

VOTER REGISTRATION

Register Your Opinion



Objective:

Students will explore new possibilities and old issues concerning voter registration and voting and write letters to the government expressing their own opinions.

Estimated class time: 2 hours

- Ask students to read the information on the “Register Your Opinion” handout.
- Read the following to the students: “As current or future voters, what suggestions would you have for this committee to improve the system of voter registration and voting to make it more appealing or accessible to you?” Ask students to write out their responses in class or as homework.
- In class, discuss students’ ideas. Brainstorm a variety of possibilities and encourage students to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each. This information could be written up in a chart on the board.



Interested students could research voting practices in other democratic countries in the world. Which countries have high voter turnout? Can we learn something from them to increase the voter turnout in the U.S.?

- Have students individually or in small groups write letters to the U.S. House Administration Committee explaining their suggestions and utilizing facts from the handout or other facts from the following web site or some of its links:
<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/nr/2001/voting2facts.html>
- If students receive responses to their letters, encourage them to share them with the class or post in a special location in the classroom.
- Further discussion in class could focus on how school elections are held. Do the current procedures ensure a valid outcome? How could the process be improved?

References for this lesson:

National Institute of Standards and Technology. “Hearing Report: Voting Technology Hearing”. <http://www.nist.gov/hearings/2001/votetech2.htm>

Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project. “Voting: What is, What could be”. <http://weeb.mit.edu/newsoffice/nr/2001/voting2facts.html>





Register Your Opinion

In May of 2001 the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Administration held a special hearing concerning voting technology. Experts in the field shared their opinions, ideas and recommendations regarding voting and voter registration systems in the U.S.

Facts show that elections are currently organized at the state level where officials are responsible for ensuring fair elections. Voting lists enable state officials to check for voting fraud or double voting. Statewide voting lists can make this job more efficient and manageable, yet only 14 states have such computerized lists at this time.

Some experts suggest that the U.S. system of voluntary registration is seriously outdated and seems to hinder voter turnout. In nations where the government either requires its citizens to register, or does not require registration at all, the voter turnout is much higher than in the U.S.

Finding ways to improve registration practices may be the answer. Evidence points to better voter turnout in states with less restrictive registration practices. Currently six states that have same-day registration report higher rates of voter turnout (63.1 percent) than the national average, which is 51.2 percent. Outreach programs for youth registration have shown success in numerous states, such as in Connecticut where registrars are required to go into the high schools each year to register eligible interested students.

Encouraging naturalized citizens to register and vote is also important. During the past two years over 1.8 million immigrants have become U.S. citizens. In some local elections, such as school boards, resident immigrants can actually vote before becoming citizens. Election reform for felons is also of concern. When should criminals have their right to vote returned to them?

The committee also heard testimony on how technology can be used to improve registration and voting practices in the U.S. The experts told the House Committee that more money would enable the states to buy updated electronic equipment, which has been shown to be more reliable. Voting by phone, electronic voting, and online registration and voting are all possible solutions, yet serious problems related to security and privacy need to be overcome before these new technologies are workable.

Another idea is making Election Day a national holiday. Getting to the polling place to vote is a practical problem for many people who work the same hours as the precinct opens. Many citizens have transportation issues and other scheduling conflicts on election days. Recently some states have allowed for votes to be cast weeks or days in advance, or have accepted mail-in ballots, resulting in improved voter turnout for many communities.

Which of these ideas do YOU think would improve the U.S. system of voter registration and voting? What other ideas do you have that might prove useful?

VOTER REGISTRATION

Learning about Voter Registration



Objective:

Students will learn about the qualifications of being a voter and how to register to vote in their community. They will obtain the forms required for voter registration and practice filling them out.

Estimated class time: 1 - 2 hours

- Have students learn about the qualifications of being a voter in the United States. They can look for this information on the Internet or in printed materials. How have these qualifications changed over time? What grassroots and political efforts led to these changes?
- Have students find out how one registers to vote in their community. Can a person register electronically? Through the mail? In person at a specific location?
- Locate and make copies of the forms that need to be completed to register to vote. Students or teacher could also obtain forms from a neighboring state that are different to compare with those from your state.
- Have students practice filling out the registration forms. Discuss together whether the forms are easy to fill out or whether they might be challenging for some adults.



See the High School Kids Voting USA Civics Alive! curriculum lessons on pp. 45 - 52 for activities that reinforce and extend the learning in this lesson.



