Evaluating Online Information

Lesson Topic: Voter Fraud
Class: AP U.S. Government & Politics and an on-level government course (elective)
Age Group: 11-12 grade

Part 1: Curated Digital Media Resources

Preface: I use AllSides.org as my go-to source to address the political bias of news sources. In front of the room, I printed logos of well-known news organizations and placed them on a color-coded political spectrum to represent left, left of center, center, right of center, and right. Thus, students are well aware of the political bias of most sources and think about the bias of an article, video clip, or audio clip. Additionally, whenever I use an outside source, I try to label the political bias, especially when the source may not be well-known.

Source 1: “Trump wins Florida, Biden flips Arizona as many battleground states still up for grabs” USA Today, November 4, 2020 (Political Bias - Center)

Source Type: News article (National Newspaper)

How was the media located? I intentionally looked for an article that mentioned voter fraud after the election on a website considered in the middle of the political spectrum. Through AllSides.org, I found this article and two others from different sources to cover the left of center, center, and right of center biases. AllSides.org focuses on “balanced news coverage, media bias ratings, [and] civil dialogue.” The CEO, John Gabel, has a background in technology and politics and gives himself a “right of center” bias.
ranking. The AllSides staff members also provide a ranking for themselves, which adds to their transparency. The website has a dedicated section on the website's biases, funding, and partners. They've received funding from megadonors on both sides of the aisle, including Tom Steyer and the Koch Brothers.

Strategies to Assess Accuracy and Credibility: USA Today is part of the Gannett network of newspapers and is a well-respected national newspaper. The journalists are in the byline with links to other work they've done before and after the published article. In conversation with the other two items listed (below), it is factually consistent with other reports.

Source 2: “Trump claims victory with many states undeclared, hints at possible Supreme Court case” Fox News, November 4, 2020 (Political Bias - Right of Center)

Source Type: News article (Cable News)

How was the media located? The article was matched with the USA Today article and the Washington Post article on AllSides.org and represented the right of center political bias.

Strategies to Assess Accuracy and Credibility: Fox News is a cable news network that reports the news and shares opinions through various talk show personalities. AllSides assigns the news reporting as the right of center bias and opinion pieces as right. The byline provides the name of the reporter, Brooke Singman, and a link to other stories written by her on the website. While the headline reads differently from the other articles used together for this lesson plan, the article's facts are similar to other reports from other news organizations, including USA Today and the Washington Post.
**Source 3:** “Trump falsely asserts election fraud, claims a victory” Washington Post, November 4, 2020
(Political Bias - Left of Center)

**Source Type:** News article (Local Newspaper - DC Metropolitan Area)

How was the media located? This article was included in the headline roundup provided by AllSides. It was linked together with the USA Today and Fox News articles.

Strategies to Assess Accuracy and Credibility:
Washington Post is a trusted news source, classified as a large local newspaper, primarily focusing on the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The Washington Post is classified as a left of center political bias for news reporting, but op-eds tend to move further to the left. Like the other articles, the story has a detailed byline that lists the reporters who gathered information to write the story. Each author is linked to other work they’ve produced before and after their election coverage.

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**Source 4:** The Heritage Foundation's Election Fraud Database, The Heritage Foundation (Political Bias - Right of Center)

**Source Type:** Online Database

How was the media located: I located through a Google Search for a voter fraud database. I was specifically looking for a conservative-friendly organization to balance the other sources I made available to students. This database provides evidence of voter fraud across the country. According to the website, cases documented, “...represents an instance in which a public official, usually a prosecutor, thought it serious enough to act upon it.”

Strategies to Assess Accuracy and Credibility: The Heritage Foundation's website states its mission as “to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.” According to Google, it is a conservative think tank out of Washington, D.C., and focuses on public
policy. Most notably, its research was used during the Reagan administration and has been influential in presidential administrations since then, whether it supports Republican administrations’ policies or serving as a watchdog for Democratic administrations. For each case of election fraud documented in the database, a source is cited. The sources go back to government websites, such as the Arizona Attorney General, or multiple news reports from various sources.

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**Source 5:** The Myth of Voter Fraud (Project), Brennan Center for Justice (Political Bias - Left of Center)

**Source Type:** Website

**How was the media located:** The Brennan Center for Justice’s voter fraud studies were brought up in two additional sources, a clip from the Stephen Colbert Show (2012, satire) and the Netflix documentary, Whose Vote Counts, Explained, both of which was shown in class to my students. It also classifies as a left-leaning resource. It includes updated news, public policy solutions, and resources.

