

# THE BAD BOYS OF LOUISIANA POLITICS

GRADES 6 - 8

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## AN EXPLORATION OF THE POPULIST MOVEMENT IN LOUISIANA POLITICS

**TIME ALLOTMENT:** Two 50-minute classes.

### OVERVIEW:

In the year 1928, Louisiana elected a governor that would change the format of Louisiana politics for generations to come. Huey P. Long stepped into the political arena followed close behind by his little brother, Earl. Huey and Earl created what came to be known as Populism. The Populist Platform was designed to appeal to the common man creating a government that provided better roadways, bridges, free school books, free school lunches, and raising the necessary taxes from large corporations instead of the voters. The politicians were entertaining "good ole boys" that could relate to old and young alike. Unfortunately, they were often not quite honest causing scandals that kept the news alive with their stories. In 1972, Edwin Edwards emerged from the swamps of South Louisiana proclaiming to be the first since Huey Long to truly understand and care for the common man of Louisiana. He followed the Populist Platform and served an unprecedented four terms as governor of this bayou state.

Through the activities in this lesson, students will become familiar with the planks of the Populist Platform, the men who developed them, and the politicians that followed the populist path. The students will explore the characteristics of Louisiana politics and the lack of success enjoyed by reformers that strove to rid the government of scandal and balance the financial structure of the state.

**SUBJECT MATTER:** Louisiana Social Studies and History

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to:

- Identify the characteristics of the Populist Movement in Louisiana politics.
- Differentiate between populists and reformers.

- Explain why the voters of Louisiana prefer the populists politicians.
- Describe the impact Huey P. Long and Earl Long had on the development of political campaigns in Louisiana.

### STANDARDS:

#### National Standards for Historical Thinking

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/thinking5-12-4.html>

*Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society.*

#### Louisiana Social Studies Content Standards

<http://www.lcet.doe.state.la.us/doe/assessment/standards/SOCIAL.pdf>

**H-1D-M1:** The student will describe the contributions of people, events, movements, and ideas that have been significant in the history of Louisiana.

**H-1D-M2:** The student will trace the development of the various governments that have been established in Louisiana throughout its history.

### MEDIA COMPONENT:

#### Video:

#### *Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics*

This film is an intriguing look at Louisiana politics beginning with the days of Huey P. Long and ending with the infamous Edwin Edwards. It includes not only the politicians, but the campaign tactics they used.

#### Web sites:

#### The Governors of Louisiana

<http://www.sec.state.la.us/gov-1.htm>

This Web site lists the governors of Louisiana with an article on each governor and auditory interaction.



GE Fund



**Ken Burns American Stories – Huey Long**

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/hueylong/film/>

This Web site has film clips by Senator Russell Long and Arthur M. Schelsinger, Jr. about Huey P. Long. It offers a timeline and resources for educators.

**MATERIALS:**

*Per Student:*

- Political Flyers (attached)
- Pencil and paper

*Per Group:*

- **Political Platform** activity sheets (attached)

**PREP FOR TEACHERS:**

1. Prior to teaching this lesson, bookmark the web site used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom. Load a media player if the computer does not have one. (available free at <http://www.macromedia.com>)
2. View the video becoming familiar with the segments to be used in class.

Prepare the hands-on element of the lesson by:

1. Copying the two **political flyers** for each student.
2. Copy the **Political Platform** activity sheets

When using media, provide students with a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, a specific task to complete and/or information to identify during or after viewing of video segments, Web sites, or other multimedia elements.

**INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY:**

Step 1. Distribute the attached campaign flyers for Edwin Edwards and Buddy Roemer. Ask the students to read the flyers and evaluate the effectiveness of the different platforms.

Step 2. After your students have completed reading the documents, ask your students for a show of hands regarding who thinks Edwin Edwards' platform could be more effective. Who thinks Buddy Roemer's platform could be more effective? What do they think will appeal to wealthy people and what will appeal to poor people? (Guide students to realize that these are two different approaches to the same problem in education. Both politicians recognize that the ratings of education in Louisiana schools are an important campaign issue. They are both attempting to get votes based on an approach that will appeal to the voters. Would changing the school systems with reform improve education or would putting money into the hands of the students who study be a more popular approach? Remind them that the focus is winning an election.)