VOTER REGISTRATION

Rock the Vote



Objective:

The students will learn about youth organizations aimed at increasing the voting rate of youth 18 to 25 years old and write a letter to a young friend or relative in another state about how to register to vote.

Estimated class time: 1 - 2 hours

- Have students find information about “Rock the Vote” on the Internet (www.rockthevote.org). While this campaign to increase voting among 18 to 25 year olds was more active before the November 2000 election, the organization is still involved in a variety of efforts to increase youth voting rates.
- Ask students to follow the link on the Rock the Vote web site to find information on voter registration for each state. Have each student choose a state in which s/he has a friend or relative of voting age who is not registered to vote.
- Have students look up the guidelines for voter registration for their chosen state on the Internet (www.lwv.org/electioncentral/registration.htm).
- Ask each student to write a letter to his or her friend or relative in another state about how to register to vote in that state. Include at least three reasons why one should register and vote. Encourage the students to mail their letters and let the class know if they receive a response.
- Discuss whether receiving a letter is an effective method of persuading youth to register and vote. What other efforts might prove successful? Research the effects of the Kids Voting USA program. Has this program increased youth and/or adult voting rates in the communities where it has been adopted?

VOTER REGISTRATION



Birthday Surprise

Advocacy

Objective:

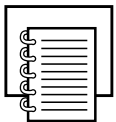
Students will make and distribute special birthday cards for students in the school who turn 18, encouraging them to register to vote.

Estimated class time: 1 - 2 hours

- Obtain a list of seniors in the high school who will turn 18 before they graduate. Make sure the list has their birth dates.
- Have students design and create special 18th birthday cards. Ask a few students to develop a handout to be included with the card that gives information about registering to vote. The national voter registration form could also be included with the card.
- Develop a plan for distributing the cards to the appropriate individuals on their birthdays.
- Have students include a short survey with the following questions to be returned to the class.
 - Were you already planning on registering to vote when you turned 18?
 - Will you register to vote soon?
 - Do you think it is important for young adults to vote? Why or why not? The surveys could be returned to a teacher's office mailbox or through e-mail.



- After a number of cards have been distributed and surveys received, discuss whether this approach to voter registration in the school is working or not. If not, consider alternate ideas and plans for encouraging those who turn 18 to register to vote.



If you wish to make this a group service-learning project, have committees assigned to work on the following tasks: obtaining the list of seniors birth dates, designing the cards, developing the voter registration handout and obtaining the forms, designing the survey, and creating a plan for distributing the cards.



VOTER REGISTRATION

Registering New Voters



Advocacy

Objective:

The students will distribute voter registration information to adults who are not currently registered to vote.

Estimated class time: 3 hours

- Ask students to brainstorm about how to find adults who are not registered to vote. In general, individuals who are younger, less educated, and less wealthy are less likely to be registered to vote. Have students seek out high school students who are at least 18 years old and local college students. You could also contact the local immigration service center to identify and reach for-ign-born citizens. High school language classes could help with translating information.



Work with your local Board of Elections or voter registration office on this activity. They may have additional ideas about how to seek out those who are not currently registered to vote.

- Have students prepare a flyer to be given to individuals they find who are not currently registered to vote. The flyer could be designed by individual students, small groups or the class as a whole. The flyer might include any of the following:
 - how to register to vote (include several options)
 - why it is important to register to vote
 - how your vote could make a difference
 - statistics about close votes, percentage of voters in certain age groups, etc.
- In addition to giving flyers to those they find who are not currently registered, students could post their flyers in public locations or mail flyers to relatives and friends in other states.



If flyers are mailed out of state, make sure to check the voter registration guidelines for that state and send along the appropriate information in a cover letter to accompany the flyer.



- Have students keep track of how many flyers they distribute as a class. Discuss the following question. If each of those who received flyers registered and then asked someone else to register to vote, how many new voters would we have?

VOTER REGISTRATION



Direct

Assisting People with Disabilities

Objective:

Students will develop and carry out plans to assist individuals with disabilities in registering to vote and voting.

