Lesson Overview

This lesson focuses on a voter’s need to be fully informed prior to casting a vote on Election Day and how to acquire the necessary information. Students learn what a yes or no vote or a decision to abstain means on a ballot. Students learn the definitions of amendment, initiative, and referendum. By completing the handouts for school referendums, students are given the opportunity to think critically and to learn first hand why voters need to be fully informed about ballot questions.

Suggested Grade Level

Elementary (Grades 5–6)

Estimated Time to Complete

50 minutes

Lesson Objectives: After completing this lesson, students will be able to

- define the terms amendment, initiative, and referendum;
- explain the concepts of majority, majority rule, and minority rights;
- understand what a yes or no vote or a decision to abstain means for each question on a ballot;
- understand why becoming an informed voter is necessary.

Vocabulary

- abstain
- amendment
- direct democracy
- initiative
- majority
- majority rule
- minority rights
- popular sovereignty
- referendum
Materials Needed

Teacher Resources

- Quick Vocabulary (Teacher Resource 1)
- Election ballot
- Absentee ballot
- Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide
  - These guides can be obtained from the registrar of voters or from your secretary of state’s website.
  - The guides will contain information on the initiatives, referendums, or constitutional amendment questions for the upcoming election.

Student Handouts

- Building Our Vocabulary (Student Handout 2)
- School Referendum Questions (Student Handout 6)
- School Referendum Information (Student Handout 7)

Before the Lesson

- Contact the registrar of voters office or visit your secretary of state’s website to obtain one copy of an election ballot, absentee ballot, and Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide.
- Review and photocopy all Lesson 4 teacher resources and student handouts.

Lesson Procedure

1. What Does the Election Ballot Look Like?

The election ballot, absentee ballot, and the Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide are required for this part of the lesson.

Show students the actual election ballot for the November election. Explain that a voter needs to learn about the candidates running for office. Voters also must understand the ballot questions in order to cast an informed vote.

- Ask students to recall whether a registered voter can still cast a ballot if they are not in their home community for the election.
  - Show students the absentee ballot for the November election and explain that this type of ballot can be used. However, it must be completed and mailed by the deadline set by your state.

- Ask the students why this type of ballot must be completed ahead of time.
  - Students should reply that the ballots must be counted.
Explain that voters need to find information for everything on the ballot before they can cast an informed vote. That is a lot of work. Not everyone has time to research all the information needed to be an informed voter.

Show students the Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide and explain that much of the needed information can be found in this guide. Every registered voter receives one of these guides in the mail several months before the election. The guide is also available on your secretary of state’s website. These guides allow voters to learn about the candidates, offices, and questions on the ballot before the election.

Tell students that they will be creating their own election ballot questions, but first they need to learn how to become an informed voter.

2. Understanding Ballot Questions Classifications

Teacher Resource 1: Quick Vocabulary and Student Handout 2: Building Our Vocabulary are required for this part of the lesson.

Have students take out their vocabulary lists (Student Handout 2) and tell them that new vocabulary is used when considering the ballot.

Inform the students that there are different classifications for the ballot questions that voters are asked to consider. Define the following terms for the students: amendment, initiative, and referendum.

Tell students that initiatives are an example of direct democracy. Amendments, initiatives, and referendums are good examples of popular sovereignty.

Define the terms direct democracy and popular sovereignty (see Teacher Resource 1: Quick Vocabulary).

- Ask students whether voting is a form of direct democracy.

- Ask students how many votes are needed to elect someone to office or pass ballot questions.
  - You might use the example of an election in which 1,000 votes are cast. Ask the students how many votes a candidate must receive to be elected.
  - Students might reply that a majority (501 votes) would be required to win.

Define the terms majority and majority rule. Some students may already know the definition of majority. Explain to the students the concept of minority rights. These terms are defined in Teacher Resource 1.
Add the definitions of amendment, direct democracy, initiative, majority, majority rule, minority rights, popular sovereignty, and referendum to the vocabulary chart. Have students add the definitions to Student Handout 2: Building Our Vocabulary.

3. Introducing Ballot Questions: How Would You Vote?

Student Handout 6: School Referendum Questions is required for this part of the lesson.

The purpose of this part of the lesson is to show students that they must take the time to become informed voters and to make informed decisions on ballot questions. Students are asked to vote on several referendums on a school ballot. The information on the referendums is intentionally limited; however, ellipses indicate that more information is available.

Explain that the school is asking students to take a quick vote on several referendums under administrative consideration. Distribute Student Handout 6 and instruct the students to read through the ballot and circle their choice (yes, no, or abstain) in 5 minutes so that results can be sent to the school’s administration as soon as possible. Explain what the term abstain means.

Immediately ask students to show how they voted by raising their hands. Students may vote yes or no, or they may abstain from voting. Keep a tally on the board. Ask a student at the back of the room to quietly keep a separate running tally.

When all votes are cast and tallied, ask students the following questions:

- What questions received a majority vote?
- Why did they vote yes on a referendum?
- Why did they vote no on a referendum?
- If they did not vote, why did they choose to abstain?
  - How did decisions to abstain affect the result?
- How did they feel about being rushed through the process?

Compare your board tally with that of the student keeping a separate tally at the back of the room.

- Did you arrive at the same results?
  - If not, why might that have happened? What can be done about it now?

Add the definition of the term abstain to the vocabulary chart. Have students add the definition to Student Handout 2: Building Our Vocabulary.
4. Critical Thinking Exercise: Can I Change My Vote?

Student Handout 7: School Referendum Information is required for this part of the lesson.

Distribute Student Handout 7 and ask the class to read it. After the students have read the handout, ask them the following questions:

- What did they really vote for or against?
- Would they change their minds now if they could? Why?
- Would those who had abstained from voting cast a vote now? If so, how might this have changed the outcome?
- Did the terms *majority rule* and *minority rights* play a role in this ballot?
  - You may need to expand the definition of minority rights for the students.
  - Were any minority rights violated?
- What have they learned about voting and the voting process?
  - The key response should be that they need to know more about what they are voting on and take more time to vote.
  - Students should also question the process itself. They might say that the vote should have been a secret ballot.

The activity students just completed should lead them to the idea that knowledge is a key to voting and that they need to be informed voters if they want to make a positive impact.

5. Concluding the Lesson: Can We Exercise Direct Democracy?

- Ask students what they have learned about voting on ballot questions.
- Ask a student to read the definition of *initiative* and *referendum*.
- Ask students whether the lesson’s voting exercise involved an initiative or referendum.
  - Students should answer that the ballot was more like a referendum because the school administration created the questions. This is similar to a legislative body placing proposed legislation on a ballot for approval by voters.

Explain to students that during the next Citizens, Not Spectators lesson they will be given the opportunity to create their own initiatives for a class ballot. Ask students to start thinking about what they would like to change or add as new rules or policies for the classroom or school.

6. Homework Assignment

Each student will write up one suggestion for the class ballot and include reasons for the suggestion. This homework assignment will be graded.