

Why Don't More People in the U.S. Vote?

Overview

In this lesson, students discuss the problem of low voter turnout and explore ways to increase it. First, they read an article about low voting rates and proposals for addressing this problem. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation on the reading. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator (the teacher), participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues. In an alternate activity, students conduct a poll to determine political interest levels and ideas for increasing voter turnout in a selected community (e.g., school or community).

Standards and Topics

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A: Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Topics: elections, voter turnout, voter registration, opinion polling

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain the demographic factors that make people more or less likely to vote.
2. Evaluate proposals to make voter registration easier and to institute voter IDs.
3. Conduct and evaluate the results of an opinion poll (alternate activity).
4. By participating in a Civil Conversation, students:
 - a. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
 - b. Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
 - c. Present text-based claims.
 - d. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
 - e. Identify common ground among differing views.

Materials

Handout A: Why Don't More People in the U.S. Vote? (one per student)

Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide (one per student)

Handout C (for alternate activity): The Voters' Poll (one per pair of students)

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Tell students that eligible voters generally are U.S. citizens who are 18 years old or older. Poll students: How many eligible voters voted in the 2016 presidential elections: 100 percent of eligible voters? 90 percent? 75 percent? 60 percent? Lower than 60 percent?
- B. Inform students that the 2016 turnout was lower than 60 percent. Tell students that people's attitudes toward government affect the likelihood of whether or not they'll vote in elections. But voter turnout in elections in the United States is generally low. That is what they will learn about today.

II. Reading: Why Don't More People in the U.S. Vote?

- A. Briefly overview the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the Overview above to help you.
Give each student a copy of **Handout A: Why Don't More People in the U.S. Vote?**
- B. Civil Conversation Guide
Distribute a copy of **Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide** to each student to complete as they read. (Each student should fill in his/her own guide.)

III. Activity: Civil Conversation

- A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.
- B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what's best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)
 - **Time:** Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with.
 - **Small Groups:** This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group together students who will use the same text.
- C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.
- D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.

- E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:
- What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
 - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
 - Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.
- B. If you want to also debrief the content of the Civil Conversation, you might ask students:
- Was there any surprising information you learned from the reading? What was it?
 - What are the problems today with voter turnout?
 - What do you think are the most effective ways to increase voter turnout?
- C. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:
- Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.
 - Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.
 - Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
 - Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
 - Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
 - Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.
- D. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

V. Alternate Activity & Assessment: The Voters' Poll

- A. Distribute **Handout A: Why Don't More People in the U.S. Vote?** to each student. Have students read the handout and annotate the text by jotting down questions in the margins, circling unfamiliar terms, and underlining the main points of the text.
- B. Conduct a whole-class discussion using the **Writing & Discussion** questions or assign the questions for assessment (see Part V(E) below). Be sure to tell students to use the text of **Handout A** for evidence in their answers.
1. Why don't people vote? List as many causes as you can for the decrease in voter turnout. (*obstacles to voter registration, poor and minorities not registering, decreased interest in politics, etc.*) What do you believe is the main cause? (*Accept reasoned responses.*)
 2. What do you think the consequences might be to American democracy if the trend of declining voter turnout continues into the next century? (*Answers may include a deepening of the “vicious circle” or new laws to fight voter suppression, but look for answers that cite the gap between the number of eligible voters and registered voters.*)

C. Conducting the Poll

This is an opinion survey. Before beginning, decide whether you want to have students poll fellow students at school or members of the wider community. If the answer is members of the wider community, change the last question to: *Do you ordinarily vote in elections?*

- a. Divide the class into pairs. (Or have students choose partners.)
 - b. Read the instructions aloud on **Handout C: The Voters' Poll**. Have students conduct the survey on each other in their pairs for practice.
 - c. As a whole class, tabulate the results and discuss them. (Record the results for future reference.)
 - d. Determine the best way for getting a random sample of the group students will survey (students or community members). For example, you might have students survey every fourth person in the lunch line.
 - e. Have the pairs conduct the survey on five people outside of class.
 - f. Have the pairs report their results. Tabulate them and compare them to the class survey.
- CI. Combine pairs into groups of four (two pairs each). Write the following questions on the board and have the groups discuss their answers:
- What surprised you about the results of the poll? What didn't surprise you?
 - Would the results be different if you asked just adults? Other groups?
 - Which survey questions are the most important? Why?

CII. Assessment/Closure

Option 1: Have each student write answers to the Writing & Discussion questions. Look for answers that use the text and the activity discussions as evidence. (See Part V(B) above.)

Option 2: Have each student write a well-developed paragraph arguing either for or against judicial retention elections. Students should cite at least three facts from the text and from their activity discussions to support their argument.