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## **ACTIVITY - How to Close-Read Comics: Youth Voting and the 26th Amendment**

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## ACTIVITY

# How to Close-Read Comics: Youth Voting and the 26th Amendment

### TOPICS

Comics form, genre comics, youth voting, 26th Amendment

### ACTIVITY TYPES

Reading comprehension, in-class discussion, textual analysis, historical analysis, comparative analysis

### DURATION

1-2 classes

## Texts

- Simon, Joe and Jerry Grandenetti. 1974. *Prez: The First Teen President*, Issues 1 and 2. New York: DC Comics.
- Brubaker, Ed and Eric Shanower. 1995. *Smells Like Teen President*. New York: Vertigo Comics.
- Russell, Mark, Ben Caldwell, and Mark Morales. 2015. *Prez*, vol. 1 “Corndog-in-Chief.” New York: DC Comics.

## Overview

This activity is based around a handout to help students close-read comics. The handout breaks down the analysis of comics form and style into a series of discrete questions that can help students identify meaningful patterns and motifs in the composition of a graphic text. The handout can be used as a prompt for class discussion or used in assignments that emphasize the formal and stylistic composition of a graphic text.

The attached activity focuses on a comparative close-reading of three iterations of *Prez*, a DC comics series about teenage presidents. This activity focuses on the formal and stylistic details of the three versions of this comic to analyze the various ways they imagine youth voters and the political establishment in their respective historical contexts (1970s, 1990s, 2010s). However, the handout is designed to be used to support close-reading activities for any graphic text in the course.

This close-reading activity is imagined as a two-class activity, with each group of students working on the same version of the comic for the first step, and different reboots for the second step. However, faculty could condense the activity by having individual groups work on different versions of the comic. Similarly, faculty could expand the activity by having each group connect their discussion of form and style to the narrative of each comic. Discussion activities can be conducted in line with the principles of democratic dialogue and reflective discussion in either large or small groups (see the Deliberative Dialogue activity and assignment). Instructors may also choose to have students answer questions individually (either in class or for homework). This way, instructors have maximum flexibility in adapting the activity to the needs and goals of their own class.

## Goals

Through this assignment students will:

- Develop their understanding of comics history and the specificities of various comics forms, including the language of comics form and style.
- Develop their understanding of the relationship between form and content as they explore how meaning is shaped by the interplay between the action of the comic and its formal and stylistic features.
- Learn how to trace the function of style across an individual text, a comics genre, and/or a particular comics mode and its relationship to both the ideology of the text and its specific industrial and historical context.
- Improve critical thinking, analytical, and argumentation skills as they articulate interpretations supported by specific textual evidence.
- Learn about the 26th Amendment, the forces that led to its passing, and the ways it transformed ideas of youth and protest in America.
- Analyze changing attitudes to establishment politics, youth culture, and the power of the youth vote over the last fifty years.
- Explore ideas that could be further developed in more formal assessment.

## Close-Reading Comics Handout

Analyzing a comic or graphic novel is a lot like analyzing literature, and there are lots of things that you can pay attention to in both mediums:

<b>Story</b>	What are the most important moments in the story? What moves the story forward? Is the story told in chronological order? How does the story resolve? Do we feel fulfilled or confused at the end? Is the chain of cause-and-effect clear? What effect does this have on us as readers?
<b>Character</b>	Who do we identify with? Who do we dislike? What motivates characters? Who wins? Who gets punished? How are we positioned to feel about these things? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In comics, we also need to pay attention to how characters are <i>drawn</i> as well as what they say and do.</li></ul>
<b>Symbolism</b>	Are there any images or objects that repeat or seem suggestive? Are certain characters associated with certain places, colors, or things?
<b>Point of View</b>	Is the story told from a specific character's point of view? Is there a narrator? Can we trust what the characters see and say or what the narrator says? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In comics, we need to compare the points of view implied by both the text and the images, as these may not be the same.</li></ul>

There are also some specific elements of comic form and style that we can analyze:

