



Teaching Activity: Who Can Vote for Student Council President?

Adapted from an article by Mary C. Larkin, associate director of the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law (NICEL) in Washington, D.C. The article first appeared in Update on Law-Related Education, published by the American Bar Association.

Overview

During this activity, students will decide whether certain students described in a variety of hypothetical scenarios may vote for Student Council President. They will understand the constitutional guidelines that states must follow when deciding who may vote.

Estimated Time

2 class meetings

Materials Needed

Student Handout 1 – 2 (**See below**)

(Note: You will need to make two copies of handout 1 for each student.)

2 large signs – one that reads YES and one that reads NO

Activity

Step One. Explain to students that voting is one way people make choices and express their wishes. Write the following sentence on the board: "It is important to vote because ..." Ask students to complete the sentence. Discuss responses with the class.

Step Two. Distribute handout 1, "Who Can Vote for Student Council President?" Tell students to read each scenario and then circle the answer that indicates whether or not they would let that person vote in the school election. Ask them to label their handout with an "A" and write their names on the top. Each student will complete the handout two times, so you will need to have a way to distinguish the two.

Step Three. Post the signs YES and NO at opposite ends of the classroom. Now read each scenario from handout 1 aloud. Ask students to stand under the sign with the answer they circled. Then ask them to explain their positions. Use the following questions to clarify students' positions:

Shanika attends your school. She is a B student and wants to vote.

Why does it matter that Shanika makes good grades? Would you let Shanika vote if she were failing every subject?

Sean attends another high school, but he knows someone running for president and wants to vote.

Does the president represent the people who vote for him or her? What does that mean? Can the president of one school represent students in another school?

Elizabeth attends your school. She is really different: her hair is green. Elizabeth wants to vote.

Would it matter if Elizabeth were (name a race; if possible, name one other than those of the students)? Was it fair? Years ago, African Americans and women were not allowed to vote. What do you think were the reasons given for this? Was it fair?

Today is Peter's first day at this school. He hasn't met anyone and doesn't know who is running in the election. Peter wants to vote.

Does it matter that he does not know the people he's voting for? Do you think people vote in elections without knowing who they're voting for? How can Peter learn about people running for office?

Margaret attends your school. She is blind and can't see the ballot, but she wants to vote.

How are you going to let her know who is running for office? If you had someone cast a vote for her, how will you make sure that person voted the way Margaret wanted to?

Louis attends your school. He can't read, but he wants to vote.

Do you think that Louis is still able to make a wise decision for president? What is the difference between Louis and Margaret? Do you think that people who vote in elections should be required to know how to read? *Explain that literacy tests were once used in some Southern states to discriminate against African Americans.*

Kim attends your school but is at home sick. Kim won't be well before the election, but she wants to vote.

If you let her vote, how will she cast her vote? Would it matter if she missed the whole school year?

Jon attends your school, but he has been suspended. He wants to vote.

Does the reason Jon was suspended matter?

Jody has just returned to your school from the State Training School for Boys, where he spent one year for armed robbery. He wants to vote.

Does the fact that he committed a violent offense matter? Does it make any difference that he was charged in the juvenile system, not the adult system?

Step Four. Collect the students' handouts. Remind them again to label the handouts with an "A" and their name.

Optional:

If time permits, or if you want to extend this into another class period, have groups of no more than four students work together to write rules that explain the qualifications for voting in school elections. If students have difficulty getting started on their rules, give them the following open-ended sentence: *Before a person may vote in the school election, the person must ...* Have a volunteer from each group record the rules on chart paper. Ask each group to share its list with the other groups.