Step 3. Have the students debate for several minutes using their reasons for backing the candidate of their choice.

Step 4. Inform the students that Buddy Roemer was a reform governor and did win the election; but, only after Edwin Edwards stepped down. Edwin Edwards came back to serve as governor again. Ask your students to log on to the "Louisiana Governors" Web site at <http://www.sec.state.la.us/gov-1.htm>. Provide your students with a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, asking them to determine three reasons Edwin Edwards was more popular than the reformer, Buddy Roemer. Have the students choose the site for contemporary governors and first listen to the segment on Buddy Roemer, listen to the segment on Edwin Edwards. (Buddy Roemer was a reform governor for Louisiana. He won when Edwin Edwards withdrew from the campaign. Roemer wanted to increase teacher pay, introduce educational reform, pass laws on environmental quality, limit campaign financial contributions, and

revamp the tax system with changes in the Homestead Exemption. Edwin Edwards was governor for four terms by convening the Constitutional Convention in order to rewrite and streamline the old Louisiana Constitution, change the severance tax on crude oil to a percent instead of flat rate in order to bring more money into the state budget instead of raising taxes on the voters, named black politicians to key positions, created an open primary, and passed laws allowing land-based casino gambling. He was also smart enough to realize that David Duke would split the white vote enough to weaken Roemer and give him a political advantage.)

Step 5. Have students compare and contrast the two politicians. Ask the students why they think that Edwin Edwards was a more successful politician than Buddy Roemer.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY:

1. Ask your students what they think of when they hear the word “politician”. What do they expect to see on the streets, hear on television, and read in the newspapers when an election is approaching?
2. Explain to the students that Louisiana spends an inordinate amount of money on political campaigns. Many times more money is spent to get elected than the salary of the office will pay. Why would a politician invest so much in a job that has very little legitimate financial return for him?
3. Insert Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics into your VCR. *Provide your students with a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, asking them to notice who is featured in the film’s introduction. Do they think that Louisiana politics is corrupt?* Start the tape at the beginning and stop it after the man in the chair mentions holding his breath. This segment will be approximately two minutes. (The politicians featured in this segment were: John McKeithen, Huey Long, Earl Long, Jimmie Davis, and Mayor Morial. The two things that they all had in common were that they were popular and considered by many to be corrupt. Does anyone know what they did for Louisiana that made so many voters believe in them?)
4. *Provide your students with a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, asking them to list the reasons they think Huey P. Long was elected. What were the elements of his campaign that resulted in his political victory. How does the term populism apply?* **START** the film at the title, Every Man a King. **STOP** the tape at the picture of Sam Jones before a microphone with his finger to his ear. This segment is about two to three minutes. (Huey P. Long was elected because he appealed to the poor people of the state. His campaign against the large oil corporations such as Standard Oil, now known as ExxonMobil, helped bring money into the state. With this money, he paved roads, built bridges, provided free schoolbooks, and built Charity Hospital. Not only did he successfully end the rural isolation of Louisiana with his roads and bridges, but he was a very entertaining figure. He could make people laugh.)
5. *Provide your students with a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, asking them why Sam Jones was never reelected. Would other reformers like John Kennon fair any better. Tell students to take notes to the following questions: Which politicians were reformers and which were populist. What slogans and campaign trade marks did the politicians employ? What were some of their unacceptable practices in office. Be ready to compare the success of the populists to the success of the reformers.* **START** the film at the same place and stop after Edwin Edwards. This segment is about two minutes. (Jimmie Davis, populist, was a country singer and politician. He starred in his own movie about his campaign. He was reelected and rode his horse up the steps of the state capitol. Upon leaving his second term as governor, he sings to the legislature. He served two terms. Earl Long, populist, follows his brother’s approach and appeals again to the people with the slogan, “Every man a king, every woman a queen.” He was reelected in spite of a relationship with Blaze Star and being committed to mental institutions. He served three terms. Judge Robert Kennon was a reformer and never reelected. John McKeithen, populist, was elected with the slogan, “Will you hep me?” He was said to have had mafia influence. Edwin Edwards, populist, came out as a good ole boy from the bayou. He was known for his

womanizing and gambling. Edwards was heavily investigated throughout most of his terms of office. He served four terms.)

