

VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY

Use It or Lose It!



Objective:

Students will recognize the fragile nature of the right to vote and acknowledge the need to protect the right by designing active response plans.

Estimated time: 1 - 2 hours

- Have students read the “Use It or Lose It!” handout.
- Have students circle the actions they would be willing to take part in at the bottom of the handout. Tell them they should be ready to: 1. defend their choices; 2. give the reasons they chose as they did; and 3. describe the possible consequences of their actions or reluctance to act. Following a class discussion of the activity, determine if any of the students have changed his or her mind.
- Working individually or in small groups, have students complete the “Voting Hassles” worksheet.
- Ask the students what countries they guessed the different events occurred in. Do they think that the event is historical or current? What ideas have they determined might be a solution to the problem?
- Next, read the following to the class:

Do you still think your right to vote is secure? How effective do you believe the different laws having to do with voting have been in the United States? Here are the corresponding dates and places where the voting conditions described on the worksheet have existed—each of them right here in our own nation! Maybe we need to think twice about protecting our right to vote.

1. Louisiana, 1890’s 2. Alabama, 1965 3. Mississippi, 1960’s 4. New York, 1872
5. Texas, 1996 6. Texas, 1990’s 7. South Carolina, 2000 8. Florida, 2000

- To conclude the lesson, have students identify what problems with voting remain that must be solved.

References:

Hampton, Henry and Steve Fayer. Voices of Freedom. Bantam Books: New York, 1991.

Rapoport, Miles S. “The American Prospect”. <http://www.org/print/V12/5/rapoport-m.html>



CONCEPT
TWO:

I HAVE A RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO VOTE

Use It or Lose It!

The United States' first national election of the new millennium brought out less than one-half the population of all eligible voters. Some political scientists believe that this poor turnout reflects a thriving economy and happiness with most governmental actions. People are generally content with the government and see no need to make changes. These academics argue that the polling data show that if people are unhappy, they tend to turn out in larger numbers. There are other scientists who say that a poor turnout is indicative of a nation with serious problems; one in which citizens do not care enough to take part in electing their government leaders or don't believe that their votes will make a difference. These theorists say that many citizens do not understand that a strong democracy requires the participation of an active group of participants. They point out that in those cases where people have lost the vote or have never had the vote the government usually falls into the hands of too few, and the rights of the people are ignored.

The founders of the country strongly believed that democracy requires its people to take part. If we fail to take part, we are no longer truly a democratic nation, no matter how content or unhappy we are with it. Taking the right to vote for granted is dangerous and deadly to the process of democracy.

It has not been easy for many members of this nation to gain the right to vote. After many years of fighting and seemingly gaining the right of suffrage (vote), some groups of people have had to keep fighting to continue protecting that right. Many of those groups were finally protected with the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 that was written to enforce the constitutional right to vote and then strengthened with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 that prohibits the use of voting laws, practices or procedures that discriminate in either purpose or effect on the basis of race, color, or membership in a minority language group.

Today around the world people continue to fight and die for the right to vote. How far would you go to keep this basic human right to choose your own government leaders? Indicate below which of the following you would be willing to take part in.

Protest

Run for office

Non-violent actions

Attend meetings

Fight in a war

Make campaign donations

Letter writing campaign

Go to jail

Petition

Nothing

What other actions might you take to defend your right to vote?

Voting Hassles

Directions:

Seriously consider for a moment what it would mean to be denied the ability to elect our government officials who have so much power over our lives. Imagine that the following incidents happened to you. First, for each example, write down in what country you think this incident might have happened. Next, develop an action plan that responds to each example and begins to take positive steps to protect the right to vote. Be prepared to discuss your ideas with the class.

1. While you are waiting to register to vote, many men ride by in a pickup truck with shotguns. It is very hot and you are waiting in line very long. The water has been turned off at nearby faucets and there is none to drink. Suddenly the doors ahead close and you are told for the third day in a row to go home and come back tomorrow.
2. A poll tax is charged for you to vote. You have very little money to pay, and they tell you that since you did not pay last year, you now owe twice as much if you want to vote.
3. Before they will allow you to register to vote, you are required to interpret several sections of the country's constitution that explains the rules of government. Your explanation must meet the approval of the registrar.
4. When you attempt to vote, you are arrested and put in jail.
5. Voting districts are gerrymandered (boundaries are drawn in uneven, illogical shapes) so that certain groups of people are submerged in a larger group. This larger group of people will effectively cancel your voting interests.
6. Radio ads are run to purposely confuse you about the method of absentee voting.
7. Polling places are closed early in certain areas of the city. Your precinct is closed when you get off work, and you do not get to vote.
8. Ballots are difficult or confusing to interpret. They are also difficult to mark so that your vote cannot be easily read.