Step Five. Distribute and discuss handout 2, "Constitutional Guidelines for Voting" with your students. Include the following points in the discussion:

- Each state sets voter qualifications, but because of guidelines set by the U.S. Constitution and decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court, these laws are similar. Each state requires voters to live within that state before they may vote. Some states require voters to live there 30 days, while others only require voters to prove they live in the state.
- All states require that you be a citizen of the United States before you may vote. You are a citizen if you were born in the United States or if you were made a citizen by law.
- All states allow people with disabilities to vote. The law says that polls must be usable by everyone. If the poll cannot be used by a person with a disability, the state must find another way for that person to vote. Most states have absentee ballots and curbside voting for people with disabilities.
- Every state denies the vote to certain people. No state allows people in mental hospitals or people who the law says are mentally unfit to vote. Nearly all states deny the vote to persons who have been convicted of a felony (this does not apply to persons treated in the juvenile system). Some states also deny the vote to persons who have been dishonorably discharged from military service.

Step Six. Distribute the second copy of handout 1, "Who Can Vote for Student Council President?" Ask the students to complete the handout a second time. Have them label the second copy with a "B." After they complete handout 1 for a second time, return the version labeled "A" to each student.

Step Seven. Give each student a few minutes to compare their responses on the "A" version of the handout (which they completed *before* discussing constitutional guidelines for voting) with their responses on the handout labeled "B" (which they completed *after* discussing constitutional guidelines for voting). Ask them to note if any of their responses have changed.

Step Eight. As a whole group, ask the students to share responses that may have changed, and ask them to give rationales for changing their minds. If time permits, have students agree upon a consensus list of people they think should not be allowed to vote in school elections and a consensus list of people they think should not be allowed to vote in national elections. Make sure students give reasons for placing people on their lists. Compare the two lists.

Student Handout 1

Who Can Vote for Student Council President?

Imagine that your school is going to elect a Student Council President. You are a member of the school's election committee. Your job is to make sure that only those who are qualified get to vote. The following people listed below want to vote. Decide whether you will let them vote. Explain why or why not.

1. Shanika attends your school. She is a B student and wants to vote.
 Yes No
2. Sean attends another high school, but he knows someone running for president and wants to vote.
 Yes No
3. Elizabeth attends your school. She is really different: her hair is green. Elizabeth wants to vote.
 Yes No
4. Today is Peter's first day at this school. He hasn't met anyone and doesn't know who is running in the election. Peter wants to vote.
 Yes No
5. Margaret attends your school. She is blind and can't see the ballot, but she wants to vote.
 Yes No
6. Louis attends your school. He can't read, but he wants to vote.
 Yes No
7. Kim attends your school but is at home sick. Kim won't be well before the election, but she wants to vote.
 Yes No
8. Jon attends your school, but he has been suspended. He wants to vote.
 Yes No
9. Jody has just returned to your school from the State Training School for Boys, where he spent one year for armed robbery. He wants to vote.
 Yes No

Student Handout 2

Constitutional Guidelines for Voting

1. Any person who votes in state elections may also vote in federal elections.

The Seventeenth Amendment declares that any person who votes for "the most numerous branch" of its own legislature is also qualified to vote for U.S. senators and representatives.

2. No state may deny a person the right to vote because of his or her race or color.

The Fifteenth Amendment says that no state may deprive any person of the right to vote regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

3. No state may deny a person the right to vote because he or she is a female or a male.

The Nineteenth Amendment forbids states from depriving a person of the right to vote because of his or her sex.

4. No state may deny the right to vote to a person who is at least 18 years old because of his or her age.

The Twenty-sixth Amendment states that citizens 18 years old (or older) may vote. This amendment does not prevent a state from allowing citizens younger than 18 years old from voting. The amendment does prohibit states from setting a maximum voting age.

5. No state may require a voter to pay a tax before voting.

The Twenty-fourth Amendment eliminates the poll tax. The poll tax began in Florida in 1889 and spread to 11 Southern states as a way to discourage African Americans from voting.

For many years, in many states, there was a literacy requirement for voting. This requirement was also used to prevent African Americans and other groups from voting. The first literacy requirement was adopted in Connecticut to limit the voting rights of Irish Catholic immigrants. Congress banned all literacy tests in the Voting Rights Act of 1965.