Citizens, Not Spectators

Enrichment Lesson: Why Does Granny Control the Vote?

Student Handout 6: Youth Citizenship Skills and Voting

Groups 1, 2, 3, and 4

Group 1

Directions: Your group has assigned reading provided below and is responsible for answering the corresponding questions that follow. You will also work with

- the chart titled “U.S. Census Bureau, Table 1. Reported Voting and Registration by Sex and Single Years of Age: November 2008” (Student Handout 7) and
- the graph titled “U.S. Census Bureau, Figure 3. Voting Rates by Educational Attainment and Age Groups: 2008” (Student Handout 8).

Assigned Reading


If American democracy is in decline . . . then one need look no further than our youngest citizens to understand the problem. While declining numbers of young people vote each year, this trend represents just one of the symptoms of a more dangerous illness that has come to infect the roots of our democratic nation. Young people today lack interest, trust, and knowledge about American politics, politicians, and public life in general. . . .

Since 18-year-olds were first given the chance to exercise their right to vote in the 1972 elections, the voter turnout rate of 18- to 24-year-olds has steadily declined. In 1972, 50 percent of [them] exercised their right to vote. By the 1996 elections, only 32 percent of [that age group] turned out at the polls. . . . Even with changes that have made voter registration easier, only half (49 percent) of 18- to 24-year-olds were registered to vote in 1996. . . .
Many young people do not feel that they were given proper information about the political process ... A majority (55 percent) of the young people agree with the statement that schools do not do a very good job of giving young people the information they need to vote. ... As one focus group participant said, “I know if I walked into an election [booth], I wouldn’t know what to do. If I had known what’s on the other side of the curtain in the booth, I’d have felt more comfortable.”

Questions

1. Why do you think youth voter registration and voting steadily declined from 1972 to 1996?

2. What were the age group registration and voting percentages for 18- to 24-year-olds in 2008?

3. Refer to Student Handout 7 and the New Millennium Report (above). Did the 2008 youth vote total (for ages 18 to 24) increase, decrease, or remain the same as in the elections of 1972 and 1996?

4. Refer to Student Handout 8. How did education affect the 18- to 24-year-old group’s voting percentage?

5. Do you agree with the report’s conclusion that schools have done a poor job preparing youth to be knowledgeable about the voting process?

Group 2

*Directions:* Your group has assigned reading provided below and is responsible for answering the corresponding questions that follow. You will also work with Student Handout 7 and Student Handout 8.

*Assigned Reading*

“Engaging Youth: Combating the Apathy of Young Americans Toward Politics” by Kevin Mattson (2003); a Century Foundation Report

Source: [http://www.tcf.org/Publications/MediaPolitics/mattson.pdf](http://www.tcf.org/Publications/MediaPolitics/mattson.pdf)

“Historians are cautious when it comes to predicting how any particular generation of young people will turn out in the long run. ... pop cultural pundits [have the] desire to find a nickname that seems particularity adept for describing ... individuals who live through a common era. Thus, those Americans who faced the challenges of the Great Depression [1929-39] and of World War II [1939-45] ... sometimes have been referred
to as the “civic generation.” . . . Of course, the civic generation, in important respects, was coerced into its engagement with great public questions and historic changes. . . . [Baby] Boomers [born 1946 to 1964] came of age just when enormous changes in society and culture were reaching critical mass. The ideas of the sexual revolution, women’s liberation, and especially civil rights . . . achieved . . . popular support and media attention . . . So perhaps it is not surprising that, in recent years, scholars and popular observers have struggled to make sense of the young Americans who followed the now-aging boomers. . . . the current generation of young adults appears to be uninterested in public affairs and cynical about government and politics.” (Foreword by Richard C. Leone, Century Foundation president, pp. v–vi)

“Ever since the baby boom generation . . . pundits and marketers have been searching for a tag line for the next generation, those born during and after the 1960s . . . then the term that stuck, ‘Generation X’ (coined by Douglas Coupland’s novel about young adults frightened of commitment and working low-paying, service sector ‘McJobs’). . . . (and those a bit younger now known as Generation Y). . . .

In 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment lowered the voting age to eighteen. The first generation to benefit from this change votes in record low numbers. Elizabeth Hubbard of the Pew Foundation recently noted, ‘Over the last twenty years, the decline in voter turnout has been most apparent among young adults.’ . . .

Although saying so seems like a cliché, young people are America’s future. If they are increasingly apathetic about public life, public life will continue to deplete itself. . . . With this in mind . . . we should try to understand what youth apathy tells us about contemporary politics. Take the act of voting . . . younger adults have shown higher levels of disengagement than other adults . . . After an in-depth exploration of research on Generation X and politics (much of it quite gloomy), two political scientists stated, ‘It is likely that X’ers will eventually find their political voice(s) and take their place . . . at the table of power.’ . . . With all of this said, though, there does seem something quite different about Generation X . . . this generation seems to be leading other Americans in terms of an overall civic decline.” (Chapter 1, pp. 1–3)

Questions

1. Do you know someone who is in the “civic generation?”

2. Why do you think the civic generation has consistently had the highest voting percentages?

3. Do you know someone who is in Generation X?

4. Refer to the Student Handout 7 to compare the civic generation with Generation X for voter registration and voting percentages. Why do you think there is such a difference in voter registration and voting percentages?
5. Refer to Student Handout 8 to determine how higher education affects the registration and voting percentages for Generation X.

Group 3

Directions: Your group has an assigned reading provided below and is responsible for answering the corresponding questions that follow. You will also work with Student Handout 7 and Student Handout 8.

