Lesson: The Qualities of a Politician

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students examine the qualities of a politician to determine which characteristics the most effective political leaders possess.

The video clips provided with this lesson are from **Koch**, a film about Ed Koch, who served three terms as New York City mayor from 1978 to 1989. New York City mayors have a world stage on which to strut, and they have made legendary use of it. Yet few have matched the bravado, combativeness and egocentricity that Ed Koch brought to the office. As Neil Barsky's **Koch** recounts, Koch was more than the blunt, funny man New Yorkers either loved or hated. Elected in the 1970s during the city's fiscal crisis, he was a new Democrat for the dawning Reagan era—fiscally conservative and socially liberal. **Koch** finds the former mayor politically active to the end (he died in 2013)—still winning the affection of many New Yorkers while driving others to distraction.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Determine which characteristics make a politician effective or ineffective
- Identify key characteristics of an effective politician and examine the efficacy of current political leaders based on this understanding
- Discuss what drives people's choices in electing political leaders

GRADE LEVELS
9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
Language Arts, Social Studies, Current Events

MATERIALS
- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
- LCD projector
- Self-adhesive chart paper

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
One 50-minute classroom period for the lesson; another for students to share their homework assignment.

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: Ed Koch (Length: 2:21) This clip begins at 1:24 with archival footage of Ed Koch and ends at 3:45 with Charles Barron saying, "This is a disgrace to have a bridge named after Ed Koch."

Clip 2: The Competent Candidate (Length: 1:28) This clip begins at 5:31 with an image of Koch saying, "Beame is an incompetent mayor." It ends at 6:59 with Koch on the street saying, "Hi, can I say hello?"

Clip 3: Political Personality (Length: 1:28) This clip begins at 7:42 with Jonathan Mahler saying, "Suddenly, this liberal city broke." It ends at 9:10 with Michael Powell saying, "And he very systematically went around and picked off key constituencies."

Clip 4: The One Who Does It (Length: 0:30) This clip begins at 9:15 with a photograph of Koch and with Carl McCall saying, "A very important issue for us, at least in Harlem." It ends at 9:45 with Koch saying, "I'm happy to be the one who does it."

Clip 5: Bigger than Life (Length: 1:09) This clip begins at 13:50 with a title card that reads, "Corona, Queens," and shows people campaigning in the street for public officials. It ends at 14:59 with Koch getting into a car and saying, "Thank you."

Clip 6: Battling Washington (Length: 1:50) This clip begins at 17:20 with an image of a building and then Koch speaking with a reporter, saying "I am going down today." It ends at 19:10 with an image of a newspaper announcing that the state was making a loan to the city.

Clip 7: Making a Mistake (Length: 3:10) This clip begins at 22:32 with an image of people protesting, holding placards and chanting. It ends at 25:42 with Koch saying, "And there would have been no problem."

Clip 8: The Opportunist (Length: 0:43) This clip begins at 26:20 with an image of Koch on a podium with a microphone. It ends at 27:03 with Abyssinian Church pastor Calvin O. Butts, III, saying, "He's worse than a racist. He's an opportunist."

ACTIVITY

1. Have each student reflect on a politician he or she respects or supports and ask them to describe the qualities that contribute to their assessments of the people they chose. Record contributions and work with students to categorize the qualities. For example, honesty might be one, and under that would come associations such as truth, tells it like it is and so on. Additional categories include, but are not limited to, communication, intelligence, integrity, energy, decision making and stances on issues.

2. Ask students: In your opinion, what does it mean to be an effective politician? What should be some of the main goals of a politician? Then ask students what qualities might make a politician ineffective or effective. Record responses. Probe with students whether certain qualities, such as charisma or charm, make political leaders effective. Ask students whether it is possible to dislike a politician because of personality or presentation, but like or respect him or her as a leader (or vice versa).

3. Introduce and provide some background on Ed Koch (ask students if they know who he is and invite them to share what they know). Show **Clip 1: Ed Koch** (Length: 2:10) as a brief introduction to the former New York City mayor.

4. Tell students that they will view a few additional clips of Koch to determine his leadership qualities and explore whether he was effective as New York City mayor. Distribute "Qualities of a Politician." Review the instructions with the class and present the example. Students can fill in the sheet as they watch the clips, or, they can complete it as a class after they have discussed the clips. Show:

Clip 2: The Competent Candidate (Length: 1:28)
Clip 3: Political Personality (Length: 1:28)
Clip 4: The One Who Does It (Length: 0:30)
Clip 5: Bigger Than Life (Length: 1:09)
Clip 6: Battling Washington (Length: 1:50)
Clip 7: Making a Mistake (Length: 3:10)
Clip 8: The Opportunist (Length: 0:43)

5. After viewing, ask students the following discussion questions:

- How would you describe Ed Koch?
- Do you think he was an effective politician? An ineffective politician? Somewhere in between?
- What qualities do you think made him effective or ineffective? Explain.
- Analyze Koch's famous phrase "How am I doing?" As a political tactic, was it an effective way to solicit genuine feedback? How did he use the phrase to connect with people on the street? What role did it play in conveying his image as a "man of the people"? Who heard the phrase as a positive invitation to engage and who was alienated by it?
- What makes someone an effective leader? What does a person need to be able to do in order to be a strong politician?
- How does a politician's personality weigh into his or her popularity, compared to his or her stance on issues? How about family history and personal relations/connections?
- Can you think of other examples of politicians who have won public support or opposition based on their personal qualities more than their political actions?
- How do media portrayals affect public perception of politicians today? How does having politicians on talk shows and using social media impact public perception and decisions on election days?

