

# 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.
- D. 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?

### E. 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.

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

In the 2016 presidential election, voter turnout fell nearly to a 20-year low. And voter turnout in the United States consistently lags far behind that of many other countries. But Americans still consider democracy one of their most cherished principles. Our Constitution has been emulated by many emerging democracies. Given the value and importance of democracy to American values, principles, and institutions, why don't more people in the United States vote?

### The Voters

Generally, the older you are and the more wealth you have, the more likely it is that you will be a voter. However, young-adult voters turned out in record numbers in the 2018 midterm election, increasing early voting rates 188 percent over the 2014 midterm election.

Aside from age, education and income level remain the best predictors of a person's likelihood to vote. According to the *New York Times*, those most likely to vote have an annual income from \$50,000–\$100,000. White people and those between the ages of 40–64 are the most likely to vote in the race and age groups, respectively. However, black voter turnout has increased at least 20 percent since the mid-1990s.

Throughout the 1800s, about 80 percent of those qualified (i.e., white males) actually voted. Toward the end of the century, particularly after the Civil War, many states set up obstacles to voting such as poll taxes, literacy tests, residency requirements, and annual registration fees. These obstacles were primarily directed against Southern blacks as part of segregationist state laws (known as Black Codes and, later, Jim Crow laws). In the 19th century, many Northern states also enacted laws that prevented black men from voting and passed laws to make voting more difficult for white workers who were recent immigrants and who spoke little English. As a result of these obstacles, voting levels nationwide went down from 79 percent in 1896 to 49 percent in 1920.

The 15th Amendment prohibiting racial discrimination in voting in 1870 and the 19th Amendment giving women the vote in 1920 expanded the franchise to more and more Americans. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 protected minorities' right to vote in the South where state laws had deliberately undermined and violated the 15th Amendment since 1877. In 1971, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

Still, voter participation in the United States has declined. Compared to other developed nations in the world, the U.S. has very low voter turnout. Belgium leads the world in voter turnout with a rate of 87.2 percent of eligible voters in a recent national election. The U.S. trails far behind with its rate of only 55.7 percent in 2016.

### Voting Laws: Is Easier Registration the Answer?

Some experts link the decline in voting to bureaucratic obstacles. In their 1988 book *Why Americans Don't Vote*, sociologists Frances Piven and Richard Cloward point out that when Americans are registered to vote, they show up at the polls 80 percent of the time. They argue that despite



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legislation that potentially opens the polls to nearly everyone, obstacles to voter registration continue to affect turnout at the polls. Poor people and minorities tend to be less likely to register to vote. Their lack of voting tends to create a vicious circle. When the poor and minorities refrain from voting, politicians do not feel obligated to address their concerns. Because politicians don't speak to their needs, these groups risk becoming even less interested in politics.

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 was based on the assumption that voting is a fundamental right and that it is the duty of government to promote the exercise of that right. The act was designed to encourage potential voters to register and to remove discriminatory and unfair obstacles to voter registration. It requires states to register voters with three methods. Eligible citizens can register:

- When applying for or renewing a driver's license. This so-called "motor-voter" method is used in about a dozen states.
- With a mail-in application.
- At public assistance agencies and agencies that provide services to people with disabilities. In addition, election officials must send all applicants a notice informing them of their voter registration status.

Supporters of the National Voter Registration Act, mostly Democrats, argued that the measure would help register 90 percent of all eligible Americans. Because non-voters tend to be poor, young, or from racial or ethnic minorities, many election observers believed that an increased voter population would aid the Democrats, traditionally the party of choice for those citizens.

Opponents of the bill, mostly Republicans, expressed concern that it would dictate to the states how they must register their citizens. They also predicted that multiple registrations would contribute to fraud. Other opponents contended that voters who aren't interested enough to participate in the electoral process would not make informed decisions on candidates.

Despite the controversy, the law went into effect in 1995. Voter *registration* increased just before the 1996 presidential election. But voter *turnout* continued to fall. By the time of the U.S. presidential election in 2016, the gap between the number of registered voters (86.8 percent) and actual votes cast by eligible voters (55.7 percent) had widened considerably.

That gap can be partially explained by voter suppression tactics that were either not contemplated, or not resolved by the 1993 law. Too few polling places or insufficient ballot resources can cause voting lines to take hours, too long for those who vote during lunch breaks from work. Certain states have passed legislation requiring voter IDs, and many of these laws restrict the kinds of IDs that qualify. For example, Texas allows gun permits but not student IDs to qualify. And the process for obtaining such voter IDs can be difficult and expensive.

Certain states, like Idaho and Nebraska, have cut 5–7 days from early voting dates. In Arizona, it is a felony to turn in another person's mail-in ballot, even with the voter's permission. Iowa and South Dakota have made it more difficult for people with criminal convictions to re-establish their voting rights. Some states do not allow a person to vote early at all without an excuse. These restrictions – requiring significant time, money, or both to address – tend to have discriminatory effects on people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds and on people of color.

## Writing & Discussion

1. Why don't people vote? List as many causes as you can for the decrease in voter turnout. What do you believe is the main cause?
2. What do you think the consequences might be to American democracy if the trend of declining voter turnout continues into the next century?

# CIVIL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Reading: \_\_\_\_\_

## Step 1: Read.

- A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.
- B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:
- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
  - Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
  - Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.
  - Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

## Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...	B. The MAIN POINTS are:
C. In the reading, I agree with:	D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

### Step 3: Discuss and listen.

#### RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have \_\_\_\_\_ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E.

### Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? \_\_\_ Less than, \_\_\_ About the same as, \_\_\_ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)



# The Voters' Poll

The purpose of this survey is to determine the level of people's interest in the electoral process and how it can be improved. Be sure to explain the purpose of the survey to all those to whom you talk. Tell people they do not have to give their names. Always be polite. People who answer your survey are doing you a favor.

## Survey Questions

1. Do you think that democracy is the best method of governing a state or nation?  
Yes      No      Don't know
2. Do you think the outcome of elections have any effect on how our nation is run?  
Yes      No      Doesn't matter
3. Do you think that it is possible to influence the way people vote through political discussions?  
Yes      No      Sometimes
4. Do you know of at least one political candidate who speaks for your beliefs and needs?  
Yes      No      Don't know
5. At election time, do you talk about political candidates with others?  
Often      Sometimes      Not at all
6. Do you think enough Americans vote in national elections?  
Yes      No      Don't know
7. Do you think that more Americans would participate in elections if voter registration was easier?  
Yes      No      Don't know
8. Do you plan to vote in political elections after you turn 18?  
Yes      No      Don't know