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VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY

Voting and City Government

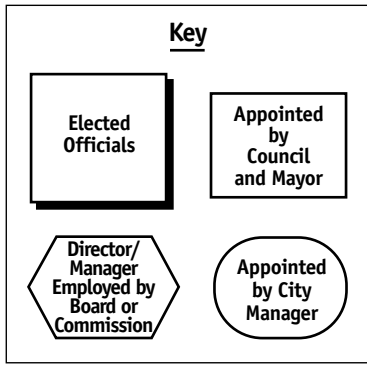
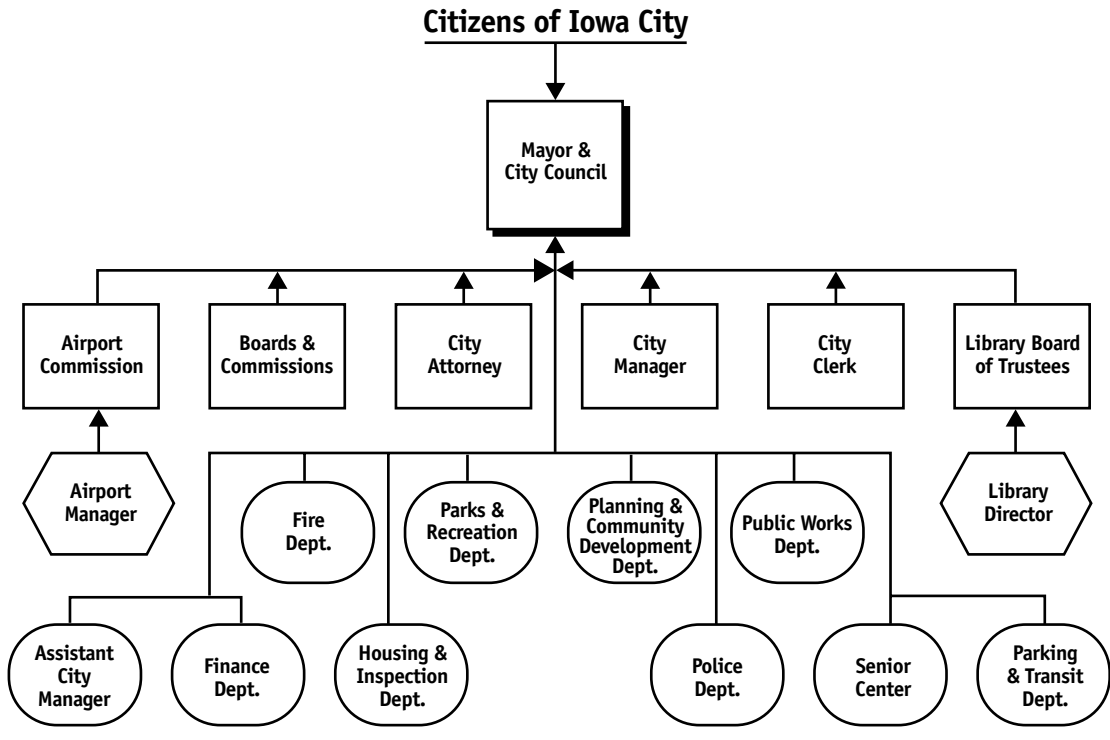


Objective:

Students research the individuals, groups and committees that make up the local city government and determine what part voting plays in how local government operates.

Estimated class time: 3 hours

- Using the phone book and/or the Internet, have students develop a list of the individuals, groups and committees that make up the local city government. For each one, students should gather the following information, if needed by contacting someone at City Hall.
 - Name of individual position, group or committee
 - Contact information (name, phone number and/or e-mail address)
 - List whether individuals in this group are appointed, elected, or hired
- Pooling their information, students can assist in constructing a flow chart to determine how voting contributes to the make-up of the city government. (See example on p. 23.)
- Next, have students e-mail someone from each group or committee to find out how voting plays a role in the functioning of the group. Do the groups use voting to make decisions? How often? About what types of topics?
- After students have received replies to their messages, ask students to reflect on and discuss the role of voting in local government groups and committees. Do many groups make decisions by voting? Are there any groups that do not use voting? How do those groups make decisions?
- An optional activity would be for students to research and write a report about one government group or committee for which voting is very important. What would happen to this group if there were no elections for members? How does the group use voting at its meetings?





VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY

Voter Survey



Objective:

Students will survey adults to learn why they vote or why they do not.

Estimated class time: 3 hours

- As a class, decide how many adults each student will survey. Each student should plan to talk to 5-10 adults to provide adequate data. Require students to go beyond just their parents or other relatives and to attempt to reach a diverse spectrum of the general voting public. A more time efficient way to collect data might be to use e-mail; some parents might be willing to provide their children with e-mail addresses of their friends and/or co-workers for this purpose.
- Have the students brainstorm possible questions to ask on the survey. Be sure that students' questions are clear and neutral. Questions might include the following:
 - Did you vote in the last presidential election?
 - If yes, what were your reasons for voting?
 - If no, why did you decide not to vote?
- Have the class determine what demographic information to collect along with the answers to the survey questions. Possibilities include gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, and educational level.
- Make sure students keep accurate records of their survey results. A common form could be made and copied to ensure this outcome.
- In small groups, have students compare their survey results. What percentage of people voted? Does there seem to be any relationship between any of the demographic information collected and whether a person voted or not? What are the most common reasons adults gave for voting? Why did they say they did not vote?
- Compiling all the information from the class, have students develop a profile, perhaps even draw a picture, of the typical voter from their community. Compare this profile with data from local exit polls (contact your local voter registration office) or with national survey data from a web site.
- Have students reflect on what they learned from this activity. Based on the reasons adults gave for voting and not voting, brainstorm possible strategies for increasing voter participation. What ideas have you heard about already? Have any of these been effective? Has Kids Voting USA been an effective program in your community for getting adults to the polls? What other ideas might hold promise for increasing the number of voters in future elections in the U.S.?

VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY

Voicing Your Opinion



Advocacy

Objective:

Students will attend a school board, town meeting, city council, or county supervisors' meeting and voice their views on a selected issue either verbally or in writing.

Estimated class time: 5 hours

- Have students select a current community issue of concern to youth that will be discussed at an upcoming school board or city council meeting.



At the beginning of the school year, call the city council office and the superintendent of schools and ask to be put on a mailing list for the locations, dates, times, and agendas of the two groups' meetings.

- Ask students to find out all they can about this issue, the various perspectives held by community members, and the options for action. Newspapers, public opinion surveys, and printed materials from the school board or city council will be the best sources of information.



See lessons on Choosing an Issue (p. 10) and Community Survey (p. 11) for further ideas on how to have students research an issue.

- Have students develop their own position on the issue. Their positions should be written in essay form and should include: a) a brief description of the issue; b) a discussion of different perspectives and ideas for action on the issue; c) the student's own perspective; and d) reasons supporting the student's perspective.
- Students should choose whether they would like to express their opinion in a letter to the city council or school board or publicly at the group's meeting. If students write letters, send them ahead of the meeting the students will attend. If students plan to speak publicly, they can write out a few notes on an index card to remind them of their key points.
- Before attending the meeting, if possible, obtain and watch part of a videotape of a past city council or school board meeting. After watching the tape, discuss as a class how the meetings are organized. What are the rules for who can speak? When will students speak? Will they remain seated, stand up or speak from a podium?



CONCEPT
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I HAVE A RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO VOTE



- Attend the meeting as a class, if possible. The next day in class, discuss the meeting and the students' contributions. Do they feel that their views were heard? Do they think they made a difference in regard to the issue?
- Continue to stay informed about this community issue. Encourage students to bring in news clippings and/or attend future public meetings where this issue is addressed and report back to the class. Have a bulletin board in the room or school hallway where students can post news clippings. You could also invite local government leaders to come to class and talk about steps taken to address the issue. Finally, discuss as a class how students can continue to be involved voicing their opinions to make a difference. For example, do students have any issues of concern that they would like to try to get on a community group's agenda?

VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY



**Direct,
Advocacy**

Student Representatives

Objective:

Students serve on a local community board or committee as youth representatives to provide a youth perspective on community issues.

Estimated class time: 3 hours

- Have students develop a list of community agencies and local government committees that might welcome a youth representative.
- Divide up these groups and have each student contact one or two agencies by phone or letter to inquire about their interest in having a youth representative on the committee. Be sure to include in this communication how youth might contribute to the efforts of the group. Have students tell those who are interested in having a youth representative that they will be contacting them again soon for more information.



If students come across boards or committees that already have youth representation, have them gather additional information such as written guidelines for youth participation and an interview with the current youth representative. An additional resource may be your congressional representatives; some have youth advisory councils.

- As students gather information from interested boards and committees, they should make sure to ask for all of the following:
 - name and contact information for the chair of the board or committee
 - specific information about when, where, and how long the committee meets
 - purpose of the committee, current projects and activities
 - how elected officials affect the committee
 - ideas about how a youth perspective might contribute to the committee's work
 - limits on youth participation (For example, will the youth representative be a voting member of the committee?)
 - how long a commitment the committee wants in regard to student involvement (one meeting, six months, the school year, etc.)
- Have students add this information to a chart or fill out a form that can be included in a booklet of local opportunities or a web page for youth representatives.



CONCEPT TWO: I HAVE A RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO VOTE

- Make the information accessible to students who might want to participate as youth representatives. Have students sign up with one teacher or club for effective coordination.
- Provide opportunities for students who serve as youth representatives to gain public recognition in the school and/or community for the time and energy they are contributing.



- Also, provide periodic forums for these students to share what they are learning about the community, local issues, and the specific board or agency with a service club, social studies classes, or the student body.



Make sure that students participating in this service-learning activity are willing to make a commitment to attend the community board or committee meetings for the days, times, and duration required.

VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY



Advocacy

Election Judge Trainees

Objective:

Students will learn about the voting process and assist at the polls during an election.

Estimated class time: 3 hours

- Have students research the history of voting in the United States. (*Civics Alive!* core activities: A Game of Cards (p. 7), 1965 Alabama Literacy Test (p. 10), and We, the Women (p. 17), are good content lessons for this subject.) How has the process changed over time? How do election laws or the voting process differ from state to state? What are some of the challenges that have disenfranchised voters (e.g. poll taxes, butterfly ballots)? What is the history of suffrage in the US? (Women? Blacks? Youth?) What is the process for challenging a voter? What are some of the famous voting rights issues/cases? How do you think the process can be improved? Since 1972, 18 year-olds have had the vote and there was a fifty percent turnout in that election year. It has declined ever since. What can be done to reverse this trend and engage more young people?
- Contact your local elections or voter information office. Invite someone to come and speak to the class about the election process. How and why does it work the way it does? How do people register to vote? Can they register at the polls on the day of the election? What contributions do poll workers make to the election process?
- The next day in class, have students discuss which of the options presented by the guest speaker they are most interested in. Since poll workers are getting older and seeking volunteers is sometimes challenging, there is enthusiasm in some locations for involving youth in this capacity. Talk with the entity in your area responsible for elections about the possibility of involving youth in the capacity of election judge trainees, serving as an actual election official with important responsibilities. Some of the duties of election judge trainees could include helping regular adult election judges with opening and closing the polls; being responsible for all election materials; ensuring that only qualified voters are permitted to vote and that each qualified voter is permitted to vote only once; distributing ballots, ensuring that all votes are cast in secret; helping voters who require assistance; maintaining order in the voting place throughout the day; obtaining the results after the polls are closed; and certifying the precinct election results.



Be sure to clear permission for this activity with your school principal.



- If serving as judge trainees is not feasible because of state election laws or other restrictions, an alternative volunteer opportunity might incorporate a range of more modest activities including: help set up equipment at the polling places, answer phones, get refreshments for poll workers, welcome voters, hand out ballots, provide translation services, provide assistance for those with special needs, assist in counting ballots, and pack up equipment and supplies.
- After completing the service activity, as students to discuss or write about their experiences as poll workers. Was it hard to do? Fun? What kinds of reactions did they get from others? Do they think they made a difference? What did they learn about voting and elections from their experience? Are there pieces of the process that could be changed to make the voting experience more acceptable, interesting, etc.?



