

Lesson Activity: Who Gets to Vote?

Time: 1 hour

Grades: 4-12

Objective: Understand the impact that restricted voting rights has on group decisions
Relate the game to the expansion of voting rights in United States history

Materials: 5 types of candy bars or other tokens, enough for each person in class

Lesson Plan

1. Divide class into 5 groups, and distribute a different type of candy bar (or any other token with 5 variations) to each group. In a class of 25-30 students, size the groups as follows.
 - a. Group A: 4-5 students
 - b. Group B: 4-5 students
 - c. Group C: 4-5 students
 - d. Group D: 8-12 students
 - e. Group E: 3-4 students
2. Put up a list of three or four topics the class could discuss and vote on. Issues should be broad at first (i.e. the environment, education, school nutrition, road safety), so the class can have several sub-topics to vote on later. You could start with a shortlist of issues, or have students brainstorm several topics to choose from. Alternatively, for younger students, choose a non-political decision that impacts the class (what kind of treat to bring in for everyone, what game to play during P.E., etc.)
3. Vote 1: Announce that you will take a vote to decide which topic to discuss. For this first vote, only students in Group A will be allowed to vote. Let students know that this topic will be used for the rest of the activity.
4. Vote 2: Select a sub-issue within the topic Group A selected. The issue should be a proposal with clear pro and con positions (i.e., "Should the government fine companies who pollute the environment?" or "Should people under 16 be allowed to drive without an adult in the car?") Announce a second vote, this time allowing Groups A and B to vote. Record the tally.
5. Vote 3: At this point, you can either continue re-voting the same proposal, or select a new proposal within the topic from Vote 1. Either way, students in Group C are now allowed to vote, BUT must either pass a short voter eligibility test or give back their candy bar as a "poll tax." Samples of real voter literacy tests can be found here: <http://www.crmvet.org/info/lithome.htm> (or have students respond verbally to a difficult trivia question). Record the tally.
6. Vote 4: Using either the same proposal or a new one, vote again, allowing Groups A, B, C, and D to vote. Record the tally.
7. Vote 5: All groups vote. Record the tally.
8. Discuss the historical context of the exercise. Have students identify the groups of people that correspond to their candy bar groups, following the historical expansion of voting rights in the United States.
 - a. Group A: White males who owned land
 - b. Group B: All white males

- c. Group C: Male emancipated slaves – but some were required to take a literacy test or pay a poll tax to discourage their participation
- d. Group D: Women
- e. Group E: People aged 18-20

Make sure students note that even by the time everyone was voting, the legacy of the original system was still impacting the outcome. The first group got to decide the topic of discussion and was therefore able to frame all subsequent votes.

9. Discuss how it felt when students were in a group that wasn't eligible to vote.
 - a. Did you feel like the decisions made by the earlier groups were fair?
 - b. How did it feel to be the only group required to pass a test or give back the candy bar to participate?
 - c. Did you feel solidarity for your group? Did each group tend to influence the outcome of the vote in one direction?
 - d. If you were voting while other groups could not, how did that feel? Did anyone feel pressure to consider the opinions of people who couldn't vote?

Adaptations and Extension Activities

Visit the Elections & Voting website of the Washington Secretary of State to walk students through the process of registering to vote. In most years, students can participate in the statewide Mock Election and track results from classrooms around the state on the Secretary of State's Civic Education website: <http://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/civics/>

For More Information

This activity is adapted from a 2014 project by the Spokane chapter of the League of Women Voters. Find more resources about Washington State government and civic participation on their website. <http://www.lwwa.org/studies.html>

Resources about the Civil Rights Movement, and examples of real literacy tests and voter registration systems used to suppress black voters in the Jim Crow South, are available at the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website.

Books: <http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm>

Resource links: <http://www.crmvet.org/crmlinks.htm>

Historical documents: <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/dochome.htm>

The Washington State Women's History Consortium hosts articles and resources about the history of women's rights and female suffrage in Washington state.

<http://www.washingtonhistory.org/research/whc/>

<http://web.leg.wa.gov/WomenInTheLegislature/>