



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Young Voters and Civic Participation

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Young Voters and Civic Participation

Lesson Plan and Activities

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12

Subject(s):

- Government

Duration: 2 class sessions

Description: This lesson demonstrates to students that they have a voice and that an organized student voice can be powerful. Further, the lesson will demonstrate that even students that are not old enough to vote have a myriad of ways to engage in civic participation. Lastly, a successful grassroots organizing strategy will be illustrated.

Goals:

Illinois Learning Standards

A. Social Science: 14C

Objectives:

1. Understand the demographics of voting in the United States;
2. Discuss how government affects students' lives;
3. Explore how students can get involved in their government, regardless of age; and
4. Develop a grassroots organizing strategy.

Materials:

Young Voters handout series (attached)

Instruction and Activity:

Start with the teaser true/false questions regarding young voters (first handout, "Young Voters and Elections").

1. **False.** The voting age was changed in 1971 to accommodate younger citizens who felt that if they were old enough to die in military service for their country, they should be old enough to vote. The current minimum age to vote is 18 years.
2. **False.** The voter turn-out among young voters was at an all-time low for the 2000 presidential election, when only 36% of eligible voters under age 24 years cast a ballot.
3. **True.** Volunteerism is on the rise, but only in direct-service, social service organizations.
4. **False.** Youth volunteerism remains at an all-time low for good government organizations, political organizations, etc.

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Now use the second handout (“Question”) to spark discussion regarding students’ expectations for government in their lives.

Do you think that government officials should listen to your opinions as young people? Do any issues affect you as students in particular? See the next handout, “Issues for Today’s Student,” for a list of possible areas of concern or interest.

Do politicians and government officials listen to students? Why? Why not? A cycle seems to occur in today’s world: politicians do not listen to young people because young people do not vote; young people feel disenfranchised because they are not being listened to, so they do not vote. Who is going to break this cycle? Never leave something this important to someone else -- take responsibility yourself and do something to make a change!

Activity:

- Have everyone in the class stand. Tell them that they represent all eligible voters under the age of 30 in the United States.
- Now have half the class sit down. The students left standing now represent those eligible voters over age 30 who actually register to vote.
- Now have just under half of those left standing sit down. The remaining students left standing represent those eligible voters over age 30 who actually voted in the last presidential election. Only one third of all eligible voters under age 30 actually voted in the last presidential election.
- Ask the students who remain standing to draft the rules for a student dress code or some other issue that relates to students. Have those students offer a couple of options.
- Now have the students who remain standing vote on those options.
- Inform the class that everyone in class will be held to that vote for the rest of the school year because the voters voted on it and decided it was to be so.

Is it fair for those few people to decide the issue for everyone?

Do those people represent what everyone wants?

How could the rest of the people have made a difference? Answer: They could have voted!

Why should young people vote? See the next handout, “Why Bother.”

Imagine the impact if all eligible people under age 30 organized and voted. It could turn an election upside-down!

Even if you can’t vote, you can still make a difference. See the next handout, “How Do I Participate?”

- Showing up is half of the battle for any issue.
- When you learn how to participate, you can make a difference.

- Find out if you have the right to speak. The school board and most other public bodies allow members of the public to speak at a government meeting. Choose an issue and let your elected officials know how you feel about it.

Activities:

1. Imagine that you are running for governor of Illinois.
 - Which geographic areas would you visit in the state during your campaign?
 - Where would you stop to talk with people?
 - What issues would you focus on in your speeches and debates?
 - Who would you be the most interested in pleasing if you were elected?
 - Why do you think that young Americans are not voting?
 - How would you increase young voter participation?

Possible assignment: Have students write a letter to a public official discussing their concerns about young voter participation.

2. Is there something about your school that you would like to change? Generate a list of issues that are problems in the school; choose one or two of these items to discuss.
 - Who are the decision-makers in the school or school district who are in charge of this issue?
 - Why are they in charge of this issue?
 - To whom are the decision-makers accountable? To the superintendent? To voters?
 - Develop an action plan to make your voice heard on this issue (see the handout “Political Action Plan”).
 - Identify which freedoms of the First Amendment to the US Constitution (freedom of speech, press, assembly, and petition) are involved with each element of your action plan.

Resources:

<http://www.civicyouth.org/>

YOUNG VOTERS AND ELECTIONS TRUE OR FALSE?

1. You must be at least 21 years of age to vote.
2. Since 1971, more and more young voters (under age 24) have voted each year.
3. Youth volunteerism is on the rise in social service settings (religious-based services, soup kitchens, hospitals, schools, etc).
4. Youth volunteerism is on the rise in democracy-building settings (e.g. volunteering with a political campaign or for a good government organization)

QUESTION:
**WHAT DO YOU WANT OUT OF YOUR
GOVERNMENT?**

Do you think that government should help families achieve “The American Dream?”

Do you think that government impacts your life now?

Do you like how government impacts your life now?

What changes would you make in how government impacts your life?

How would you make those changes?

ISSUES FOR TODAY'S STUDENT

1. EDUCATION

- a. Quality of education
- b. Disparity between rural, suburban, and urban schools.
- c. School /Student Safety
- d. Teenage pregnancy
- e. Financial aid

2. VIOLENCE

- a. Gun violence
- b. Domestic violence
- c. Child abuse

3. MONEY

- a. Vote with your wallet.
- b. Minimum wage
- c. Disparity in incomes between sexes/races

4. ENVIRONMENT

- a. Environmental discrimination
- b. Clean Water
- c. Clean Air Act

5. CIVIL RIGHTS

- a. Hate Crimes
- b. Racial Profiling
- c. Equal Opportunity — Being judged on the “content of our character.”

WHY BOTHER?

- In 2008, 131.3 million votes were cast for President in the national election, representing a voter turn-out rate of ~62% of the eligible voting-age population
- Number of citizens age 30 and younger who voted in the 2008 presidential election: ~23 million
- Voter turn-out rate of voters age 30 and younger in 2008: ~52%
- Therefore, there were ~22 million eligible voters age 30 and under in 2008 who did not vote
- There are ~12.8 million people in Illinois (as of 2010 Census)
- There are ~5.2 million people in Cook County (as of 2010 Census)

Imagine the impact if young people got organized and VOTED EVERY TIME!

HOW DO I PARTICIPATE?

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1. Volunteer.
2. Join an organization.
3. Petition.
4. Show up - represent your views, and hear the views of others to find solutions to common problems.
5. Give - time, money, clothing, ideas.
6. Organize - if it isn't being done well now, do it better.
7. Protest.
8. Testify - school board, city council, and legislators all need your input.
9. Campaign.
10. Register to Vote.
11. Vote.
12. Run for Office.

POLITICAL ACTION PLAN

1. Make some noise!
 - Freedom of Expression is YOUR right.
2. Get media coverage.
 - What audience are you trying to reach?
 - How can you reach that audience?
 - How can you get the media outlet you want to cover the story?
 - What messages will work with the audience you are trying to reach?
3. Create.
 - Letters, faxes, videos, emails, web-sites, on-line discussion groups
 - Voters' Guide
4. Write or Call.
 - Letters to the Editor
 - The Op/Ed page is the most-read section of the newspaper.
 - Your representatives