



Teaching the Unit

Unit 16: The New Hampshire Primary

Unit Summary

In the “New Hampshire Primary” unit, students explore civics concepts as well as the history of the New Hampshire primary, its significance, and its traditions. Every four years the nation turns its attention to New Hampshire’s presidential primary. This small New England state plays a significant role in selecting a president. The Granite State brings some unique qualities and traditions to the presidential race that boil down to one overriding reason why New Hampshire holds the first-in-the-nation primary—the people of New Hampshire take seriously their responsibility to vet candidates regardless of the media or the political parties. Every New Hampshire voter feels they have a voice. As each primary election draws near, the Granite State itself—its people, landscape, cities, and towns—draws the nation’s attention on the first stop of the long road to the White House.

Full Educator Overview

The Big Picture

The first-in-the-nation presidential primary is what New Hampshire is best known for in America during the modern era. The main points covered in this unit are:

- The first modern presidential primary was held in 1952. Four major candidates—two for each party—were running for president that year. New Hampshire’s primary was the first one in the country, and the results of surprised everyone. The contest changed the course of American history and established New Hampshire as an important political battleground for those seeking to be president.
- Since 1952, a number of New Hampshire traditions regarding the presidential primary have developed. Some played a role in the 1952 election, and some have emerged since then. Many of these traditions promote the role of individual voters in determining the outcome of the primary, which is why the New Hampshire primary sometimes produces such surprising results.
- Other states have questioned why New Hampshire should have such sway over presidential politics, but New Hampshire has good reasons for holding onto its first-in-the-nation status.

Introduction

Throughout the 19th century, each party selected its presidential nominee by means of what could be called a good ol’ boys network. Party leaders met in smoke-filled backrooms and made their choices with no input from everyday voters. Early in the 20th century, progressive reformers sought to change this process to give ordinary citizens more of a voice in government. Along with many other states, New Hampshire adopted a primary election process in 1916 that allowed voters to elect delegates to the national party conventions; the delegates at the convention would then select the party’s nominee. Because election day in New Hampshire fell on the same day as town meeting, which was a cost-saving measure, New Hampshire has held the first primary in the nation since 1920.

Many people across the United States still felt removed from the presidential nominating process, though, and states began to change their primary nominating process again in the years after World War II in an effort to increase voter turnout. A state law passed in 1949 was crucial to establishing the modern New Hampshire primary because it allowed Granite



Staters to vote directly for the candidates themselves in addition to voting for delegates to the party conventions. Before this change, the delegates' names were on the ballot instead of the names of the candidates, whereas the new law meant the candidates' names would be on the ballot. The change made it much easier for people to understand who they were voting for. This type of election was called a presidential preference primary. Other states were already holding this type of election, but since New Hampshire's election day was in March, well before any other states held their presidential primaries, the Granite State's position as the first-in-the-nation primary was solidified.

The 1952 Primary

What was so special about the 1952 primary?

The first presidential contest under the new law took place in 1952, and the contest that year proved to be both popular and significant. In New Hampshire, voter turnout doubled from the 1948 election. The media also covered the campaign extensively, bringing national attention to New Hampshire and to the primary itself.

On the Republican side, there were two main contenders for their party's nomination. Supporters of General Dwight D. Eisenhower ("Ike"), led by New Hampshire Governor Sherman Adams, placed Ike's name on the ballot, even though they had not quite convinced Eisenhower to run on the Republican ticket yet. Eisenhower was still in Europe in the aftermath of World War II serving as commander of NATO forces. He neither visited New Hampshire during the presidential primary nor did anything to participate in the campaign, and he was not expected to win. His backers just wanted to see if the public was interested in his candidacy. The favored Republican candidate, Senator Robert Taft from Ohio, campaigned personally in New Hampshire, and the media routinely reported that he was far ahead in the polls.

For the Democrats, there were also two main contenders vying for the nomination. All eyes turned to President Harry Truman, who had not yet committed to run for another term in part because of his low approval ratings. Truman's primary challenger was Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. Truman dismissed the New Hampshire primary lightly, saying it was unimportant and just a "beauty pageant." While Truman remained aloof, Kefauver campaigned hard across New Hampshire, wearing a coonskin cap, going door-to-door, and meeting the electorate. Kefauver's personal approach was entirely new to presidential politics, a style of campaigning called retail politics. This new style has become the standard all over the nation as candidates seek to connect with the "common man." However, retail politics has proven especially effective and influential in the traditions of the New Hampshire primary.

