Why Are Midterm Elections Important?

Lesson Overview

In the middle of the political discussions about the midterm elections of 2018, have we have lost sight of the importance of midterm elections in general? Are these elections important? Use this lesson to help students discover the importance of all elections.

Suggested Grade Level

High school (grades 9–12)

Estimated Time to Complete

One to two 45-minute class periods

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to

- define midterm elections,
- explain why midterm elections are important from the perspective of national, state, and local decisions that need to be made, and
- suggest at least two ways in which voter turnout in all elections, particularly in midterm elections, can increase.

Materials Needed

- Chart paper, smartboard, whiteboard, or chalkboard
- Internet access using a computer, tablet, or other device
- Teacher Resource (see the end of this lesson)
- Student Directions (see the end of this lesson)

Lesson Procedure

1. Introducing the Lesson

   Ask students to define midterm elections and offer an opinion on whether they are important. Students should explain why they are or are not important. Who gets elected during these elections? What other issues might be listed on the ballot?
Write their responses on the board or on chart paper and leave their initial responses for later.

2. Let Us Clarify

This is wonderful opportunity to correct the students' definitions of the midterm elections. It is also the time to remind students that the elections include national, state, and local seats and issues. Discuss which government seats are on the ballot during this 2018 midterm election. Did students mention any of these in the introduction to this lesson? If so, make the connection. For example, at the national level, all 435 members of the House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate are on the ballot. But what about the states? In each state, there may be gubernatorial, state assembly, and state senate seats that need to be filled, and there may be seats at the local level. Some states will have initiatives and referendums on the ballot, and there may be local measures found there as well. It may be necessary to define initiatives or referendums for the students, or you may refer students to a prior lesson or reading covered in the class.

3. Activity 1

Working in groups of four or five, ask students to determine the seats or issues on the November 2018 ballot at the national, state, and local levels. The number of groups will depend on (a) the number of congressional seats up for election, (b) the number of state assembly and state senate or other state-level and local seats up for election, and (c) the number of issues (initiatives, referendums, or measures) appearing on the ballot.

Provide each group with the Student Directions sheet provided at the end of this lesson. The various groups will identify the people running and the issues before the electorate.

*Please note*: Based on time and internet availability, this activity may be altered or not done at all. Instead, the information can be provided to the students by the teacher. The focus of this activity is the state and local seats up for election, along with the initiatives, referendums, and measures that are being considered.

4. Voter Turnout

Ask students what they think the voter turnout was during the 2014 election. According to official data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, of the total eligible voting population, 59.3 percent were registered to vote and 38.5 percent actually
voted. How does this compare to past midterm elections? Students can use the third and fourth resource on the Teacher Resource page or another resource available from the school library, etc.

5. **Activity 2**

The Census Bureau has issued reports about voter turnout from 1978 to 2014. You may choose to divide the class into the years you wish to have them review. You may also divide the class in half. Half can seek the midterm voter turnout for the number of desired years, and the other half can seek the voter turnout for a desired number of presidential election years. In the end, the groups can share their information and compare.

6. **Concluding the Lesson**

Based on the information discovered in this lesson, lead the class in a discussion. The following questions may aid in that discussion:

- a. What have you learned about the positions and issues that can be covered in the midterm elections?
- b. What have you learned about the 2014 elections in our own state and locality?
- c. Describe why you believe that elections are important in democratic societies.
- d. Why do you think voter turnout has been so low in past midterm elections?
- e. What could be done to increase voter turnout in midterm elections?

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2 It is often suggested that low voter turnout is the result of a lack of knowledge about the voting process. A lesson on the voting process can be found at [http://www.civiced.org/cns-teachers/lesson-plans/brief-high-school-lesson-plans/1131-lesson-4-the-culminating-activity-in-class-simulated-election](http://www.civiced.org/cns-teachers/lesson-plans/brief-high-school-lesson-plans/1131-lesson-4-the-culminating-activity-in-class-simulated-election). In this lesson, students can familiarize themselves with all the polling procedures.
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Teacher Resource

The web resources listed below provide the content necessary to complete this lesson. Please note that although these websites are current as of the writing of this lesson, they are not the only resources you could consult. It is highly recommended that you and your students consult the websites for the League of Women Voters (the national site, https://www.lwv.org/, provides links to various state sites) and the website for your state’s secretary of state (see https://www.usa.gov/election-office to find your state or local election office website).


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Student Directions

Activity 1

Your teacher will assign you to a group. The number of groups will depend on the number of positions or issues the electorate in your state and locality are faced with.

Your group should answer the following questions for the section you are assigned and then share your answers with the rest of the class.

National Level

1. How many House of Representatives seats need to be filled?
2. If more than two, provide information on one seat:
   a. The names of those running
   b. Their party affiliations
   c. Their positions on at least two issues that the electorate is interested in
3. How many Senate seats (if any, this year) need to be filled?
   a. The names of those running
   b. Their party affiliations
   c. Their positions on at least two issues that the electorate is interested in

State Level

1. How many state assembly seats need to be filled?
2. How many state senate seats need to be filled?
3. Is the office of governor, secretary of state, state superintendent of education, or any other state-level position on the ballot?
   a. The names of those running
   b. Their party affiliations
   c. Their positions on at least two issues that the electorate is interested in
4. What initiatives or referendums are before the electorate?
   a. Name at least one and describe its focus.
   b. Provide at least two pros and two cons for each.
Local Level

1. What positions are up before the electorate?
   a. The names of those running
   b. Their party affiliations
   c. Their positions on at least two issues that the electorate is interested in

2. What ballot measures, if any, are before the electorate?
   a. Name at least one and describe its focus.
   b. Provide at least two pros and two cons for each.