<b>Publication Format</b>	Is the comic serialized or a stand-alone book? What kind of paper is used (rough newsprint or high gloss)? Is it a standard comic size and shape (6.5x10 inches) or does it appear more like an art book or magazine? Is it hardback, paperback, trade, or saddle-stich binding?
<b>Graphiation</b>	How would you describe the graphic style of the comic (realist, iconic, expressive, abstract)? Is it consistent across the text? When and how does the style change?
<b>Color</b>	Is the comic in black and white or color? Does it use the CMYK color process? How does the paper quality impact the color? Does the comic use flat color (images feel 2D so shape is emphasized more) or expressive color (rich color to articulate mood, sensation, or emotion)?
<b>Page Layout</b>	How are the panels organized on the page? Is it clear which order you should read in? Are the panels a conventional shape? Are they laid out in a conventional grid structure or are they organized more creatively? Does the narrative drive the composition of the page or vice versa? What do you notice when you look at the page tabularly (as a whole page) versus sequentially (panel-to-panel)? What is the page-turn moment?
<b>Panel-to-panel transitions</b>	What are the temporal and spatial relationships between each panel? How much closure is required to understand the relationship between each panel? How big is the gutter between each panel? Is the gutter used expressively? Do any of the panels overlap, bleed, or have open borders?
<b>Images</b>	How are the panels composed? What does the image show? What gets left out or is only implied? What are the perspective/size relations between objects in the panel? Where is our eye drawn? Is the image a close-up or is it a long shot? Does it try to emphasize a specific detail or the bigger picture? Do we look straight at the content of the image or are we positioned to look up or down on it? Does the comic use synesthetic symbols (visual icons to represent sound, movement, or feelings)?
<b>Text</b>	What kinds of text appear on the page (dialog, sound effects, narration, description)? Where does the text appear in relation to the image? How big is it? Does the comic use word balloons? What shape and size are they? What fonts are used?
<b>Image/text relations</b>	How do the image and text work together? Do they convey the same or different information? Does one amplify or contradict the other? Is one more important than the other? Does it matter which you read first? Who utters the text and whose point of view focalizes the image?

# Comparative Close-Reading Activity, Step One: The First Iteration of *Prez*

## TEXTS

- *Prez: The First Teen President* #1, pages 5–7
- *Prez: The First Teen President* #2, pages 2–4

## BACKGROUND

The initial run of *Prez: The First Teenage President* was published shortly after the passage of the 26th Amendment in 1971. This amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. The 26th Amendment gained support across the 1960s, in large part, because of conscription during the Vietnam war. Men became eligible for the draft at 18, which meant that many young servicemen felt forced to fight in an increasingly unpopular war when they were denied access to the democratic system that would give them a voice in determining whether the war should even be fought. This notion of expectation without representation broadly echoed the demands of the larger civil rights movement to widen access to voting. Like the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement had successfully mobilized youth and student groups, and across the 1960s youth activism increasingly pushed young people to the forefront of the nation's political struggles. This, in turn, helped to transform American attitudes about youth rights and agency. At a time of social upheaval and increasing distrust, young voters also presented a way forward. Lowering the voting age was seen as a way to channel the radical politics of the previous decade into the existing democratic system that would, at the same time, prompt reform and renew faith in the government in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

## PREREADING QUESTIONS

In your groups, take ten minutes to discuss the three questions below. If you don't feel like you know much, do a little research to get a sense of what young people and comics looked like and cared about at this time.

- What were the major political issues of the late 1960s and early 1970s?
- What do you know about 1970s youth culture?
- What do you know about 1970s comics culture, in particular mainstream comics (DC, Marvel)?

## THE FIRST ITERATION OF *PREZ*

Focus on pages 5–7 in *Prez* #1 and pages 2–4 in *Prez* #2. Using the close-reading comics handout and thinking about what you've just been discussing, consider the following questions. For each question, first describe what's being represented using 3–4 adjectives. Then, try to identify at least three specific stylistic techniques and discuss how they create this impression. As much as you can, focus on style rather than narrative (how information is presented, not simply what is happening).

- How is the world of the comic represented—what is the state of society?
- How is the established political system represented?
- How are youth movements and teenage characters represented?

## Comparative Close-Reading Activity, Step Two: *Prez* in the 1990s and the 2010s

### TEXTS

- *Smells Like Teen President*, pages 6–8, 23–25, 50–53
- *Prez* 2015 vol. 1, pages, 4–6, 11–15, 19–20, 23

### BACKGROUND

*Prez* was relaunched by Vertigo in the mid-1990s under the title *Smells Like Teen President*. In this one-shot publication, Prez Rickard became a recluse after leaving office and is presumed dead. P.J., a troubled teenager, goes searching for him, believing Prez to be his father. The series was rebooted again by DC Comics in 2015 as a six-issue mini-series. This version takes place in a near-future and features the teenager Beth Ross, who is elected President via Twitter (the social media platform now known as X).

In your groups and focusing on either *Smells Like Teen President* or *Prez* 2015, compare the rebooted issue with the original run of *Prez*.

- How has the overall tone of the comic changed? What formal and stylistic choices are responsible for this shift?
- How does the reboot represent American culture? Does it highlight the same issues as the original *Prez*? Are these issues represented in the same way? How do the formal and stylistic elements of the comic impact our understanding of these issues?
- How does the reboot represent the established political system? Is it controlled by the same interests? How are they characterized stylistically in the reboot? Do we get the same impression of them?
- How does the reboot present youth culture? Are young people presented homogeneously or are there different groups? How are they drawn and stylized?
- How does the reboot represent youth movements and protest (if at all)? What does this suggest about the way the comic imagines the processes of social transformation?
- What do these similarities and differences tell us about the way the reboot imagines the future of the nation and the role of youth in contemporary politics?