Assigned Reading

“Engaging Youth: Combating the Apathy of Young Americans toward Politics”

Source: http://www.tcf.org/Publications/MediaPolitics/mattson.pdf

[Andrei Cherny, author of “The Next Deal: The Future of Public Life in the Information Age”] identifies a new generation affected by something called a ‘Choice Revolution’ symbolized by the Internet. Cherny argues that the Internet places a new generation ‘in control.’ A generation that impatiently raps its fingers on the table when it takes more that few seconds to download a web page from China, which expects packages sent from the other end of the continent to arrive by 10 a.m. the next morning, which finds it difficult to watch TV without a remote control in hand, which demands a piping hot pizza delivered to their front door in half an hour, has elected to bypass government through the immediacy of individual action.

Cherny believes that this new generation should simply vote for policies directly over the Internet. Cherny tries to draw far too many political lessons from the peculiar behaviors of a new generation. I do not believe that we need to throw aside ‘old’ institutions like government, nor do I think we should encourage young people to think that buying things on the Internet is anything like participating in a democratic society with a vibrant public life. (p. 52)

Youth apathy about politics is a multifaceted problem that requires a diverse set of responses. (p. 51)

One of the easiest places to introduce young people to politics is in school. In 1988, the Center for Civic Education and the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship released a report that assessed civic education at the high school level. The report was gloomy: “The question of what citizenship means was seldom addressed. Little was said about the aims of citizenship education. Descriptions of civic education as a subject tend toward conceptual fuzziness and diffusion.” (pp. 38–39)


The Millennial Generation . . . covers everyone born from 1981 to 2000. They are the first generation to come of age in the new millennium.

They are the first generation in human history who regard behaviors like tweeting and texting, along with websites like Facebook, YouTube, Google, and Wikipedia, not as astonishing innovations of the digital era, but as everyday parts of their social lives and their search for understanding.

*Note:* The Millennial Generation is sometimes referred to as Generation Y.

**Questions**

1. Do you agree that Generation Y is apathetic and uninterested in government and politics? Why or why not?

2. Do you agree with the Internet “in control” characteristics that Cherny describes as typical for the Millennial Generation (Generation Y)? Why or why not?

3. Is the Internet the best place to get information about candidates up for election and issues that will be on the election ballot for voter consideration? Why or why not?

4. What is your opinion about an option to vote in elections on the Internet? Why or why not?

5. Refer to Student Handout 7 and Student Handout 8 to determine the group with the lowest voter registration and voting percentages.

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**Group 4**

*Directions:* Your group has an assigned reading provided below and is responsible for answering the corresponding questions that follow. You will also work with

- the graph titled “U.S. Census Bureau, Figure 5. Voting by State: 2008 (citizens 18 and older)” (Student Handout 9) and

- the chart titled “U.S. Census Bureau, Table 6. Reasons for Not Registering and Voting, by Selected Characteristics: 2008” (Student Handout 10).
Assigned reading

“Voter Turnout Increases by 5 Million in 2008 Presidential Election, U.S. Census Bureau Reports”

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2009 news release
http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/voting/cb09-110.html

Data Show Significant Increases Among Hispanic, Black and Young Voters

About 131 million people reported voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, an increase of five million from 2004, according to a new table package released today by the U.S. Census Bureau. The increase included about two million more black voters, two million more Hispanic voters and about 600,000 more Asian voters, while the number of non-Hispanic white voters remained statistically unchanged.

Additionally, voters 18 to 24 were the only age group to show a statistically significant increase in turnout, reaching 49 percent in 2008 compared with 47 percent in 2004. Blacks had the highest turnout rate among 18- to 24-year-old voters—55 percent, an 8 percent increase from 2004. The increased turnout among certain demographic groups was offset by stagnant or decreased turnout among other groups, causing overall 2008 voter turnout to remain statistically unchanged—at 64 percent—from 2004.

“The 2008 presidential election saw a significant increase in voter turnout among young people, blacks and Hispanics,” said Thom File, a voting analyst with the Census Bureau’s Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division. “But as turnout among some other demographic groups either decreased or remained unchanged, the overall 2008 voter turnout rate was not statistically different from 2004.”

Although the youngest voters were the only age group to show a statistically significant increase in turnout, voting did tend to increase with age. In 2008, younger citizens (18–24) had the lowest voting rate (49 percent), while citizens who fell into older age groups (45–64 and 65-plus) had the highest voting rates (69 percent and 70 percent, respectively).

Relative to the presidential election of 2004, the voting rates for blacks, Asians and Hispanics each increased by about four percentage points. The voting rate for non-Hispanic whites decreased by one percentage point.

By sex, women had a higher voting rate (66 percent) than men (62 percent). Neither was statistically different from 2004.

The overall voting age (18 and older) citizen population in the United States in 2008 was 206 million compared with 197 million in 2004. Of that total, 146 million, or 71 percent, reported being registered to vote. That’s slightly lower than the 72 percent who reported
being registered to vote in the 2004 presidential election, but does represent an increase of approximately four million registered voters. The percentage of those registered to vote that actually did so was slightly higher in the 2008 election (90 percent) than in 2004 (89 percent).

Questions

1. What three demographic groups had significant voter percentage increases in 2008?

2. Which of the above groups had the highest voter turnout change from 2004? Why do you think this occurred?

3. Overall, what was the percentage for voter turnout in 2008?

4. Refer to Student Handout 9 to answer the following questions:
   - What was the voter percentage for the two states with the lowest voter turnout?
   - What was the percentage for the two states with the highest voter turnout?
   - What was the turnout percentage for our state?

5. Refer to Student Handout 10 to answer the following questions:
   - What were the top three reasons for not registering to vote?
   - What were the top three reasons for not voting?

6. What is your opinion of the above reasons for not registering or voting?