free press to a democracy. Hundreds of newspapers responded. Go to: https://apps.bostonglobe.com/opinion/graphics/2018/08/freepress/?p1=HP_special to access an editorial from your state, or have students do a close reading of the *New York Times* editorial, included in Handout Two.

In pairs or small groups, have students answer the following:

1. What is the editorial trying to convey?
2. What is the form of the piece? What do you know about editorial writing?
3. What tools do the authors use to make their points?
4. The Press is often referred to as “The Fourth Estate.” What are the other three?
5. What further questions arise from the text?

Have students consider what journalist John S. Adams and the authors of the editorial they read believe to be the role of a free media in a democracy and how the journalist and the editorial authors think a free media is related to the fight against dark money. Ask them to be prepared to answer whether or not they agree with those assessments.

Step 4:

Watch Clip 3.

Discuss:

- What did state senator Art Wittich do that was illegal? Why was it illegal? According to

- state or federal law — or both?
- How did he get caught?
- What needs to happen in order to prevent this kind of corruption? Who is responsible for ensuring adherence to disclosure laws in Montana? Knowing this, who is responsible in the students' state?

Assessment:

Have students select a recent local or federal election and follow these analysis steps:

1. Assign students to gather as much paid campaign information as they can find about each of the candidates, such as websites, social media memes, mailers and press releases. Using the questions in Handout One, ask students to assess each campaign piece for reliability.
2. Using FollowTheMoney.org or OpenSecrets.org, have students research the known campaign contributions to each candidate. Ask them to relate those contributions, where possible, to the mail, web, social media and other campaign advertisements they found. Given the contributions, in which topics or issues do they think the candidates are most interested in? Whose interests do they seem to represent?
3. Ask students to seek out press pieces on each candidate. Does the press coverage match the information in the mailers and on websites and other messages about the campaign supported with money from private donors? Does the press coverage mention campaign contributions and if so, do the figures provided match the records?
4. Using all of the information gathered, have each student write an editorial detailing the strengths of each candidate, and questions they would ask a candidate about their campaign, based on their investigation.
5. Consider sending the editorials to a local newspaper, to active campaigns for a response or to a local journalist for insight and comments.

EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS

Dark Money Primer: The website OpenSecrets.org provides a primer on [dark money](#), including the basic terms and processes through which dark money is funneled, and research tools to discover funding to candidates running for federal offices throughout the United States. Students can use the tools available at this website to explore the individuals, corporations and political action committees (PACs) giving to major campaigns in their states.

Explore Montana's History of Corporate Corruption: Using this June 3, 2012 [New York Times editorial](#) by then-Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer on Montana's history of corporate corruption, learn why the state passed the Corrupt Practices Act of 1912. Students can research "copper king" William A. Clark and how his actions inspired the need for the Act and connect that history to Montana's current leadership in fighting corporate contributions to campaigns. See Tester's co-sponsorship of the Federal DISCLOSE Act, Bullock's suing of the IRS over Mnuchin's recent IRS rule change removing donor disclosure and Tester's sponsorship of Federal legislation regarding that rule change.

Understanding Campaign Finance: Use the *PBS NewsHour* [Understanding Campaign Finance Law](#) lesson plan to explore campaign finance and how it was influenced by the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision.

RESOURCES

This is a list of organizations, websites, articles and other resources that may be helpful to teachers in developing the lesson, or for students as they are researching.

POV: *Dark Money*

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/darkmoney/>

The film's official **POV** site includes a trailer, additional information about the film and other resources, including instructions for borrowing the DVD from the POV Lending Library.

Dark Money

<https://www.darkmoneyfilm.com/>

The film's official website provides information on the film, including press coverage and information about the film's subjects.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php>

This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

National Institute on Money in Politics

followthemoney.org – Offers a variety of tools (searchable by state and district) that track spending by lobbyists, independent contributors, and more. Also features additional civics lesson plans, available at <https://www.followthemoney.org/resources/civics-lessons>.

Center for Responsive Politics

opensecrets.org – This independent nonprofit provides data and analysis related to tracking money in U.S. politics and its influence on elections and public policy.