Strategies to Assess Accuracy and Credibility: The Brennan Center for Justice self-described “nonpartisan law and policy institute” that strives to “uphold the values of democracy” and “stand for equal justice and the rule of law.” According to Influence Watch, it was created to put in the values of Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, a left-leaning justice. It is a think-tank that is located in New York City. While it does call itself non-partisan, it has liberal financing, including the Carnegie Corporation, and the executive director was a former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton. In terms of credibility, the website lists experts and staff members working on this specific project. Many of them have backgrounds in constitutional and civil rights law.

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**Source 6:** Whose Vote Counts, Explained, Netflix, produced by Vox (2020) (Political Bias - Left)

**Source Type:** Documentary
How was the media located: This three-episode documentary series came up within my personal Netflix feed. I watched it on my own time and decided, while produced by Vox, it represents different perspectives and includes historical background about voting. I used it to introduce the concept of voting rights and voter fraud to my students.

Strategies to Assess Accuracy and Credibility: According to AllSides, Vox is on the left side of the political bias spectrum. While this does present another liberal source to the conversation, it does give a voice to both Democrats and Republicans, in addition to historians and voting rights advocates, all of whom are well-respected in their respective fields. When providing factual information, like the rate of voter fraud, the documentary cites their sources (such as the Brennan Center for Justice). The documentary also uses clips from reputable news organizations to tell different parts of the story. While these news sources have their individual biases, they come together to create a message from diverse sources.

According to Wikipedia, Vox is left-of-center and progressive and was founded by Ezra Klein (formerly of the Washington Post), Matt Yglesias (formerly of Slate, and Melissa Bell (also once from Slate).

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**Part 2: Lesson Plan**

**Title:** Does voter fraud exist?

**Class/Subject:** Government (Elective)

**Age Group:** 11th & 12th Grades

**Time:** 45 - 60 minutes (with optional extension activity)

**Essential Question:** Is voter fraud a significant issue within the American democracy?

**Objectives:**

Students will...

...analyze headlines and determine the political bias of sources.
...research voter fraud and assess online sources.
...defend a position using a claim, evidence, and reasoning

**Relevant Standards:**
ISTE: Knowledge Constructor 3a -- Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits.
ISTE: Knowledge Constructor 3d -- Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories, and pursuing answers and solutions.
Wisconsin State Standards: SS.PS3.a.h -- Create and evaluate solutions to increase voter participation.

**Background Knowledge:** Students should have an understanding of voting requirements and a background in voter participation. Either independently or as a class, students can watch the Netflix (Vox) episode, "Whose Vote Counts, Explained," and fill out the viewing guide to prepare them for the lesson. However, this is an optional activity.

**Procedure:**
1.) Warmup Activity: Headline Analysis (4-5 minutes)
   a.) Give students the three headlines (included below) without providing the source or political bias of the source. Have students analyze the difference between the headlines and note the potential political bias of each.
   b.) Students should ask themselves, "What does this reveal about the author's biases or purpose?" Students should be recalling previous lessons on extreme and/or absolute language. *(Reading Non-Fiction, Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst, pgs. 136-147)*
      i.) When you're reading and you notice the author uses language that leaves no doubt, exaggerates, or pushes to the limit, you should stop and ask yourself, “Why did the author say it like that?”
      ii.) The answers will tell you something about the author's point of view and purpose. Or, you might realize the author is exaggerating to make you think a certain way.
   c.) The formative assessment of learning will be through discussion. The discussion questions can include, What specific language makes you think the source leans a specific way? What are the biggest differences between the headlines? What are the biggest differences? Can we trust the information provided? Why or why not?
2.) Background Information: Have students read one of the following articles for background information. (15 minutes)
   a.) After or while reading the background information, they should fill out a Google Form or Google Doc with the following information:
b.) Articles:
   i.) “Trump falsely asserts election fraud, claims a victory” Washington Post, November 4, 2020 (Political Bias - Left of Center)
   ii.) “Trump claims victory with many states undeclared, hints at possible Supreme Court case” Fox News, November 4, 2020 (Political Bias - Right of Center)
   iii.) “Trump wins Florida, Biden flips Arizona as many battleground states still up for grabs” USA Today, November 4, 2020 (Political Bias - Center)

   Students are recalling from a previous lesson, highlighting NewseumEd’s “E.S.C.A.P.E. Junk News” from the very beginning of the semester. The essential question is, “Based on the quick evaluation of the news article, do you think this information is reliable?” Students have a copy of the E.S.C.A.P.E. acronym from the beginning of the year.
   i.) E = Evidence -- Do the facts hold up?
   ii.) S = Source -- Who made this and can I trust them?
   iii.) C = Context -- What's the big picture?
   iv.) A = Audience -- Who is the intended audience?
   v.) P = Purpose -- Why was this made?
   vi.) E = Execution -- How is this information presented?