Both parties were in for a surprise on election day. Eisenhower beat Taft handily, demonstrating the strength of Eisenhower's political appeal even when he was not personally involved. Ike's victory convinced him to actively run for president. Conversely, Kefauver's victory over Truman convinced Truman not to seek re-election. Thus, the 1952 primary made it clear that New Hampshire was an early and important testing ground of a candidate's electability, and it marked the beginning of a new era in the American process of choosing a president.

Traditions of the New Hampshire Primary

What primary traditions have developed in New Hampshire, and why are they important?

In the years since the 1952 primary, a number of New Hampshire traditions have developed—some fun and quirky, others deeply important to the electoral process. Why do



these traditions matter? They show how much New Hampshire values every vote and how an election can turn on the decisions of ordinary voters.

The Power of Retail Politics: New Hampshire is a small state, making it relatively easy for candidates to interact personally with voters. Candidates can travel around the state effectively in only a few days and connect with voters, many of whom are less interested in stump speeches and more interested in having a dialog with those seeking the presidency. Retail politics, in which candidates try to sell themselves to the voters by interacting with them personally, rose to popularity in the 1950s. Opportunities for people to have a dialogue with those seeking public office—to ask unscripted questions and follow up on candidates’ answers—allowed voters to feel that they got to know the candidates, what they believe in, and how they will react to people who present opposing viewpoints. In retail politics, this interaction occurs at the local level: candidates visit a community event or a popular restaurant, knock on people’s doors, stand outside of a grocery store, or hold a town hall meeting. All of these venues allow voters a great deal of access to candidates. Granite Staters pride themselves on this vetting of candidates; the candidates themselves, rather than relying on their staff, have to think on their feet and confront the problems of ordinary Americans. Ultimately, this New Hampshire primary tradition forces candidates to talk about the issues and concerns the people want to talk about and not what their campaign advisors tell them is their strong suit.

The Rise of the Underdogs: New Hampshire voters are historically independent in their thinking. Although front-runners get lots of attention, Granite Staters are also receptive to learning more about the underdogs—the people who enter the race without a lot of money or backing by party leaders. The voters’ willingness to support candidates other than the front-runners makes the New Hampshire primary unique and sometimes rather volatile. Voters have a chance to make a real assessment of political promise because, in the first primary, the field of candidates is wide open. It has also led to some big upsets over the years. The first was in 1952, when President Harry Truman decided not to run for re-election after he lost the New Hampshire primary. President Lyndon B. Johnson came to the same conclusion in 1968; he won the New Hampshire primary but by such a narrow margin that he decided he lacked the support to win the general election. At other times, the New Hampshire primary has helped put underdogs on the political map, such as when Bill Clinton, a little-known governor from Arkansas, captured a second-place finish in New Hampshire. In his “victory” speech on election night, he credited New Hampshire voters with making him the “comeback kid.” Other notable underdogs included Pat Buchanan in 1996, John McCain in 2000, and John Kasich in 2016. After campaigning hard in New Hampshire, and doing substantially better than expected in the New Hampshire primary, all three made credible, if ultimately unsuccessful, runs for their party’s nomination. Underdogs can connect with New Hampshire voters, while several front-runners, including Truman and Johnson, have found that neglecting the Granite State can be costly.

Civic-Minded Voters: The people of New Hampshire take their civic responsibilities seriously, making great efforts to learn about the issues and candidates. In fact, Granite Staters have a reputation nationally for their civic-mindedness. Participation at traditional town hall meetings, when candidates come and answer voters’ questions directly, is generally high, depending on the candidate. For some voters, it has become a tradition to attend at least one town hall event for each candidate to listen to what potential presidents have to say on a wide variety of topics. Sometimes, voters will even debate with candidates. Several formal debates are held in New Hampshire during primary season as well, which gives voters additional opportunities to learn about the candidates. The media also plays a role in helping candidates get acquainted with the people, and vice versa, although Granite Staters show a



decided preference for the coverage provided by New Hampshire journalists over journalists from elsewhere.

