

Topic: IV. Ways to Participate

What students do: Create a plan of action for participating in an election.

[CA History-Social Science Standards:](#) 12.2.4, 12.6.4

[CMS Promising Approaches:](#) 2, 3

Thanks to: [Constitutional Rights Foundation](#)

Get Involved in Elections!

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about active participation in elections. First, students read about and discuss options for active participation in elections. Then in small groups, students select an issue they care about and make a plan for taking action on this issue during an election campaign.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe several options for active participation in elections.
- Select an issue that they care about.
- Create an action plan for actively participating in an election.

Materials/Preparation

Handout 1: “Get Involved in Elections!”—1 per student.

Handout 2: “Creating an Action Plan” —1 per student.

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Hold a brief discussion by asking students: What do you think is the most important duty of citizens in a democracy? Why?
- B. Tell students that they are going to look at options for getting actively involved in elections.

II. Reading and Discussion—Get Involved in Elections!

- A. Distribute **Handout 1: “Get Involved in Elections!”** to each student. Ask students to read it, examine the options, and think about their benefits and costs.
- B. When students finish reading, hold a discussion using the questions on the handout:
 1. Why do you think voting is important? What does “Democracy is not a spectator sport” mean? Do you agree? Explain.
 2. Look at the options discussed above. For each discuss the following questions.
 - What is the purpose of this approach?
 - What are some of its potential benefits? What are some of its potential costs?
 - Under what circumstances, would this approach be appropriate and get the best results?

III. Small-Group Activity—Creating an Action Plan

- A. Ask students to brainstorm issues that they think are important. If necessary, use the list of issue areas on the handout to spark student ideas. Write their ideas on the board.
- B. Divide the class into groups of three to five students. Distribute **Handout 2: “Creating an Action Plan”** and go over the steps with the class. Answer any questions students may have.
- C. When students finish, call on groups to explain which issue and option they chose. Then call on groups that chose the same option to compare the steps of their plans.

IV. Putting Plans into Action

Having students implement their Action Plans provides an outstanding opportunity to engage students in meaningful civic participation.

Some ideas to consider:

- Groups of students who created the plans work together to implement.
- The class selects one plan to implement as a class project.
- Students complete their own assessment of how the Action Plan was implemented using criteria such as:

What they learned about the issue they were addressing.

What they learned about public policy, voting, elections, etc.

What they personally contributed in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes.

What they learned about their own knowledge, skills, attitudes.

What successes/challenges they experienced.

Get Involved in Elections!

Voting is one of the most important acts a citizen can do. Our elected officials make decisions that can affect the lives of everyone: They might, for example, deal with issues of war and peace, healthcare, taxes, the environment, immigration, and public safety. Every citizen has a right, even a duty, to stay informed and vote for the best candidates for office.

Also, many cities and states (such as California) have ballot propositions. These are proposed laws that the voters decide on. The proposals may be bond issues for schools, rapid transit, or water. They may relate to the environment, public safety, immigration. Again, these are important matters that citizens should study and vote on.

Citizens can be involved in elections in many ways aside from voting. They may volunteer as poll workers to help at election time. Or they may become involved in a candidate's campaign by donating money or volunteering time (staffing phone banks or going door-to-door to talk to voters).

Individuals and groups have many options for making their opinions heard on issues that they want candidates to address and on helping individual candidates. Below are a few options.

Letter-Writing Campaigns. Most people in power keep close track of letters written by the public. It's one of the ways they gauge public opinion. Although the official or candidate may not personally read every letter, he or she has assistants who read letters and tally opinions. If politicians pay attention to one letter, think of what many letters can do. A letter-writing campaign can force politicians to pay attention to an issue. To conduct a letter-writing campaign, organizers typically meet in a place where many people congregate or walk by. Those conducting the campaign must get the attention of passers-by and persuade them to take a few minutes to write a personal letter. To do this, the issue must strike people as important. The best campaigns don't send form letters. A handwritten letter shows that a person really cares. Some groups organizing letter-writing campaigns often supply a variety of pens, paper, and envelopes so that all the letters look different. The organizers of the campaign typically collect the letters and send them out at intervals from different ZIP Codes.