ProPublica

<https://www.propublica.org/> – This independent, nonprofit newsroom regularly publishes original reporting around dark money, including their [FEC Itemizer](#), which can be used to browse electronic campaign finance filings. Data for the FEC Itemizer is courtesy of Issue One, a nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization focused on political reform and government ethics.

U.S. Common Sense

uscommonsense.org/research/citizens-united/ - Overview of the *Citizens United* decision by a Stanford University project designed to help Americans understand their government. For details of the case's arguments, see law.cornell.edu/supct/cert/08-205.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

RH.11–12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

W.9—10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.11–12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

SL.11—12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11—12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

SL.11—12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

Content Knowledge: (<http://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blueshift is a team of education specialists with background in social impact work. The team recognizes and builds on the power of documentary film to reach broad audiences to spark energy for deep and lasting social change. The team works with filmmakers, photographers and writers to develop innovative educational strategies, experiences, tools and resources that bring stories off the screen and into viewers' lives.

Handout One Analyzing Campaign Mailers

Walk through these critical media literacy questions, adapted from the National Association for Media Literacy Education's [Key Questions to Ask When Analyzing Media Messages](#), to determine the following about campaign mailers:

With regard to the **Author(s)**:

1. Who wrote this piece?
2. What do you think they intend for the piece to accomplish?
3. Who paid for it? What do you know or can you find out about that group?
4. Who might benefit from this information and who might be harmed by it?
5. What actions do the authors want you to take? In what ways are your emotions being activated to encourage that action?
6. If you cannot determine who the author of the piece is, what is the effect of that anonymity?

With regard to the **Message and Meaning**:

1. What information does this convey? What information is missing?
2. At a glance, and based on your previous knowledge about the subject, is the information provided believable?
3. What tools of writing, language or images does the author use to convey their message?
4. How might this information be interpreted differently by different people?

With regard to **Representation and Reality**:

1. When was this information released? Why was it relevant at that time?
2. Is it presented as fact, opinion or something else? Do you agree with how it is presented?
3. Is this information trustworthy?
4. If this information is not trustworthy or misleading, what recourse is available?

Handout Two
The *New York Times* Editorial

“A Free Press Needs You”
August 15, 2018
Editorial Board, *The New York Times*

In 1787, the year the Constitution was born, Thomas Jefferson famously wrote to a friend, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

That’s how he felt before he became president, anyway. Twenty years later, after enduring the oversight of the press from inside the White House, he was less sure of its value. “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper,” he wrote. “Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.”

Jefferson’s discomfort was, and remains, understandable. Reporting the news in an open society is an enterprise laced with conflict. His discomfort also illustrates the need for the right he helped enshrine. As the founders believed from their own experience, a well-informed public is best equipped to root out corruption and, over the long haul, promote liberty and justice.

“Public discussion is a political duty,” the Supreme Court said in 1964. That discussion must be “uninhibited, robust, and wide-open,” and “may well include vehement, caustic and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials.”

In 2018, some of the most damaging attacks are coming from government officials. Criticizing the news media—for underplaying or overplaying stories, for getting something wrong—is entirely right. News reporters and editors are human, and make mistakes. Correcting them is core to our job. But insisting that truths you don’t like are “fake news” is dangerous to the lifeblood of democracy. And calling journalists the “enemy of the people” is dangerous, period.

These attacks on the press are particularly threatening to journalists in nations with a less secure rule of law and to smaller publications in the United States, already buffeted by the industry’s economic crisis. And yet the journalists at those papers continue to do the hard work of asking questions and telling the stories that you otherwise wouldn’t hear. Consider *The San Luis Obispo Tribune*, which wrote about the death of a jail inmate who was restrained for 46 hours. The account forced the county to change how it treats mentally ill prisoners.

Answering a call last week from *The Boston Globe*, *The Times* is joining hundreds of newspapers, from large metro-area dailies to small local weeklies, to remind readers of the value of America’s free press. These editorials, some of which we’ve excerpted, together affirm a fundamental American institution.

If you haven’t already, please subscribe to your local papers. Praise them when you think they’ve done a good job and criticize them when you think they could do better. We’re all in this together.