



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Ballot Initiatives: Direct Democracy vs. Representative Democracy

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

All rights reserved. No part of this lesson plan may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems without permission in writing from the Citizen Advocacy Center.

Citizen Advocacy Center ▪ Elmhurst, IL ▪ 630-833-4080 ▪ www.citizenadvocacycenter.org

Funding for lesson plans was provided to the Citizen Advocacy Center by the McCormick Foundation.

Ballot Initiatives: Direct Democracy vs. Representative Democracy Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Social Studies: United States Government, State Government, Local Government;
- Language Arts: Speaking, Listening, Writing.

Duration: 1-2 class sessions

Description: This lesson poses the question, “How much of a direct say should citizens have in government decisions?” and provides an overview of ballot initiative (referendum) questions in Illinois.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14C, 14D; 16B; 18B, 18C and;

B. English/Language Arts: 3A, 3B, 3C; 4A, 4B; 5A, 5B, 5C.

Objectives:

1. Understand the types and requirements of ballot initiatives;
2. Understand the role citizens can play in shaping government action and policy; and
3. Understand the process by which ballot initiatives are enacted in Illinois.

Materials:

1. Pen/pencil and paper
2. Blackboard and chalk or whiteboard and marker

Instruction and Activities:

Lecture

America is a representative democracy. Voters cast their ballots for elected officials who then vote on bills. However, elected officials are not bound to cast certain votes nor are they bound to vote for a bill in a way that a majority of their constituents would have voted. In a representative democracy, citizens are typically not able to vote directly on a particular issue; however, many states have procedures by which a group of citizens or legislators can request that a particular question or proposal about an issue appear on the ballot for citizens to vote on directly. The means by which citizens have a direct role in setting policy are called voter initiatives and referendums.

There are two general formats of referendums on the ballot. One type of referendum asks voters a “yes” or “no” question on a particular issue. For example, “Should the City of Washington build a new highway?” The other type of referendum requires a “yes” or “no” vote in support of a specific proposed new initiative, such as a new statute or ordinance, or an amendment to a state constitution.

Additionally, referendums can be binding, advisory, or mandatory. A binding referendum requires the public body to take action based on the outcome of the vote. An advisory referendum does not force public officials to take action; instead, an advisory referendum is a means by which citizens can attempt to influence policy decisions by making their beliefs and opinions known. Finally, a referendum can be mandatory, meaning that the matter being voted on must, by law, be approved by the voters before it can go into effect. This situation arises when elected bodies have passed laws requiring certain changes in legislation be approved by voters. An example of a mandatory referendum is a request by a local government for approval of the issuance of a bond.

Questions for discussion

Why would a state choose to limit or prohibit binding referendums? Why would states limit advisory referendums? Why would a person or a group want an advisory referendum placed on the ballot?

Lecture (continued):

In Illinois, ballot initiatives are known as “Questions of Public Policy.” Illinois statutes provide for two types of ballot initiatives: binding and advisory. However, citizen-initiated referenda are always advisory only; only legislators are permitted to propose binding referenda.

The requirements for initiating an advisory referendum or any public question not specifically provided for in another state statute are governed by Article 28 of the Illinois Election Code (10 ILCS 5/28). Citizens can initiate an advisory referendum to be placed on the ballot by submitting a formal petition listing the specific question at issue. The petition must be signed by a number of voters from the municipality, township, county or school district in which the referendum is sought totaling at least 8% of the number of votes cast for governor in the preceding gubernatorial election in that municipality, township, county, or school district. For example, say the citizens of a school district want the district to adopt a new policy, such as off-campus lunches. First, a petition stating the question needs to be circulated and signed by people who are registered voters living within the boundaries of the school district. Once enough signatures of eligible voters are collected, the completed petitions must be submitted to the local election commission.

The wording of the questions in referendums is extremely important. Questions may be invalidated due to their wording. All referenda must ask a single question that may be answered with a “yes” or “no” response. Referenda questions should involve only one topic and should not contain multiple questions or alternative questions within them.

Questions for discussion

What are the advantages and disadvantages to the requirement for collecting signatures in order to put a referendum on the ballot? What is a reasonable number of signatures to require in support of placing a referendum question on the ballot? Why might some people be opposed to a referendum?

What is the purpose of voter-initiated referenda that are only advisory, not binding, and which may not result in any government action?

Why would elected officials ignore a successful referendum, even though they were not bound by it?

If you were an elected official, what would you do if an advisory referendum were passed? Why do we allow voter-initiated referenda? Why don't we just inform our elected officials of what we want them to do and let them take care of it?

Activities

1. Class Referendum

Have students simulate the referendum process by voting on a new class policy or procedure. Divide the students into several groups, have them brainstorm a policy or procedure they think should be adopted in class, and ask them to create a petition in support of putting the new policy or procedure on the ballot. In order to get their question on the ballot, the students must collect signatures from 2/3 of the class on their petitions. Students may sign more than one petition. Only the first three successfully submitted petitions will be placed on the ballot for the class vote.

(Optional: In preparation for this activity, hold a student voter registration drive the day before this class. Those students who forget to register to vote are not registered voters for the referendum activity and their signatures will be invalid if they sign a petition.)

2. School/Community Referendum Question

Brainstorm issues that students would like to change about their school or their community. Ask students to draft possible referenda questions attempting to bring some of the proposed changes to the ballot for a vote. Make sure all referenda questions are properly worded, covering only a single topic and able to be answered with either "yes" or "no." Have students create petitions stating their referenda questions and collect signatures, with the end result being an advisory school referendum question, in which all students and teachers are allowed to vote.

3. Research Previous Referendum Questions

Have students research referendum questions that have recently been on actual ballots. Students could contact the people who initiated the referenda and track the election results for them. Students could also analyze whether the wording of the referendum questions were appropriate under Illinois Law.

Sources consulted:

Illinois Election Code: 10 ILCS 5/28.

Mathias W. Delort & Barbara B. Goodman, *Election Law*, Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education Practice Handbook (2005).

Citizen Advocacy Center ▪ Elmhurst, IL ▪ 630-833-4080 ▪ www.citizenadvocacycenter.org