Petitioning. A petition is like a letter with a thousand signatures. It's easier to get people to sign a petition than write a letter. Politicians know this—that's why they pay more attention to a letter-writing campaign. But a petition can help spread the word about a cause or issue. Typically, a petition is like a short letter that simply states a demand. Each page of the petition should include this statement. Thus more than one person can gather signatures, and it makes it clear that people knew what they were signing. Groups typically set a deadline for their petition, because energy for the drive will last a short time. But they can make the claim, "In only a week, we collected 500 signatures."

E-Mail and Telephone Campaigns. Politicians keep track of e-mails and telephone calls as carefully as they do letters. A flood of phone calls or e-mails can get a politician's attention as quickly as a stack of mail. And it's easier for most people to call or e-mail than to write a letter.

Voter Forums. An informed citizenry is necessary for democracy. Before casting their ballots, voters should know the issues and how candidates stand on issues. Yet many voters make decisions based on

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30-second television advertisements and even on attack ads. Voter forums, where issues are discussed and debated, can help create better-informed voters. At these forums, experts may be invited to discuss and debate issues, or candidates or spokespeople for candidates may be invited to debate and answer questions from the audience. Typically, these forums are held in the evening at meeting halls or school auditoriums.

Research and share candidates' views on a particular issue. Many voters may not understand where the candidates stand on a particular issue. It can be helpful to research a particular issue and see the views of all the candidates. Consider using candidates' web sites to pose questions about issues you care about. You could share the information you learn through political blogs and youth web sites.

Voter Registration Drives. To vote, a person must be registered to vote. Voter registration drives try to get as many people registered to vote as possible. They can be conducted in schools, at malls, or in other public places. In California, according to the Secretary of State's Office, "You do not need to be a registered voter, or a particular age, or even a resident of the area, in order to register voters." Thus a group of students, who themselves are not eligible to vote, may register others to vote. Complete instructions on how to register others to vote can be found online at:

http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/guidetovr_1006.pdf

Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns. To vote, a person must be registered. But that is only the first step. The person must also cast a ballot, typically by going to the polls on Election Day. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the 2002 national elections, 70 percent of the registered voters actually voted. A get-out-the-vote campaign tries to get people to the polls on Election Day. Political parties and non-profit groups (such as the League of Women Voters and Rock the Vote) have elaborate get-out-the-vote campaigns. Individuals can join these campaigns or create their own. There are a number of possibilities for individuals and small groups. They can call friends and relatives on Election Day and urge them to vote. Or they can hold a block party on Election Day and invite people who have voted. Or they can create posters urging people to vote. Or before the election, they can urge neighbors to vote and check at the poll on Election Day and call those who still have not voted.

Everyone—even those too young to vote—can get involved in an election. Examine the issues. Look at the candidates. Take action. Democracy is not a spectator sport.

For Discussion

1. Why do you think voting is important? What does "Democracy is not a spectator sport" mean? Do you agree? Explain.
2. Look at the options discussed above. For each discuss the following questions.
 - What is the purpose of this approach?
 - What are some of its potential benefits? What are some of its potential costs?
 - Under what circumstances, would this approach be appropriate and get the best results?

Creating an Action Plan

Imagine that in an upcoming election, you want voters and candidates to focus on a particular issue. Your group is going to create a plan for getting involved in this election. Do the following:

1. Discuss and decide on an issue that you care about. Consider the following issue areas (but you can decide on an issue outside these areas):

Education, crime, the economy, unemployment, recreation, the environment, housing, healthcare, Social Security, drug and alcohol abuse, automobile accidents, natural disasters, race relations, foreign policy, national defense.
2. Think of what you can do about this issue in the upcoming election. Consider the actions discussed in the article: letter-writing campaigns, petitioning, e-mail and telephone campaigns, voter forums, voter registration drives, get-out-the-vote campaigns. Decide which is the most appropriate for your group and your issue.
3. On a separate sheet of paper, write down a plan of action. It should include the following elements:
 - A. State the issue. Tell what issue your group is concerned about.
 - B. Decide on an option. Tell which option you have chosen to address your issue.
 - C. Set your goal. In one sentence, state what you want to accomplish.
 - D. Write the steps you have to take. What do you have to do? When? Who will do it? This is the bulk of your plan of action. Be detailed.
 - E. Make an evaluation plan. When you are done, how will you know whether you have succeeded?
4. Be prepared to share your action plan with the rest of the class.