6. Have students refer back to the politicians they named earlier and reflect on Koch. Discuss with students what they believe ultimately drives voters' choices of political leaders, and what people should focus on when deciding on the most effective leadership. When it comes to electing a political leader, on what should a person base his or her decision? Should that decision be based on charisma, communication skills and media presence, or the ability to lead and a stance on issues, or a combination of those things?

HOMEWORK

Instruct students to read "How to Judge a Candidate" (http://www.smartvoter.org/voter/judgecan.html) and consider whether the qualities they identified in a political leader reflect or overshadow someone's ability to lead effectively. Then assign students to write persuasive essays in support of or opposition to leaders based on their qualities, as defined in the reading.

EXTENSIONS

The Politics of Special Interest Groups

In the film, students learn about groups that can influence public and political agendas. These groups, sometimes known as special interest groups or SIGs, can be very powerful and often use that power to lobby politicians, steering their policy decisions one way or another, and to get certain candidates into office.

Students can explore the range of national SIGs, with emphasis on those that have a powerful role in national politics, and look at how they work.

Sites to jump-start this task include:

- **Project Vote Smart: National Special Interest Groups**
  http://votesmart.org/interest-groups#.U8FT7qhYWGI
- **American Government: Interest Groups**
  http://www.ushistory.org/gov/5c.asp
- **The National Bureau of Economic Research: Special Interest Groups and Economic Policy**
  http://www.nber.org/reporter/summer00/grosshelp.html

Socio-Economic Challenges

The film touches on socio-economic issues, such as homelessness, unemployment and AIDS, that affected New York City before and during Koch's tenure as mayor. These and related challenges continue to exist today. Have students explore an issue that affects their immediate community and research how politicians representing their community are addressing the issue. Students determine whether political efforts are alleviating the problem, whether politicians are making the right decisions with regard to the issue and how politicians can be influenced to improve the situation.

The Politician's Team

Behind the scenes, teams of people guide politicians, influencing what they say, how they behave and the decisions they make. From political strategists to speechwriters, these professionals play an integral role in a politician's impact and success. Instruct students to research and present on the various roles, starting with those presented in the film: political adviser, political strategist, press secretary, campaign manager, chief of staff and even friends and family. After these presentations, have students discuss why a politician needs a professional team to support him or her.

Ask students to select a local, state or national politician who represents their community, and explore who that person's key team members are and how they drive policy and budgets. Ask students to consider whether any of those team members have improved or damaged the politician's reputation and to explain how they have done so.

RESOURCES

American Experience: **Interview: Ed Koch**
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interview/stonewall-koch/

The Center on Congress at Indiana University: What Makes a Good Politician?
http://congress.indiana.edu/what-makes-good-politician

City Journal: **"The Last Sane Liberal"**
http://www.city-journal.org/2012/22_1_ed-koch.html

Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office: Notable New Yorkers: Edward I. Koch
http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/koche/

History: Ed Koch Victory Speech
http://www.history.com/topics/new-york-city/videos/ed-koch-speaks-after-reelection

La Guardia and Wagner Archives: Edward I. Koch
http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/COLLECTIONS.aspx?ViwType=1&ColID=8

La Guardia and Wagner Archives YouTube Channel: Mayor Ed Koch
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4A8313LQdwjgsPwK6qjF5AWci8kENp7J

LinkedIn: 10 Leadership Nuggets from Mayor Ed Koch
http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130203111715-60894986-10-leadership-nuggets-from-mayor-ed-koch

New York: **"Ed Koch and the AIDS Crisis: His Greatest Failure"**
http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/02/koch-and-the-aids-crisis-his-greatest-failure.html

NPR: "What Makes a Great Mayor?"
http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1540840

PBS NewsHour: **Ed Koch and a City on the Brink**
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/ed-koch-and-a-city-on-the-brink/

PBS: Mayor Koch on "Mayor," Part I
http://video.pbs.org/video/1512037259/

Politico: **"Why They Mattered: Ed Koch"**
http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/ed-koch-obituary-101439.html#.U7_xlqhYWGI

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)

SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

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.

RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

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

Civics

Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics and government

Standard 9: Understands the importance of Americans sharing and supporting certain values, beliefs and principles of American constitutional democracy

Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

Standard 19: Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media

Standard 20: Understands the roles of political parties, campaigns, elections and associations and groups in American politics

Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals

Standards 29: Understands the importance of political leadership, public service and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy

Behavioral Studies

Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Israel owns Educational Writing & Consulting (www.micheleisrael.com), where she works with large and small educational, nonprofit and media organizations to bolster products and programs. Her rich career spans more than 25 years of successful experience developing educational materials and resources, designing and facilitating training, generating communication materials and grant proposals and assisting in organizational and program development. Her long list of clients includes the Public Broadcasting Service, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Teaching Tolerance, Aspiranet, the New York City Department of Mental Health and Hygiene, WETA Public Television, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* the Harm Reduction Coalition and the Frost Valley YMCA.