   Students will use the Google Form to relay information about their source using the E.S.C.A.P.E questions. Ultimately, they will have to decide whether or not the information is reliable.

   e.) Have one volunteer for each story share their summary. Possible discussion questions:
   What were the differences between the two articles? What were the similarities? What facts can we pull from each article that are the same? Can we trust articles that are written so close to an event? Where might we go to find other information?

3.) Research Activity: Make the statement (or a version of the statement), “Voter fraud is not a major issue in the United States.” Depending on your statement and where you are located, this may attract some students’ reactions (which is the point). The statement should be written somewhere -- either on the board in the front of the room or on the assignment page within the learning management system. The goal of the assignment is for students to provide evidence either proving or disproving the statement. Let students know that this is what historians and
political scientists do -- they use evidence to prove or disprove something. Provide students with three sources to start their research. The sources should be from multiple perspectives. Students are welcome to find other sources, but they must be from sources classified as left of center, center, or right of center. (via AllSides.org) The response should be a solid paragraph, approximately 7-9 sentences. Three sources provided may include:

a.) The Myth of Voter Fraud (Project), Brennan Center for Justice (Political Bias - Left of Center)
b.) The Heritage Foundation's Election Fraud Database, The Heritage Foundation (Political Bias - Right of Center)
c.) “US election 2020: Do postal ballots lead to voting fraud?”, BBC News (Political Bias - Center)

4.) Students should continue to use the E.S.C.A.P.E acronym to assess the sources provided and any additional sources they may find. Students will be assessed by the instructor to see if their information is reliable. Instructors should go around the (Zoom) room and ask students a selection of the questions from the E.S.C.A.P.E acronym to assess student learning. This will hopefully catch any extreme sources that may not be counted with the assessment.

5.) Assessment: Students should write a response to the statement using their research. Students should make a claim, provide evidence, and give reasoning. Students must cite their sources (informally) and appropriately use the source within their response to receiving full credit. If outside sources are from far ends of the political spectrum, they will not be counted.

Possible Extension Activity:
1.) Combine this activity with another mini-research project on voter identification laws. Because voter ID laws are used to combat voter fraud, it could force students to critically think about the issue, as well as the potential effect on voter participation.

Part 3: Student Work Samples

T.D. -- 12th Grade
In America, voter fraud is not a problem. Voter fraud exists, just at such a small scale that it goes almost unnoticed. On the voter fraud map found on Heritage Foundation, Wisconsin had only two cases of voter fraud in 2016 which was the last presidential election. On the same website, you can see that in the 2016 election, there were only 62 fraudulent votes nationwide which are fewer votes than any marginal win by either candidate during the 2016 election. On the other side of the opinion I have, there
are sources like BBC that have listed many cases in the 2020 election that have resulted in a suspicion that voter fraud is happening on a much larger scale than normal. I believe that there is more suspicion because of the situation with corona and the mail-in ballot system that is in place. Although I am not completely disregarding the votes that have been proven to have been taken away or added due to voter fraud, I just think that the number is very insignificant compared to the margins that a candidate typically wins the state by. I also believe that even though voter fraud is not that big of an issue, I believe that if we do not have a system of preventing voter fraud in place, it can become a major issue in future elections.

A.K. -- 11th Grade

Every human can understand that voter fraud does exist, yet we take it to the next level of is this a massive effect on our country. Some of us only take the easy information such as a simple tweet or statement and take it as evidence, but what they fail to recognize is talk can be a bunch of lies or unprovable sources. I overall believe while voter fraud exists it is not a major problem for the United States, and here are a few reasons why. First off, taking a look at the source BBC news, when reading I had seen within each state our current president, Donald Trump, made remarks of false applications. As seen in Ohio he had tweeted "In Ohio, 50,000 ballots were wrong, fraudulent, 50,000." Though understanding voter fraud wouldn't make an impact in the overall election, where is the proof of these people? Where can we track down the 50,000 people who had lied in this vote? These false statements towards the American citizens about lying in their votes seem to put more unnecessary news out there. As a result, it only worries the people and makes them believe in things that have no proof. In order to understand that voter fraud is truly happening, the people need evidence, such as identification of who did it. Something like this shouldn't be falsely dragged into our country when overall it isn't affecting the election. Next, on the website Brennan Center, they share about voter fraud, and one quote that stuck out states "Numerous other studies, including one commissioned by the Trump administration, have reached the same conclusion." Which the conclusion was fraud turns out to be, in their words, "baseless." In the end, voter fraud is going to be brought up during election time yet it's us as the people to not let it destroy us.