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State Issue Watch



Objective:

Students contact their state lawmakers about their positions on an issue of current public concern.

Advocacy

Estimated class time: 4 hours



- As students read the newspapers and watch television news, encourage them to focus on news at the state level. What issues are of concern? How do they affect students' lives and future?

- Also, ask a few students to check your state government web site to find out about issues that will be voted on in the near future.

- After reviewing several issues of concern at the state level, have students vote on the issue they would like to address. Students should research the issue and develop an understanding of the various perspectives on it. If possible, invite a local state representative to the class to give the students information about the different views on this issue.



As with other lessons in this curriculum, students should choose an issue of interest and significance to youth. For example, in Iowa, for the past few years the state legislature has been discussing the pros and cons of passing a law requiring all individuals up to the age of sixteen to wear bicycle helmets when they are cycling.

- Have students develop their own perspectives and choose a method for making their voices heard by their state representatives. Possibilities include in-person lobbying, phoning, writing or e-mailing their views.
- Before contacting the chosen elected official, students should use a government web site to find out how this individual currently views the issue, his/her past voting record on the issue, and any other pertinent information that will assist the student in developing an appropriate communication.

CONCEPT TWO: I HAVE A RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO VOTE

- Students should include the following information, regardless of the method chosen.
 - their name and contact information
 - why they are contacting their elected official
 - some basic knowledge and facts about the issue
 - their perspective on the issue
 - how they would like the elected official to take action on this issue
 - a request for a response from the elected official as to his/her views and intended action
- Set up a bulletin board in the room to keep track of responses to the students from state lawmakers and any news articles about actions taken at the state level on the issue under study. Students can also periodically review state government web sites to find out what votes or actions have been taken on the issue.
- In addition to the advocacy activity here, students could also inform other students, parents, and community members about the issue and encourage their involvement. The class could also brainstorm options for continuing to work on the issue through either advocacy, direct action, or indirect action such as a fundraiser.



VOTING IN MY COMMUNITY



Get Out the Vote

**Direct,
Advocacy**

Objective:

Students will participate in a variety of activities to increase the number of registered voters and/or Kids Voters who attend the polls on election day.

Estimated class time: 3 month project, time varies according to choices made

- Have students brainstorm responses to the following question: “How can we increase the number of registered voters who attend the polls to vote on election day?”



It is important to begin this activity in September in order to have enough time to plan and carry out activities before a November election.

- Here are some possibilities to add to students’ lists if they do not come up with them.
 - posters
 - flyers
 - letter to the editor of a newspaper
 - public service announcement on the radio
 - voter registration
 - calling registered voters to remind them to vote
 - setting up a public display in the library, mall or outside a grocery store
 - contacting neighbors, friends, former high school grads, relatives, etc.
 - driving seniors or others who need transportation to the polls
 - coordinating childcare at the polls
 - assisting younger students in Kids Voting USA at the polls (who hopefully will come with their parents who will also vote)



Be sure to check school policies and local election laws to determine if it is permissible for students to drive senior citizens or others who need rides to the polls.

- Provide students with accurate information about where the polls are located and what hours they are open.
- Decide which activity or activities students will undertake to increase the voter turnout. Students in one class or club could work in small groups based on their chosen task. Another possibility would be to have different classes in the school take responsibility for planning and coordinating different activities.

CONCEPT TWO: I HAVE A RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO VOTE

- Before students plan their activity, have them find out if there are others in the community with whom they might coordinate their efforts, such as the PTA, the teacher's union, or the local voter registration coordinator. The major political parties often organize calling registered voters to remind them to vote a day or two before the election. If students want to participate in this effort, they should contribute time to all political parties involved or an equal number of students should contribute their time to each party.
- Have students plan early on how they will assess the results of their efforts. Groups should endeavor to count the number of people they have supported in voting. A large thermometer type graph could be posted in the hallway and filled in periodically as students complete their activities. (Of course, they won't be able to discern the effects of all activities, for example, posters and flyers.) As a school or a class, students could set a goal to support a certain number (100? 1000?) of voters getting to the polls. They could check Auditor's web pages or contact the Auditor's office or the Election Commissioner for voter turnout records. Be sure to compare results to the voter turnout of the last comparable election.



- After the election, discuss in class whether students think they made a difference. What did they learn about the challenges of voting in our democracy?