

US HISTORY EXAMPLE LESSON PLAN: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE WAR EFFORT IN WWII

Goals and Objectives

Students will be able to use polling data as a primary source to examine public support for the American war effort during World War II. Using these data, students will consider whether Americans supported the war, what sorts of government interventions they felt were appropriate, and in what ways they believed the war effort could have been better organized.

Lesson Overview and Activity

Initiation. Show students a series of WWII propaganda posters that encouraged different ways to participate in the war effort (e.g. save food and metal, reduce waste, buy war bonds, etc.). These posters raise the question: to what extent did Americans acquiesce to such requests?

Development. Note that a way to answer this is to look at polling data intended to question a broad swath of the population about the war. Polls were taken during WWII, sometimes by the federal government, and sometimes by independent organizations. Describe the difference between open-ended and closed-ended polling questions so that students can look at questions where respondents were allowed to volunteer their own answers as well as ones where they could not.

Activity. Ask students to locate polling questions in iPOLL by constraining a search to 1941 – 1944 and typing in “war effort” (2a), or if a computer lab is unavailable, provide a handout with at least 10 questions from this period that the students can examine on their own (2b).

Questions. Ask students to consider the following questions:

- What kinds of questions were asked of American respondents and by whom?
- How did these respondents answer?
- Were they supportive of the war or those who were running it?
- What sorts of issues did they raise in open-ended questions?
- What did respondents say about labor issues (e.g. wartime wages, union participation, employment choice)?
- What did respondents say about federal taxes?
- What did respondents say about Republicans, Democrats, the President, and Congress?
- Can you characterize Americans’ general feelings towards the war effort from their responses to these polls?

Requirements

1. Student knowledge about the economic and political situation in the US prior to its entrance into WWII.

2a. Two class periods, one of which should include ½ hour when students can search for polling questions using iPOLL.

2b...Or one class period and a handout with the frequencies for at least 10 polling questions that students can examine on their own.

Example Frequency Table

Do you think the United States government should have the right to order men to change their jobs to help the war effort?

83% Yes
9% No
4% Don’t know

Source:
Postwar Problems Survey
September 1942

Closure

Emphasize for the students that general statements about Americans’ support for the WWII war effort may mask the political nuances of the time. One should look to polling data to find evidence concerning *what ways* Americans supported the war effort and *how in other ways* they may have opposed it.

Assessment

Assignment: Ask students to write a paragraph, using 3 of the frequencies examined during class, arguing whether or not there was widespread support for the war effort, and citing percentages in their response.
Evaluation: Do students correctly report percentages and use them as evidence for an argument about public support for federal action in WWII?