Citizens, Not Spectators

Lesson 2: Becoming a Voter

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students apply their state’s requirements for registering to vote. Students learn when and how to register, how to complete a voter registration form, and when and how to reregister.

An optional enrichment lesson, “Why Does Granny Control the Vote?” introduces students to the dismal youth voting trends. Working with an article about generational voting trends and U.S. Census Bureau charts and graphs, students determine voting results among generations, genders, and education levels in the November 2008 presidential election. Students might conclude that if their generation registers to vote and votes, they have a good chance to sway election results to reflect their own views on public policy.

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

- understand their state’s requirements for registering to vote,
- complete a voter registration form,
- explain the impact of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and United States Code: Title 42 on voter registration, and
- evaluate solutions to problems that have arisen with the voter registration process.
Vocabulary

- Civic Generation
- Generation X
- Generation Y
- Millennial Generation

Materials Needed

Teacher Resources


Student Handouts

The following handouts were assigned as homework at the end of Lesson 1. Students should come to class with these handouts completed:

- National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act) (Student Handout 2)
- United States Code Title 42 (1997) (Student Handout 3)
- You Be the Judge: Wesley v. Cox (2005) (Student Handout 4)

The following additional handout will be required for this lesson:

- Voter Registration Forms (one for each student) (Student Handout 5)
  - These can be obtained from the registrar of voters or you can use the National Mail Voter Registration Form or your state’s voter registration form (see your secretary of state’s website).

The following handout will be assigned as homework at the end of this lesson:

- Voter Information Guide (Student Handout 13), one per student

Before the Lesson

- Ensure that students have completed their homework assignment, which was to read and complete Student Handouts 2, 3, and 4.
- Review and print out Lesson 2 Student Handouts and Teacher Resources.
Lesson Procedure

1. Reviewing Requirements for Voter Registration

Begin the lesson by reminding students that citizens must register to vote in their state. Have students recall the requirements for voter registration.

Ask students to refer back to the U.S. Constitution’s suffrage amendments studied in Lesson 1 and ask if any of those amendments address voter registration.

Inform students that because the Framers did not include anything about voter registration in the Constitution, states assumed the power to establish voter registration qualifications; therefore, the necessity arose for the Constitution’s suffrage amendments to enfranchise more U.S. citizens.

2. Applying Information: Registering to Vote

Inform the students that in most states, voter registration must be completed a few weeks before an election. Tell students the registration deadline for your state for the next election.

• Distribute a Voter Registration Form (Student Handout 5) to each student.

• Review the registration form with students and then have them complete the form.

• After completion, ask students what they think might happen if they change their address or want to register in their college or university location.
  o They may respond that they will have to reregister.
    ▪ When students go to college or university in 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.

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

• Also inform students that some states drop voters from the rolls if they do not participate in elections. This means if you fail to vote, you must go through the effort to reregister.

• Ask students if a homeless person can register to vote, since they have no permanent address?
  o A box on the registration form asks for cross streets as an address, allowing homeless people the ability to register to vote.

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

Collect all registration forms from students and ask the following question:
Assume that you are all qualified to register to vote. If we bundle and send your registration forms to the office of voter registration, will they be accepted? Why or why not?

- Students should reply that the Motor Voter Act, U.S. Code: Title 42, and the decision rendered in *Wesley v. Cox* both mandate that registration forms sent in bundles to the office of voter registration must be accepted.
- Students may also reply that registration forms for persons younger than eighteen years of age would not be accepted because of state guidelines on submission and the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which established eighteen as the voting age.
  - Inform students that in some states a citizen who is seventeen years old may legally register to vote if he or she turns eighteen years old by the date of the next election.

4. United States Litigation on Voter Registration Procedures

Conduct a review of the pre-lesson homework assignments (Student Handouts 2 and 3). Ask students for responses for each handout’s questions.

Then ask students the following question:

- If voter registration is a state power, why then did the U.S. Congress enact the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) and U.S. Code: Title 42?
  - Students should be able determine why the NVRA and U.S. Code: Title 42 were enacted—because state voter registration requirements were too complicated. They may also respond that the registration process was yet another way to deny some citizens the right to vote, as was the case in *Wesley v. Cox* (2005).

Review student responses to the questions for the case of *Wesley v. Cox* (Student Handout 4). Then ask them how they would have decided the case and ask them to explain why. After students have declared their decision with a show of hands, read the court’s decision to them.

Ask students the following question:

- Do you think that the adjudication in the *Wesley v. Cox* case ended any further voter registration difficulties?
  - Students may recognize that even with the NVRA and U.S. Code: Title 42, some states continued to curtail efforts to facilitate voter registration.
  - Students should recall the necessity to incorporate numerous suffrage amendments to the U.S. Constitution to address state regulations that limited voter registration and enfranchisement itself.

5. Concluding the Lesson: Reflection. Can We Solve This Problem?

Read the following text to the class or project it on a screen and ask a student to read it aloud:
With the ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971, that lowered the voting age to 18 years old, there was great hope and enthusiasm for the younger generation of this nation. Sadly, these great expectations have only been met with declining political participation among youth. The voter turnout rate of 18- to 24-year olds has steadily declined since 1972. . . . The trend and the actual figures are both very disturbing signs for our democracy.


Ask students the following questions:

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

6. Enrichment Lesson: Why Does Granny Control the Vote? (Optional)

• Divide the class into four groups. Inform students that they will be picking up handouts as the next Citizens, Not Spectators class.
  o Groups 1, 2, and 3 students will pick up Student Handouts 6, 7, and 8.
  o Group 4 students will pick up Student Handouts 6, 9, and 10.

7. Preparing for Lesson 3

If you are not using the enrichment lesson, assign the following homework for Lesson 3:

• Have students pick up a Voter Information Guide (Student Handout 13) as they leave class. Ask students to review the guide with parents or other trusted adults and come to the next Citizens, Not Spectators class prepared with any questions about the ballot they might have.