The Race to the White House
(March 10, 2016)

Every four years the American people choose their President, who is the most powerful elected official in America (and the world!). 2016 is a Presidential election year. First the two big parties in the USA – the Republicans and the Democrats – have to decide who their candidates for President will be. Then the two candidates have to try to win the Presidential election in the fall. Meantime, the media is full to overflowing with reports about almost every detail of the process. It can be very confusing. What is really going on these days? The following article will try to help you understand.
Choosing a candidate

Have you heard about Donald Trump? Of course you have! It is impossible to avoid him these days. That is because he is trying to become the candidate for President for the Republican Party. Hillary Clinton – who you have also heard of – is trying to do the same thing for the other big party in America, the Democratic Party. But what must they do to become the candidate?

To be the Presidential candidate of a big party in the United States you need to have a majority of delegates at the party’s national convention. Each of the 50 states sends delegates to the convention. Large states send many delegates and small states send few. Each state chooses which candidate it will support by either holding a *primary election or a caucus*. These go on for months. (You can see the schedule here.)

Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are fighting within their respective party to gain a majority of delegates. Trump needs 1237 delegates to win at the Republican National Convention in July. Hillary needs 2382 delegates to win at the Democratic National Convention one week later. As this is written, Donald Trump has won 446 delegates. His nearest rival, Ted Cruz, has won 347. On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton has won a 1221 – almost half of what she needs – while her rival, Bernie Sanders, has won less than half that, 571. (You can check delegate numbers here.)

So, Hillary has a big lead and Donald has a smaller one. Nevertheless, Donald Trump is getting by far the most attention at this point – much more attention than primary elections candidates usually get during a Presidential election year. Why?

*A primary election is a special state-wide election to choose a state party candidate for President. A caucus is a state-wide party convention that serves the same function. 37 states have primary elections; 13 have caucuses.*
Understanding “The Donald”

Donald Trump exploded on to the political scene out of nowhere. He came as a big surprise to the Republican Party leadership and to the other Republican candidates. Trump only recently joined the party. He is not a politician and he has never been elected to anything. Trump says outrageous things and is very aggressive and uncompromising in his positions, attacking his opponents as “liars” and “weaklings” and “robots.” Sometimes he makes fun of women and the handicapped. His chief claim to the Presidency is that he is a successful businessman, worth something like $3 billion, who would be able to “manage” things. How can such a man get people to vote for him?

To understand that, you need to understand the Republican Party. It is the conservative party in America, and it has always been deeply suspicious of government and politicians. Republicans have a strong belief in individuals and private businesses as the source of jobs and wealth. The less money people and businesses have to pay in taxes (to be wasted by the government), the better for the nation.

Donald Trump fits well into these beliefs. Many vote for him precisely because he has not been a politician, because he has never held government office, because he is a very successful businessman and because he is a strong individual who speaks his mind no matter what others might think of it. They admire the fact that he is so rich, both because it shows that he is a “winner” and because it means he does not owe debts to any “special interests” that can tell him what to do if he is elected.

Trump appeals to many dissatisfied Republicans who have now turned their suspicions about politicians and big government against their own party leadership. This has made that leadership and many moderate Republicans very worried. They fear Trump is too extreme to win the Presidential Election in the autumn against a Democratic opponent.

Hillary and Bernie

On the Democratic side, things are much calmer and clearer. Hillary Clinton is the wife of former President Bill Clinton and is, of course, well known. She was Senator from New York for eight years and in 2008 she almost became the Democratic Party Presidential candidate instead of Barack Obama. She then went on to serve as his Secretary of State until 2013. Hillary is a moderate Democrat who promises to continue many of the same policies as President Obama.
Her opponent, Bernie Sanders, is a bit of a surprise. He is a 74-year-old Senator from Vermont, a small American state. Many of his opinions are closer to those found in a European Labor Party like the Norwegian Arbeiderpartiet than to most members of his own Democratic Party. He can hold these opinions because the Democratic Party is the liberal (or “left leaning”) party in America. It believes that government can be a good thing for the country and must sometimes step in to help the disadvantaged.

