Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students apply their state’s requirements for voter registration. Students learn when to register and how to complete a voter registration form. A critical thinking activity gives students the opportunity to apply a federal law (National Voter Registration Act of 1993, or Motor Voter Act) and a court decision (Wesley v. Cox, 2005) to the voting registration process to determine if state registration requirements are legal.

Suggested Grade Level

High School (Grades 10–12)

Estimated Time to Complete

50 minutes

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to

- explain the voter registration requirements and process in their state,
- complete a voter registration form, and
- mail in voter registration cards if students qualify to vote.

Critical Thinking Activity

- Explain the impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act) on state voter registration processes
- Evaluate solutions to problems that have arisen with the voter registration process by analyzing a court case, Wesley v. Cox (2005)

Materials Needed

- Teacher Resources
  - Voter Turnout Increases in 2008 Presidential Election (Teacher Resource 3)
• State Voting Qualifications (Teacher Resource 4)
• Who Can Register to Vote in the United States? (Teacher Resource 5)
• Wesley v. Cox (2005), Extended Lesson 2 Activity (Teacher Resource 6)

Student Handouts

• What Do You Know about Voting in the United States? (Student Handout 1)
• Voter Registration Form (Student Handout 2)
• Extended Activity for Lesson 2: Critical Thinking Exercise
  o National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act) (Student Handout 3)
  o You be the Judge: Wesley v. Cox (2005) (Student Handout 4)
  o Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide (Student Handout 5)

Before the Lesson

• Review and print the Lesson 2 student handouts and teacher resources.
• Review Voter Turnout Increases in 2008 Presidential Election (Teacher Resource 3)
• Collect the following materials from the registrar of voters office:
  o Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide (Student Handout 5) (one per student)
  o Voter registration forms from the registrar of voters or your secretary of state’s website (Student Handout 2) (one per student)

If the registrar’s office is unable to provide voter registration forms, print the National Mail Voter Registration Form or print your state’s voter registration form available from your secretary of state’s website.

Lesson Procedure

1. Beginning the Lesson: Who Can Register to Vote in the United States?
   • Project on a screen or board Teacher Resource 5: Who Can Register to Vote?
   • Ask several students to read each numbered requirement and ask them the following questions:
     o Do you have any questions about these requirements?
     o What is a felony?
     o Can states have additional requirements to register to vote?
     o What other requirements would you include?

2. Learning Your State’s Voter Registration Requirements
   • Project on a screen or board your state’s voting requirements, which you added to the second half of Teacher Resource 5: Who Can Register to Vote?
   • Ask students whether they agree with the state’s additional requirements and why.
     o You may need to explain the additional requirements.
You may also compare your state’s registration and voting requirements with those of other states.

3. Critical Thinking Exercise: Rethinking Assumptions

Have students refer to Student Handout 1, Questions 3–5, for the brainstorming activity, and instruct students to correct their handout responses if necessary.

4. Applying Information: Registering to Vote

Distribute Student Handout 2: Voter Registration Form. Inform the students that in most states voter registration must be completed a few weeks before an election. Provide them with your state’s registration deadline. Review the registration form with students and have them complete the form.

After completion, ask students the following questions:

• What might happen if they change their address, move to a college or university, or join the military? Would they still be registered to vote?
  o They may respond that they will have to go home to vote.
  o They may respond that they will have to reregister.
  • When students attend a college or university in their home state or another state, inform them that they will have two options: remain a registered voter in their hometown; or register in their college or university town.
  • Military post assignments do not require reregistration if the voter wishes to continue voting in hometown elections.

• If you will not be in your hometown on Election Day, can you still vote?
  o Explain the absentee ballot to the students.

• Can a homeless person register to vote since they have no permanent address?
  o In Box 3 of the National Mail Voter Registration Form, a person registering can provide an address for forwarding mail.
  o In some states, cross streets or intersections are eligible for use as an address, thereby allowing homeless persons to register to vote.

• Once registered to vote, can your registration be terminated?
  o Inform students that some states drop voters from the registration rolls if they do not participate in elections. This means that if you fail to vote in one election, you must reregister to vote in any subsequent election.

5. Correcting Assumptions: Comparing Initial Assumptions with Facts

Ask students to offer their Student Handout 1 brainstorming activity responses to questions 7 and 8. Ask them why they made their choices for the group that votes most often and the group that votes least often.

Mention voting pattern facts from Teacher Resource 3. You may also project the following statement on the screen or board and have a student read it aloud for the class:
Since the voting age was lowered to eighteen in 1972, an average of less than one-third of eligible young adults has turned out to vote in federal elections. The entire voter turnout for state elections has been half the national election turnout. Turnout for local elections has been considerably lower, as low as 10 percent.


Ask students the following questions:

• Why do you think young people do not register to vote?
• Why do you think young people do not vote, even if they are registered?
• What ideas can you offer that will encourage young people to register and vote?

6. Concluding the Lesson: Are You Prepared to Register to Vote?

Collect Student Handout 2 from the class and ask students the following:

• Are these registration forms valid?
  o Students might mention that they are not yet old enough to register to vote.
  o Students might think only the registrar can complete the registration process.

• Summarize what students thought they knew from the brainstorming activity and what they learned in Lessons 1 and 2.

• Where might students find the legal sources for determining voter eligibility?
  o Students should respond with references to the constitutional amendments and the state’s requirements.

• Do they think the registration and voting requirements are fair?

• Do they feel informed enough to register to vote? Why or why not?

7. Critical Thinking Exercise: Are Your Registration Forms Valid?

• Collect all the registration forms and have students take out their homework assignment:
  o National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act) (Student Handout 3)
  o You be the Judge: Wesley v. Cox (2005) (Student Handout 4)
  o Ask students to offer their responses to Student Handout 3
  o Clarify any misconceptions about what the Motor Voter Act states as requirements for the voter registration process

• Ask students for their decision in the case Wesley v. Cox (2005) and what influenced their decision.
  o Students should refer back to the Student Handout 3: National Voter Registration Act of 1993
• Read the court’s decision (Teacher Resource 6) and ask students if they agree.

Ask students to assume that they are qualified to register to vote. If their registration forms were bundled and mailed to the office of voter registration, would they be accepted? Why or why not?
  o Students should reply that the National Voter Registration Act and the decision rendered in Wesley v. Cox (2005) both mandate that registration forms sent in bundles to the office of voter registration must be accepted.
  o Students may also reply that registration forms for persons younger than eighteen years of age would not be accepted because the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution established eighteen years of age as the voting age.
    • Inform students that in some states a seventeen-year-old may legally register to vote if he or she turns eighteen years of age by the date of the next election.

8. Preparing for Lesson 3: The Ballot and Questions

Distribute a Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide (Student Handout 5) to each student and assign it for the next Citizens, Not Spectators class. Suggest to the students that they review the guide with an adult. Let students know that they will be voting on this ballot during the next class.