Discuss the above notes. Lead the students to compare the antics of the populists to the seriousness of the reformers. Ask the students which actions were sure to get the governors in the news. Review the list of politicians.

6. Manually fast forward to *The Poor Man's Friend* featuring Earl Long. Provide a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, telling the students that Earl Long instituted the populist platform. Ask the students to note the things that he provided for the people of Louisiana. **START** the film and **STOP** it at *Nothing's Wrong With a Little Color*. This segment is about three and a half minutes.  
(Earl Long geared his campaign toward what he could do for the people. He even promised to "help the rich people if they behave themselves". His campaign speeches from town to town were like parties. Long developed police juries, declared no new taxes, offered an old age pension of fifty dollars for all voters over the age of sixty-five, and health care for everyone. The students may have noted a number of other campaign promises.)

Discuss the above notes. Lead the students to understand that Earl Long appealed to the poor people first, secondly the middle class, and lastly the rich. Obviously, the poor people had the most needs and would more easily be swayed by the speeches and down home attitude. Long offered self-respect by keeping many old people off welfare with his pension plan.

7. Provide a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, telling the students that Edwin Edwards was the political heir of the Longs. Ask the students to watch for similarities between the Longs and Edwards. Start the film at *Nothing's Wrong With a Little Color* and stop it directly after a comment by a man on the street that Edwin Edwards doesn't drink or smoke. Beyond this point Edwards makes several suggestive jokes that may not be appropriate for middle school students. This film segment is approximately two and a half minutes.

(Edwin Edwards was the political heir to the Longs. In this segment, he reminds people that there has never been a politician since the Longs that cared as much about the people of Louisiana as he does. He was from a poor background in South Louisiana and knows what it is like. He built roads, the Cajun Dome, paved parking lots for the football games, and involved black people in the political mainstream. He answered questions about the investigations launched against him as being standard for a politician. He may gamble, but he does not smoke or drink. In this way, the voters are able to find that he has a moral side.)

*Ask the students if the voters should overlook the flaws of politicians if they do enough for the people. Answers will definitely vary. Have the students define their expectations of the people they put into political office.*

### **CULMINATING ACTIVITIES 1:**

1. Divide the class into two groups: Group 1 – Pro populists and Group 2 – Reformers
2. Have the groups debate the effectiveness and morality of the two different approaches. Each group must cite specific benefits of the approach they are defending. Keep mud-slinging to a minimum. The teacher will ask the following questions to be debated.
  1. Should the Louisiana tax base be paid by large corporations or by the voter?
  2. Should the personal life of a politician be important if he/she has delivered on campaign promises.
  3. Should laws limit the amount of money spent on political campaigns
3. As an assessment of this lesson, assign the students an essay citing examples from the lesson of the popularity of political populism in Louisiana.

### **CULMINATING ACTIVITIES 2:**

This activity will involve a second class period.