Independent Voters: Granite State voters are famously independent-minded, making it difficult for pollsters to accurately predict the outcome of elections. Approximately one-third of the state is registered to vote Republican, one-third Democrat, and one-third is unaffiliated with any political party—the so-called independents. In New Hampshire independent voters can request either ballot on primary election day. This large demographic in the state gets attention from all candidates as the independents can often determine the outcome of the election. They are the core of why New Hampshire is a swing state. Time and again the press has predicted that a candidate is about to win the New Hampshire primary by “the largest margin in history” only to find the candidate narrowly winning or even losing because it is difficult to predict which way the independents will go. By focusing on the candidates themselves, New Hampshire voters often confound predictions and party preferences.

The Allure of Midnight Voting: A few tiny New Hampshire towns have historically voted in the first few minutes of primary day, shortly after midnight, garnering much media attention. In both presidential primaries and presidential elections, these voters cast their ballots before anyone else in the nation. Midnight voting came from an early 20th-century state law that allows communities with less than 100 residents to close their polls once all residents have voted, immediately count the votes, and announce the results. The tradition began with the first New Hampshire primary in 1952 with the seven registered voters of Hart’s Location. In 1964, another community, Dixville Notch, began midnight voting, supported by local resort owner Neil Tillotson, who turned the counting of the ballots in Dixville Notch into a media event. Until his death in 2001, at the age of 102, Tillotson proudly boasted of being the first American to vote in each presidential primary and general election.

Behold the Unique Characters: Many unique characters have participated in the New Hampshire primary over the years. Some notable candidates include comedian Pat Paulson (1968), who made a name for himself on the TV show *Laugh In*; Jeff “Lobsterman” Costa (2000), a professional wrestler who wore a cape and lobster gloves; and Vermin Supreme (2008, 2012, 2016), a performance artist known for wearing a boot on his head and promising every American a pony if he is elected. While these characters have little impact on the race itself, they do connect with those across the nation who see themselves in the uniqueness of their candidacies. If a professional wrestler with a cape and lobster gloves can legally run for president in New Hampshire, why not anyone?

The Future of the Primary

Why should New Hampshire vote first?

Over the years, other states have tried to replace New Hampshire as host of the first-in-the-nation primary, claiming that the state is too small and not ethnically diverse enough to play such an important role in electing a president. But New Hampshire officials have repeatedly offered compelling arguments why New Hampshire should remain first. The small size of the state is actually one of those arguments, as New Hampshire’s size makes it easy for candidates to connect with a large percentage of the voting population. Such personal connections make a more informed voter and also increase voter turnout. The state’s large contingent of independent voters—those not committed to one party or another—has made the primary a good test for candidates hoping eventually to appeal to a national audience.



Granite Staters take their responsibility to be informed voters seriously not only as a tradition decades in the making but also as a civic duty. Most voters make an effort to listen to candidates with an open mind and to not automatically favor the front-runners. For many years, the New Hampshire primary had an able champion in the form of New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner, who served in this office between 1976 and 2022. He was re-elected by every legislature, Democrat or Republican, since then. Gardner proved a persuasive figure on the national stage arguing for New Hampshire's continued role as the first presidential primary. The New Hampshire primary has become a statewide tradition and a by-word in the American political scene as the first of a series of hurdles candidates will need to overcome if they want to hold the Oval Office. More than any other state, New Hampshire is associated with its role in the presidential process.

New Hampshire vs. Iowa

Why is Iowa's election not considered the first primary?

But what about Iowa? It's true that Iowa holds its presidential contest shortly before New Hampshire. However, Iowa holds a presidential caucus, which requires voters from each party to gather together in small groups, debate the candidates among themselves, and then come to a decision for each group (or caucus) regarding who the nominee should be. Although Iowans cherish their caucus tradition, some have pointed out that the process differs too dramatically from an election. The Iowa caucuses have also had problems with low voter turnout and processing the results in a timely fashion. In addition, the Iowa caucuses have not had the same success in picking who the eventual nominees will be, whereas New Hampshire has shown solid judgment regarding political potential. New Hampshire Governor John Sununu once summed up the competition between Iowa and New Hampshire by saying, "The people of Iowa pick corn, the people of New Hampshire pick presidents."

