

Learning Gateways

Lesson: Teaching About Voting Reform

by Wanda J. Routier

Overview

This lesson will help students learn more about both past and current voting practices in the United States and some of the problems with voting, such as faulty voting equipment and low poor-voter turnout, that were the subject of much controversy in connection with Election 2000. Students will debate the feasibility of solutions to these problems and will devise a plan to present to election officials.

Teachers will wish to familiarize themselves with the feature article "Election 2000: Voting Issues and Recommendations" by Donald L. Davison as well as the contributions to the Voices department of this edition, which highlight some of the problems that three national voting organizations face in getting out the vote. Each Voices author shares some of the strategies that her group is using to encourage voting and make sure that every voice is heard. Teachers will find other useful instructional resources useful available with this edition, including *Update on Law-Related Education 20.3* (Election 1996). For students, the article "How Should U.S. Elections Be Managed?" in *Students in Action* will be especially informative.

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will:

- Discuss past and current voting practices in the United States
- Consider voting problems and issues raised in connection with Election 2000
- Explore ways to change voting practices and laws for future elections

Target Group: Secondary students

Time Needed: 3-4 class meetings, plus project time

Materials Needed: Feature article [Election 2000: Voting Issues and Recommendations](#); [Update on Law-Related Education 20.3](#) (Election 1996); *Students in Action* article [How Should U.S. Elections Be Managed?](#); [Student Handout #1](#), [Student Handout #2](#), [Student Handout #3](#)

Resource Person: An official from a state/local election board, the League of Women Voters, or other voting groups could talk to the class. Topics might include how voting works in your area, voter registration, local voter turnout rates, voting problems, and what the groups are doing to alleviate voting problems.

Procedures

1. Read "Election 2000: Voting Issues and Recommendations" by Donald L. Davison and review the contents of this edition as well as *Update on Law-Related Education 20.3* (Election 1996) to familiarize yourself with the history of U.S. voting and issues raised in connection with Election 2000; at the same time
2. (Optional) Have students test their knowledge of U.S. voting laws by taking the [Voting Rights Quiz](#); you might also share the handout [Voting Rights Lesson](#).
3. Distribute Student Handout #1 to the class. Divide the class into five groups. Assign each group a topic from the handout. The students' task is to become expert in their topic and to peer-teach the class the information. Circulate to highlight and discuss the main issues of each topic with each group, checking for understanding. You may wish to share [Voting Web Sites](#) with students for them to use in gathering more information on these topics.
4. After all groups make their presentations, use [Discussion Questions](#) to guide a discussion with the entire class and to raise issues for students to consider. Assign "How Should U.S. Elections Be Managed?" from Students in Action for reading.
5. Pass out Student Handout #2 and ask students to refer to it to list problems with voting; their lists should include problems identified in the handout as well as some of their own ideas. Discuss each voting problem that students identify and record student comments.
6. Divide students into small groups to discuss solutions for solving each problem. Write these on a large paper or on an overhead transparency. Discuss the feasibility of each and ways to implement the suggestions.
7. When all the groups have presented their ideas, have the class vote on a solution for each problem. Discuss how they might present this solution to the appropriate state and/or local election officials.
8. Invite a resource person from the state/local election board, League of Women Voters, or other voting group to talk to the class about voting. This person could address topics such as how voting works in your area, voter registration, local voter turnout rates, voting problems, and ways the voting group is trying to solve voting problems. Students should prepare questions to ask the guest speaker.
9. Optional: Lead students in a discussion about the following question: Has there been a change in civic participation by citizens since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks?
 - a. Compare citizen opinions about the government prior to, and after, the terrorist attacks.
 - b. Share the findings from the studies mentioned in Election 2000: Voting Issues and Recommendations, and ask whether students think the findings still indicate how citizens feel about the government and voting, given the attacks and the

subsequent military intervention overseas.

c. Ask students what they think the effect of Sept. 11 will be on voter participation in the next election compared to voter turnout in previous elections where there was no national crisis.

10. Distribute Student Handout #3 to each student. Divide the class into groups and have students select one of the student projects to complete and share with the class.

Discussion Questions

1. U.S. Constitution

- a. Name some of the responsibilities the Constitution gives the national government and the states with respect to elections.
- b. Why does the Constitution decentralize elections by giving the responsibility to the states rather than having a national voting system?

2. Electoral College

- a. Why was the Electoral College formed?
- b. How are electors selected?
- c. Do you think politics enters into the selection of electors (e.g., elected down party lines)?
- d. How can a nominee win an election by winning the Electoral College vote and losing the popular vote?
- e. How do third-party nominees affect the Electoral College vote?
- f. Is the Electoral College relevant in today's world?

3. Managing the Vote

- a. What are the five types of voting methods? Explain each.
- b. Which seems most reliable? Why?
- c. How do limited resources (money to spend on elections and voting systems) affect poor or rural areas that don't have access to the funds that larger areas have?

4. Reliability of Methods

- a. How do lost votes affect election results?
- b. How would improving faulty voting equipment influence the reliability of election results?
- c. After Election 2000, the media covered the problems with voting methods in great detail; how do you think this will affect voter turnout in the next election?

About the Author

Wanda J. Routier is a teacher of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the New London Schools in New London, Wis. She is a member of the adjunct faculty at both Marian College in Fond du Lac and Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton. She teaches graduate and undergraduate classes, supervises student teachers, and serves as an educational consultant. Routier has a bachelor's degree in music, a master's degree in special education, and a doctoral degree in education. She has published articles and curriculums for the American Bar Association, West Publishing Company, New York Bar Association, ERIC, and the National Association of the Deaf.