1. Ask the students the first thing they notice when a campaign is beginning. (*Signs in neighborhood yards and advertisements on television are the first approaches.*) Let the students know that even grocery store paper bags have been used as a campaign devise. Who is providing the funding for the campaign?  
*Provide a **FOCUS FOR MEDIA INTERACTION**, ask the students what they think are the best approaches for a political campaign. Tell them to watch some approaches that have been used in Louisiana and the amounts of money that have been spent in order to insure a political office. We are about to watch another segment of Louisiana Boys: Raised on Politics. Start the film at the Wrestler Ballet Proposition and stop it after the speaker refers to the tremendous contributions as a way of spreading wealth. (The approaches include thirty-second commercials on television that attract viewers with familiar popular interests such as wrestling, ice cream cones, and historic disasters. The money spent on campaigns is rationalized by saying that it is a redistribution of contributions and actually brings jobs into the area.)*
2. Divide the class into three groups, the Republicans will be the conservative reformers, the Democrats will be the populists, and the Independents will develop their own approach as long as it is nontraditional.
3. Each group will choose a politician, campaign manager, and publicist. The other students will be the campaign workers to which the campaign manager will delegate jobs. Some students will make campaign posters and some will design the commercial. The publicist will find a way to get the politician on the news.
4. Tell the students that each group will have fifty thousand dollars to spend on their campaign. Have them decide how to spend the money so that it will be most effective. They need to design a political platform that will attract the voter and design the placards, commercials, and other devices that will get their name in the newspapers. A thirty minute local television commercial is about \$500, a Thirty minute radio spot during prime time is about \$200. For radio news coverage to be effective, it needs to begin about thirteen weeks in advance of the election. The signs in bulk will cost about two dollars each. *Remind the students that news coverage is free.*
5. The students can tape their commercials with the school's video camera or digital camera that does short videos. The political groups will have fifteen minutes to decide on a platform and how to spend the money, and twenty minutes to tape a commercial, plan a news antic, and design the campaign poster. The remainder of the class time will be spent presenting the campaigns. At the end of the presentations, the students will act as voters and vote a politician into office.

## CROSS-CURRICULAR EXTENSIONS:

### LANGUAGE ARTS:

- Write a populist political speech convincing the voters how much the student as a politician cares for them. Include personal issues such as an incident that proves the politician's understanding of the plight of the little man, how important good schools are for a child to rise in the world, that the fight for a better economy has already begun, and put emphasis on self-respect and taking care of each other.
- Write a reformer political speech appealing to the common sense of the voters. Include a reasonable time period for reform, explanations as to how the tax burden can be shifted in order to relieve the voters with the lowest income, and put emphasis on the fact that passing new laws requires their representatives and senators to cooperate with the governor.
- Read *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* in order to explore his personal life and the manner in which he succeeded. Author: Huey P. Long Introduction by Thomas Harry Williams.
- Read *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren to analyze the creative license taken when writing historical fiction. The students will compare and contrast the novel to the facts about Huey P. Long. This book is out of print, but can be acquired on the Internet.

**MATHEMATICS:**

- The Homestead Exemption that Louisiana enjoys allows homeowners to pay far less in taxes than many other states. Property taxes are the main source for Louisiana's educational system. Research and compare the property tax base in other states with that of Louisiana.

**TECHNOLOGY/SOCIAL STUDIES:**

- Research the relationship between Edwin Edwards and his top administrative official, Charles Roemer II. Charles Roemer II is the father of Governor Buddy Roemer III, reformer. Explore the question, "How far can the apple fall from the tree?"

**VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS:**

- Research political campaign posters and advertising in order to find the most effective designs.
- Research political protest poster artists such as Ben Shahn.

**COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS:**

- Visit the local or state seat of government and watch the public officials in action. What issues are on the table? How do the officials react? What is the student's opinion of the issues?
- Visit a local museum and study the politicians that made an impact in your area. Why did they go into politics? What is their background? Were they reelected and why?
- Have local politicians visit the school and talk about the campaign and political processes.

**STUDENT MATERIALS:**

See attached. Student Materials include:

- Political Flyers
- ***Political Platform*** activity sheets



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ACTIVITY SHEET

**Design a Political Campaign**

The following times are to be allotted for each activity:

- Fifteen minutes to design the political platform and decide how to spend the money.
- Twenty minutes to tape a commercial and design campaign posters.

1. Choose a politician, campaign manager, and publicist. The remaining students will be campaign workers. The following times are allotted for each activity.

Politician \_\_\_\_\_

Campaign Manager \_\_\_\_\_

Publicist \_\_\_\_\_

Campaign Workers \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Design a political platform. (What issues will the politician discuss?)
3. Each group has \$50,000. Decide how to best spend the campaign money according to the following advertising possibilities.

Television - Thirty seconds during prime time is \$500.

Radio – Thirty seconds during prime time is \$200.  
Commercials must start about thirteen weeks in advance of the election.

Campaign signs in bulk - \$2 each.

News coverage – Free

4. Tape a commercial, plan a news antic, and design the campaign poster.
5. Present campaign and vote on the candidates.