Course Essential Questions

Essential questions are designed to be answered repeatedly throughout the entire curriculum. This unit particularly addresses the following essential questions:

- How has New Hampshire been shaped by many voices?
- How have New Hampshire's people shaped its government?
- How has New Hampshire impacted the nation?

Unit Focus Questions

Lessons in this unit are geared towards students answering the unit focus questions comprehensively through a variety of methods. This unit's focus questions are:

1. Why does New Hampshire hold the first presidential primary?
2. How do the traditions of the New Hampshire primary encourage voting?
3. What impact does the New Hampshire primary have on U.S. presidential elections?
4. What role does the average person play in the New Hampshire primary?

Lesson Plans

In two of the lessons, the function of a primary and choices for civic engagement, specifically voting, are explored. Two additional lessons focus on campaign strategies in New Hampshire and the historic 1952 primary, emphasizing how the individual citizen impacts the primary and how the primary impacts the nation. The final lesson contains a Document Based Question analysis; students choose to investigate the question "Should New Hampshire keep the first in the nation primary?" or the question "Do the New



Hampshire primary traditions encourage democracy?" Evidence of their analysis is then shown in a persuasive, summative project.

Lesson Plan 1: What Is a Primary?

This lesson takes approximately 50 minutes; it is possible to divide it into smaller segments. An explainer video introduces the basics of primaries. Students then participate in a classroom primary to nominate New Hampshire's state sport in order to experience a primary.

Lesson Plan 2: Campaign Strategies

This lesson takes approximately 60 minutes, divided into two 30-minute segments. Students analyze primary sources from primary campaigns to identify campaign strategies. They then define retail politics and plan their own "Diner Dash" while mapping New Hampshire campaign stops.

Lesson Plan 3: Voting in New Hampshire

This lesson takes approximately 50 minutes, divided into two 25-minute segments. Students create a mind map and read an age-appropriate selection of the New Hampshire state constitution to learn about voting. They then examine historic ballots to discover how presidential primary voting has changed in New Hampshire.

Lesson Plan 4: The 1952 Primary

This lesson takes approximately 60 minutes; it is possible to divide it into two smaller segments. Students examine newspaper headlines from 1952 in order to discover what makes a strong headline, then read party-specific summaries of the 1952 primary. They also construct their own headlines to demonstrate to the class what occurred in their primary and use place value math skills to examine real voter tallies from 1952.

Lesson Plan 5: DBQ on the New Hampshire Primary

This lesson takes approximately five 30-minute classes. Students review what it means to be persuasive before choosing to investigate the question "Should New Hampshire keep the first in the nation primary?" or the question "Do the New Hampshire primary traditions encourage democracy?" They analyze primary and secondary sources to gather evidence, then choose, with guidance from a rubric, how to present their findings in a persuasive summative project.

Unit Vocabulary

accessible	(adjective) Able to be reached
ballot	(noun) Something used to cast votes in an election. Ballots can either be on a piece of paper or a computer
ballot box	(noun) A secure enclosure where ballots are collected to be counted
campaign	(noun) A connected series of events or actions to make something happen; for example, a political campaign is waged to win elections (verb) To work in an organized way towards a goal. In a presidential primary, a candidate campaigns to win the election
candidate	(noun) Someone who is applying for a job. In a presidential primary election, a candidate is a person who is trying to get the job of president of the United States



civic duty	(noun) Responsibilities a person has because they are a citizen, like serving on a jury, paying taxes, or voting
civic engagement	(noun) Actions taken to participate in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a community
democracy	(noun) A government ruled by majority vote of the people
front-runner	(noun) The person who everyone thinks is going to win an election
general election	(noun) The final election that decides who will win a position. In the presidential general election, it is a national election where voters choose from nominees from different political parties
good citizenship	(noun) Actions people take to appropriately behave as a member of a community, such as civic duty
inhabitant	(noun) Someone who lives in a particular place for a period of time
media	(noun) A system to communicate with a large number of people, such as television, radio, or newspapers; for example, the news media communicates about events
nominee	(noun) Someone who is proposed for a position. In a presidential primary election, the nominee is the candidate who wins the most votes among all the candidates from the political party
political party	(noun) An organized group of people with similar goals and opinions about how a nation should function. The United States has two major political parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party
poll	(noun) Questioning voters ahead of an election to try to predict the results
polling place	(noun) A public place where citizens go to vote
primary election	(noun) An election before the general election when voters choose which candidates will represent each party in the general election
retail politics	(noun) A style of political campaigning in which the candidate tries to connect with individual voters by attending local events and talking with people
tradition	(noun) A well-known belief or custom shared by a group of people over many years
underdog	(noun) A person who is behind in a contest and not expected to win
vet	(verb) To evaluate for a position. Voters carefully examine a candidate's ideas, past actions, and plans for the future
voter participation	(noun) The number of people who are able to vote that actually do vote. This number is most often shown as a percentage



