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. In this lesson, the ballot for the upcoming election is reviewed with information on the offices and questions to be voted upon. Students learn the qualifications, term of office, and the responsibilities for each contested office on the ballot. The definitions for an initiative, referendum, and amendment are learned and applied to ballot questions. Students learn what a yes, no, or abstain vote means on each ballot question. By completing the handouts for school referendums, students are given the opportunity to think critically and to learn firsthand why voters need to be fully informed about ballot questions.

Suggested Grade Level

High school (Grades 10–12)

Estimated Time to Complete

One to two days

Lesson Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to

- explain their state’s procedures for voting in a primary and general election;
- identify the offices on the election ballot;
- explain the qualifications, term of office, and responsibilities for each office on the ballot;
- define the terms initiative, referendum, and amendment;
- identify proposed initiatives, referendums, or amendment questions on the ballot;
- explain how the concepts of majority rule and minority rights may affect the voting on offices;
- understand what a yes or no vote means for each ballot question; and
- understand why becoming an informed voter is necessary.
Vocabulary

- abstain
- amendment
- direct democracy
- federal system
- initiative
- majority rule
- minority rights
- platform
- popular sovereignty
- primary
- referendum

Materials Needed

Pre-lesson assignment

- Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide downloaded from your secretary of state’s website (Student Handout 5); students should have reviewed this as homework

Teacher Resources

- Quick Vocabulary (Teacher Resource 1)
- Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide—information on the ballot offices, initiatives, referendums, and/or amendment questions for the upcoming election
- State constitution information on elected offices for Student Handout 16
- Local charter information on elected offices for Student Handout 17

Student Handouts

- School Referendum Questions (Student Handout 11)
- School Referendum Information (Student Handout 12)
- Election Ballot or Absentee Ballot (Student Handout 13)
- Ballot Offices and Details (Student Handout 14)
- U.S. Constitution—Excerpts for Elected Offices (Student Handout 15)
- State Constitution—Excerpts for Elected Offices (Student Handout 16)
- Local Charter—Excerpts for Elected Offices (Student Handout 17)

Before the Lesson

- Contact the registrar of voters’ office to obtain election ballots and an absentee ballot or download these documents from your secretary of state’s website.
- Review and copy all teacher resources and student handouts.
Lesson Procedure

1. Understanding Classifications of Ballot Questions

Refer to Teacher Resource 1: Quick Vocabulary to define direct democracy and popular sovereignty for the students.

Inform the students that there are different classifications for the ballot questions. 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.

2. Critical Thinking Exercise: How Would You Vote? How Did You Vote?

The purpose of this exercise is to show students that they must take the time to become informed voters and to properly make decisions on ballot questions. Students are asked to quickly 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 11 and instruct students to read through and circle their choice (yes, no, or abstain) in two minutes so that results can be sent to administration as soon as possible. Explain what abstain means; refer to Teacher Resource 1.

Immediately ask students to show how they voted by raising their hands. 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:

• 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 they feel about being rushed through the process?

Compare your board tally with that of the student 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?
  • Do you think miscounts happen very often?
• Is that important? Why?

Distribute Student Handout 12 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 that have changed the outcome?

• Were the terms majority rule and minority rights part of the voting process used?
  ○ You may need to expand the definition of minority rights for the students. Refer to Teacher Resource 1.

• 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. They should also question the process itself such as should the class know how every person voted?

• Where can they get information on the upcoming or future elections?
  ○ Students should refer to the Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide that they reviewed as homework. Accept any logical sources of reliable information.

3. What Information Is Needed to Cast an Informed Vote?

The activity students just completed should lead students 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. Students work in groups on specific ballot offices up for election and ballot questions that voters are asked to decide.

Ask students to take out their homework assignment—(Student Handout 5)—and the list of questions they had on the ballot. Remind students that the Quick Reference Guide or Voter Information Guide is a good source of information that can be used in their group work.

Distribute a ballot (Student Handout 13) to each student and inform students that several major party candidates had to win a primary in the spring to be placed on the ballot as their party’s candidate for office.

Ask students

• whether they can identify a candidate on the ballot that won a primary in your state, and
• whether they can define the term primary.
  ○ If needed, define the term primary for the students. Refer to Teacher Resource 1.
4. Gathering Ballot Information

Depending on what is on your ballot, have students work in four to five groups to gather ballot information about the candidates and questions. Distribute the student handouts according to the group’s assignment.

Have students work in four or five groups and assign the following:

- Groups 1–5: Student Handout 14 (provide separate worksheet for each group)
- Groups 1–3: Offices on the ballot
- Groups 4 and 5: Ballot questions

If the ballot has local, state, and federal offices, you might want to assign one level of government to each group.

- Group 1 working on federal offices will need Student Handout 15
- Group 2 working on state offices will need Student Handout 16
- Group 3 working on local offices will need Student Handout 17
- Groups 4 and 5 working with the ballot questions. Divide the questions evenly between the two groups.

Tell students that they have 20 minutes to gather the information for their assigned questions.

5. Sharing Information, Becoming Informed

Ask each group to share the information they have gathered on their public office or prospective legislation. While each group is presenting, the rest of the class should be taking notes.

When all the groups have presented, try to answer any final questions the students might have.

- Were all the questions you had from your homework assignment answered?
- What have we learned about becoming an informed voter?
- What have we learned about the upcoming election?
- What do we need to do next?
  - The students might respond that they want to actually vote.

6. Concluding the Lesson: Preparing for the Simulated Election

As a culminating activity, Lesson 4 offers steps for an in-class simulated election and Lesson 5 offers details for an all-school simulated election. Determine the option that you will schedule. Below are preparation guidelines for Lesson 4. If you choose to conduct an all-school simulated election, proceed to Lesson 5 for preparation guidelines.
7. Preparing for Lesson 4

- If your school requires student identification cards, tell your class that they will need to show them to vote.
- Ask for volunteers to “work the polls” on Election Day. Below is an abbreviated list of poll worker positions. You can assign two sets of students for each duty. This will allow each set of students the ability to cast a vote and still have the necessary positions covered for the duration of the activity.
  - Demonstration area: one to two students. Voters can review the ballot and Voter Information Guide before casting their ballot.
  - Registration table: Two sets of two to three students.
    - Check ID cards if used
    - Check names off the class list
    - Distribute a ballot
  - Tally the vote: two to three students to check the voting results

Homework

- Students should review the ballot information that they have gathered and make a decision about how they want to vote on each office and ballot issue for the next Citizens, Not Spectators class.