But how much should it do? Bernie has been appealing to dissatisfied members on the party’s left wing who want the government to tax the rich and help the poor more. They don’t think Hillary goes far enough in this direction. Bernie and Hillary often have strong disagreements about this and other matters, but they have not yet made any bitter personal attacks on one another like the Republican candidates have. That is one reason you have heard much less about them: they are less “entertaining.”

**Going forward**

At the time of writing, the primaries and caucuses are less than half-finished. It looks probable that Hillary Clinton will defeat Bernie Sanders to become the Democratic candidate (or “nominee”) for
President. The Republican contest, on the other hand, is impossible to predict. It has become a free-for-all fight with fists flying. That makes it much more interesting. The two major challengers to Donald Trump are Ted Cruz, Senator from Texas, and Marco Rubio, Senator from Florida. Of the two, the Republican leadership would love to see Marco Rubio win. He is the more moderate of the candidates. They believe Rubio would have a better chance to win against Hillary Clinton in the Presidential Election in the fall.

But right now they will back anyone opposing Trump. Many important Republicans have recently come out attacking him and warning Republicans not to vote for him in the primaries. They are worried that he has already gained too much “momentum” in the race; i.e. that his early victories make him appear a winner – and everyone loves a winner.

Can they stop him? It’s hard to say. What they have to do is make sure Trump does not win all the 1237 delegates he needs for a majority before he gets to the Republican National in July. If other Republican candidates can get enough delegates to deny him a majority on the first vote at that convention, then state delegates will be “free” to vote for whom they wish in the second vote. In the past, some national conventions have had as many as five or six votes before they decided on the party’s candidate.

Now that would be an exciting way to end to the race to be the Presidential candidate for the Republican Party.

But no matter who wins, it will only mark the beginning of the real race for the White House that will be between the Republican and the Democratic candidates in the fall. Stay tuned!
Tasks

1. **COMPREHENSION**

Briefly answer the following questions:

- a. How often is the President of the United States elected?
- b. What does a politician need to become the Presidential candidate of a big party in the United States?
- c. What is a primary election and a caucus?
- d. Which candidate has won the most delegates in the Republican Party? In the Democratic Party?
- e. Why is Donald Trump such a surprising candidate?
- f. Why is Donald Trump popular among many Republicans?
- g. What do Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders disagree about?
- h. Why does the leadership of the Republican Party oppose Donald Trump?
- i. What will happen if Donald Trump does not win a majority of delegates to the Republican National Convention?

Republican presidential candidate, Marco Rubio, poses for a photo with young republicans at a rally in Puerto Rico
2 ELECTION COUNTDOWN

a Make a graph poster in your classroom. Once a week note the poll rankings and number of delegates won by the major candidates in both parties. At the end of this article, you will find a brief list of the candidates as well as links to sources you can use to find in information.

b Form groups of three. Pick one of the major candidates trying to become the Presidential nominee of their party. Make a poster in which you present your candidate to the class. Include information about the candidate’s:

- Background
- Opinions
- Supporters
- Major opponents
- Prospects of winning (in your opinion)
3  WRITING

Write a short essay in which you try to explain why American elections get so much attention in Norway and around the world. After all, only Americans get to vote. What is all the fuss about? When you have finished, exchange essays with a fellow student and discuss the reasons you gave.

List of Candidates

Republican candidates
Ted Cruz - http://2016.republican-candidates.org/Cruz/

Democratic candidates

Useful links
2016 Election Central - http://www.uspresidentialelectionnews.com/
ABC: http://abcnews.go.com/
CBS: http://www.cbsnews.com/
Fox News: http://www.foxnews.com/
NBC: http://www.nbcnews.com/