Using the Student Content Readings

The student content for this curriculum is designed to be used in many ways. Here are suggestions for reading activities and strategies that support independent and guided reading at different stages of each unit. Please note that some lessons in this unit use the student content in their learning activities.

- **Introducing Units:** Preview the student content before diving into lesson plans and activities. Ask students to skim the text by looking for key design elements. What are the headings? What do they say about the big ideas of the unit? Look for words in bold. What are the important vocabulary words used in this unit? Which are familiar? Which are not? What kinds of graphics or images are used in this content? Which important ideas do they illustrate?
- **Developing Understanding:** Some lesson plans direct you to specific sections of the student content, but the student content should be revisited throughout completion of a unit. Students can create visual representations of specific sections, summarize paragraphs, or complete jigsaw chunking and present their section summaries to other students.
- **Reviewing Concepts:** After lessons, return to the student content to look for evidence of the concept explored in the lesson. Students can create timelines, cause and effect charts, mind maps, and Venn diagrams using the information provided in each section.
- **Extending Comprehension:** Students can develop a review quiz for fellow students by writing their own questions about the information in each section. Translating the content into data that can be displayed on a map or graph is another way to extend comprehension of the text.

Additional Resources

Format: Website

Title: Elections: Teacher's Activity Guide

Author/Creator: Scholastic Publishing

Audience: For Educators

Description: Provides an overview of important election terms and New Hampshire's impact. The site also provides excellent activities to be used in class.

Website: teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/kids_primaries/nomination/index.asp?article=what

Format: Book

Title: *The First Primary: New Hampshire's Outsize Role in Presidential Nominations*

Author/Creator: David W. Moore and Andrew E. Smith

Audience: For Educators

Description: Describes history of the primary, analysis of New Hampshire's impact and outsize role in presidential primaries.

Format: Journal

Title: *First Stop: The New Hampshire Primary*

Author/Creator: Edited by Donna-Belle Garvin

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Special edition of *Historical New Hampshire* examines the history of New Hampshire's primary.

Location: <https://www.nhhistory.org/Publications/Historical-New-Hampshire/Audio-Versions/First-Stop-The-New-Hampshire-Primary.aspx>

Note: This article is available online only to members of the New Hampshire Historical Society



Format: Article

Title: "New Hampshire Prepares for the Primaries"

Author/Creator: Kaitlin Clark

Audience: For Students

Description: *Scholastic's News Kids Press Corps* takes on the New Hampshire Primary and all that comes with being "first-in-the-nation."

Website: kpcnotebook.scholastic.com/post/new-hampshire-prepares-primaries

Format: Article

Title: "Why is New Hampshire the first primary in the nation?"

Author/Creator: Elaine Kamarck

Audience: For Educators

Description: A more in-depth description about how New Hampshire became first-in-the-nation for presidential primaries.

Website: www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/02/05/why-is-new-hampshire-the-first-primary-in-the-nation/

Format: Book

Title: *Why New Hampshire? The First-in-the-Nation Primary State*

Author/Creator: Hugh Gregg and Bill Gardner

Audience: For Educators

Description: Notable New Hampshire figures examine the background, history, and activity of New Hampshire primary up to 2003.

Format: Article

Title: "Why New Hampshire Holds the First Primary"

Author/Creator: Alan Rappeport and the *New York Times*

Audience: For Students and Educators

Description: A brief overview of why New Hampshire is first-in-the-nation for presidential primaries.

Website: www.nytimes.com/live/new-hampshire-primary-2016-election/why-new-hampshire-holds-the-first-primary/

Format: DVD

Title: *Winning New Hampshire*

Author/Creator: Aram Fischer, Mark Lynch

Audience: For Students and Educators

Description: Documentary follows the 2004 presidential primary

Website: www.winningnh.com