

Cartoons for the Classroom



Presented in cooperation with the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)

Party animals

What's with all these donkeys and elephants?

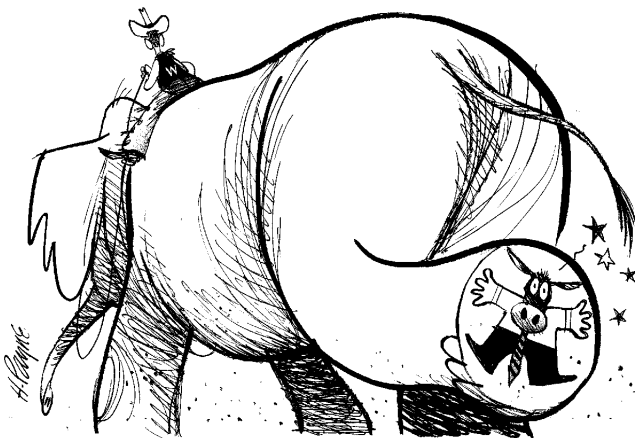


Political cartoonists use a variety of symbols as a visual shorthand to get across complex ideas. But in order to work, the symbols have to be quickly understood by the readers. So how did the donkey and elephant become symbols of the Democrats and Republicans? Artist Thomas Nast is credited with popularizing the symbols in his cartoons for Harper's Weekly magazine in the 1870s. More than 100 years later, cartoonists continue using the symbols when drawing about the political parties.

But, despite their popularity, neither the donkey nor the elephant have ever been adopted as their party's official symbol.

Get out your newspaper

Examine a few weeks worth of your newspaper's political cartoons. What symbols are used in the toons? Can you tell which political party the cartoonist is making fun of? What characteristics do the symbols portray?



Cartoon courtesy Henry Payne / The Detroit News



Detail from a Thomas Nast cartoon in Harper's Weekly in 1874.

Talking points:

Write a short definition for each of the following.

Anthropomorphic _____

Symbolism _____

What do the symbols mean to you? Elephants are strong, dignified and intelligent. Or are they plodding, slow and dim witted? Donkeys are stubborn, humble and hard workers. Or are they stupid, lazy and hard to work with? Kinda depends on how you interpret them, doesn't it? Make a list of other characteristics of elephants and donkeys. Do any match what you know of Democrats and Republicans?

Additional resources

Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC)
<http://pc99.detnews.com/aaec/>

Thomas Nast:
<http://www.lib.ohio-state.edu/cgaweb/nast/index.htm>

Donkey and elephant at top courtesy Mark Fiore