

No Place for Hate[®] Activity Library

Voting Rights and the Youth Vote

Lesson Plan and Overview

Lesson Plan: [Elections and the Youth Vote](#)

During every election cycle, the “youth vote” captures the attention of pollsters, political reporters, those running for office, and young adults themselves. In 1971, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years old. The following year, in 1972, 52% of young people between the ages of 18 and 21 voted in the Presidential election, representing the highest percentage ever for that age group. After that year, the youth vote dropped significantly but has since increased in recent years. Because high school students are close to voting age, it is important to encourage them to reflect on the importance of voting and the challenges many face in exercising their right to vote.

Grade Level

Grades 9–12

Learning Objectives

- Students will reflect on what voting is, why people vote or don't, bias in elections, and how to address barriers to voting.
- Students will experience a schoolwide real or “mock” election, helping them incorporate important aspects of creating an election that gets as many people as possible to vote and addresses issues of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Materials Needed

- [SRL Presents Turning Out: The Youth Vote](#) (YouTube video)
- [Turning out the Youth Vote: Stories](#) (collection of videos)

Words You Might Use

Activist: Someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change.

Diversity: The presence of variety within a group. For example, the population of the United States is made up of people belonging to a diversity of groups characterized by culture, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.

Core Activity

Engage students in a discussion about voting by asking some or all the following questions:

- What is voting and how do you do it?
- Have you ever voted for something (e.g., school election, contestant on a reality show, online survey, social media polls, or preferences about something such as whether you want a pizza or ice cream party)? What was that like?
- When you voted for something, why did you vote?
- Was it difficult to vote or were there any barriers or restrictions to voting? If so, what were the barriers?
- Do you think there are more barriers to voting for people in certain identity groups? Please explain.
- Do you see any bias in people's right to vote? Please explain.
- What are some ways to make it easier or more accessible to vote?
- Have you ever talked with friends or family members about voting in political elections and if so, what was that like?
- How does voting (or not) impact your life?

Next, watch the [SRL Presents Turning Out: The Youth Vote](#) YouTube video together and briefly discuss the video by asking:

- What thoughts came to mind while watching?
- What did you agree with or disagree with?
- What is your biggest takeaway from the video?

Share some background info about voting and the youth vote including:

- In July 1971, the 26th Amendment was ratified, which lowered the voting age from age 21 to 18. Since then, 18-year-olds have been eligible to vote.
- Following the lowering of the voting age in 1971, 52% of people between the ages of 18 and 21 cast ballots in the 1972 Presidential election between incumbent President Richard Nixon and Senator George McGovern, the highest percentage ever recorded for young voters.
- After that election in 1972, voting among young people dropped significantly. In the 1990s, voter turnout among young adults reached its lowest point, dropping to 32% in the 1996 Presidential election. After that, the youth vote began to steadily increase. During the 2004 Presidential election, 49% of voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted, a 9% increase from 2000. During the 2008 Presidential election won by Barack Obama, the first Black president, 51% of young adults under age 30 voted. This number represented the third consecutive election in which the percentage of young voters increased.

- In the 2020 presidential election, half of Americans ages 18-29 cast a ballot, which was one of the highest youth voting rates in recent history and an 11-point increase from 2016 (from 39% to 50%).
- In 2024, the young people's electoral participation was slightly lower than in 2020 at 47%, but still much higher than in 2016 (from 39% to 47%).

If time permits, have students watch some of the other short videos in [Turning out the Youth Vote: Stories](#) (1-2 minutes each) or have them watch on their own. In response, they can make their own short videos that respond to some/all of the following questions:

- What is voting?
- Why is it important to vote?
- Why do you think some people don't vote?
- What prevents some people from voting more than others?
- What ideas do you have to get more young people to register and vote?

Finally, engage students, teachers and staff in a whole school election that incorporates some of the new ideas, strategies and approaches they have reflected upon. It could be a "mock election" based on a local or national political election or it could be an already planned school-based election like a student council election or an opinion or preference election/survey about something you want students to vote on (e.g., what clubs to have in school, dress codes, guest speakers they want to invite, etc.).

Prior to the election, make sure that you talk with students about the following issues:

- How can we get as many students as possible to vote?
- How can we consider who typically does and does not vote in our elections and then focus on the needs of those who don't typically vote?
- What issues of exclusion and bias might be face in this election and what can we do about it?
- How can we promote and advertise the election so we get as many people as possible to vote and so that students understand the importance of the election?
- How can we make this a two-step process (first registering, then voting) so that it helps students learn about the two-step process in most political elections (first registering, then voting)? How can we make this process as clear as possible?
- How can we share the results of the election in a way that feels inclusive and motivating?

- Should we conduct an “exit poll” to understand who voted and the extent to which those who voted are representative of the school population?

After you’ve completed the election, engage a small student committee in tabulating the results, analyzing the data, and finding ways to publicize the results, using a variety of strategies to make sure many groups of students know and understand their results. Consider conducting a quick survey with students about the election itself, asking them to reflect on issues access, bias and representation in the election.

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- As a school, organize a voting information forum and voter registration drive at school. Share with students that some states have laws that specifically allow citizens to pre-register at a certain age while others allow registration as long as you’re 18 years-old by the next election. Therefore, high school students who are close to or at the voting age of 18 may be eligible to register. Consider all the ways you can engage the school in voter education and voter registration including an education forum, a social media campaign, inviting in a guest speaker, having a “voting fair” with civics and voting-related activities, a virtual forum, maybe even include information about how other countries engage in voting. Have students research local voter registration organizations in their area like the League for Women Voters and engage them in partnering to organize the voter education and registration activity. Make it a contest and see how many students (and family members) you can register to vote. Have students think critically about identity groups who are typically prevented from voting and address their needs and issues of access.
- Have students watch more of the videos about voting from the core activity above. Then have them brainstorm some of the barriers that young people face in registering to vote and voting. Conduct a school survey that asks students what they know about voting, the voter registration process, how to vote, and why students may or may not be motivated to vote. Publish the results of the survey and then use the information from the survey to highlight the barriers to voting for young people. Then, create committees or clubs, having students work in groups to engage in social action projects that address some or all of those barriers.

Home Connection

Share ADL’s Table [Talk Let’s Talk about Voting!](#)

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

All students will engage in discussions about voting rights, exploring the history of voting rights, especially the “youth vote.” They will reflect on issues of identity, diversity and bias that are relevant to voting rights and access to voting. As a school, they will then engage in a “mock election” or an already planned election, using what they have learned to organize an election that takes into account issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. The activity will help students and the school community understand how bias in elections can happen and what they can do to address that bias.

Virtual Variation

For the opening discussion questions about voting, have students make a video of themselves responding to at least three of the questions or have them virtually chat with someone from the class about the questions and share their responses. Have students watch the [SRL Presents Turning Out: The Youth Vote](#) YouTube video on their own and write and submit a one-paragraph essay that shares their response to the video. Provide the background information to students about the youth vote and have them share reflections and additional questions. Work with a group of students and staff to conduct a virtual election, incorporating all of the ideas from the activity above that helps students think critically about issues of access, bias, and representation in the election.