Estimated class time: 5 hours

- There are 43 million Americans with disabilities. Many of these people are adults of voting age. With support from the American with Disabilities Act, the U.S. government has a legal responsibility to assist individuals with disabilities in living full and productive lives. Have students brainstorm the types of disabilities that could affect how one registers to vote or how one votes. Could some types of disabilities deter an individual from registering or voting at all?
- Have students research existing services for people with disabilities in terms of registering to vote and voting. What accommodations are available at your local voter registration office and local polls?
- Invite a speaker to the class who works with people with disabilities in the community. Ask the speaker to invite a person with a disability to come to the class with them and speak to the class as well. Have students prepare questions in advance to ask these individuals about issues, problems, and services for people with disabilities related to registering to vote and voting.
- At a class session after the speakers' visit, brainstorm as a class how to assist people with disabilities in registering and voting. Have students, either individually or in small groups, develop a plan to assist people with a specific disability in registering to vote and voting in a local election.
- Have students collaborate with the voter registration office, local agencies that serve people with disabilities, or the local elections commission to increase the numbers of people with disabilities who are registered and who vote. Students could volunteer their time and/or make suggestions to the elections commission.
- Where appropriate, individual students who are completing the service activity can then be paired with a person with a disability to register and/or vote in a local election. If individuals with disabilities require transportation to the polls, it may be possible to use school buses with special accommodations for this purpose.



- After the election, have students who engaged in direct service with people with disabilities talk about their experiences in class. Why is it important for people with disabilities to be able to register and vote? Did the students make a difference with their assistance?



VOTER REGISTRATION

Senior Citizen Outreach



Direct

Objective:

Students will visit a nursing home to interview seniors and assist those who desire help to register and/or vote.

Estimated class time: 3 hours

- Find a nursing home or senior center within a short distance of the high school. Contact the activities director and explain your ideas for collaborating with them around registering to vote and voting.



For this service-learning activity, the senior citizens must be mentally competent and interested in participating in this collaboration.

- Arrange times when students can visit the nursing home to interview the seniors. The students can brainstorm a list of questions to ask their interviewees. Following are some possibilities:
 - What is your name?
 - Have you ever registered to vote? (If yes, follow up with asking about how old the person was at the time of registration, how s/he completed the registration process, how often s/he has voted over the years, etc.)
 - Do you remember the first time you voted? Who was the first presidential candidate for whom you voted?
 - (If the senior is an immigrant to the U.S.) Did you vote in the country you lived in before the U.S.? What was your experience there like? How does it compare with your experience of voting in the U.S.?
 - Are you currently registered to vote? (If not, would you like to be? Why or why not?)
 - (If the senior is registered, continue with the following.) Our next election is on _____. Would you like to vote in this election? (If yes, would you like to go to the polls or would you like an absentee ballot?)
- Have students follow up with their interviewee to provide appropriate information and/or assistance. Students could also provide the senior with campaign literature, information on special referenda, or just an opportunity to discuss the issues and candidates before voting.



There is a national law that prohibits individuals from coercing others to register or to vote in an election. It is permissible to provide the opportunity to register or to vote, but not to pressure or intimidate someone.



- After the service-learning activity is completed, have each participating student write a short reflection paper on their experience and the following questions. How did your senior interviewee respond to the interview? What did you learn about voting or registering from the senior's experience? Was there any assistance you were able to provide? Why is it important for all people to be able to register and vote?

VOTER REGISTRATION



**Direct,
Advocacy**

Voter Registration Drive

Objective:

Students will conduct a voter registration drive at the high school in conjunction with Back to School night (or some other event well attended by adults in the community).

Estimated class time: varies, depending on chosen activities

- Obtain permission from the principal for organizing a voter registration drive on the evening of the Back to School Night. Contact your local Board of Elections or voter registration office for information and guidelines to effectively plan and conduct this activity.
- A student planning committee (or one class) should develop a general plan for the event. Will there be several tables located throughout the school or one table at a central location? The planning committee can decide which of the following work groups are needed for the event:
 - publicity - get the word out to community members about the event. This could be a large committee to handle designing flyers, posters, news articles, public service announcements and so forth as well as distributing flyers or putting up posters around the community.
 - voter registration information - gather the appropriate forms and information and get copies made
 - staffing - create a schedule of students who will cover shifts at each table to distribute registration materials and answer questions
 - refreshments - provide simple refreshments (e.g. cookies and cider) for those in attendance
- At the Back to School night, students should make sure that all tables are staffed and that appropriate information is available.



- Follow-up activities could include writing articles about the event for the school newspaper or local papers. Also, students could develop and distribute a short evaluation form for those in attendance to complete before they leave the school. This feedback should be helpful in planning similar events in the future.



If this activity is successful and students are interested, they could volunteer to coordinate voter registration drives at other schools on their Back to School nights.