

VOTING, ELECTIONS, AND ME

Curricular Assignment



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Voting is a defining feature of our democracy. It is a right and a responsibility that came for many after long-fought battles. Voting rights have been expanded from the time our country was founded. For instance, in 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution secured the right for women to vote. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act to eliminate restrictive state laws involving such things as poll taxes and literacy tests that were barriers constructed to keep African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans from voting, particularly in the South. In 1971, the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. Though securing and keeping the right to vote has been a struggle over time, many Americans fail to cast their ballots in federal, state, and local elections. Some argue that it's just not worth their time since corporate interests essentially "buy" elections with campaign contributions and heavy advertising. Others say, if we give up voting, we give up the possibility of influencing who our next leaders will be. To learn more about your upcoming elections, use the newspaper, Facebook, campaign web sites, and other resources to help you identify candidates and issues that will be decided upon at the ballot box.

With this assignment, you'll increase your *knowledge* by considering:

1. What is the job and what are the responsibilities associated with the election race you researched?
2. Who are the candidates running for that office? What are their positions on education and two other issues important to you (you might consider gun control, voting rights, policing and race, the economy, immigration, or other topics)?
3. What is the geographic area for which the candidates in the race are responsible?

You'll have the opportunity to learn *skills* by considering:

1. How can you register yourself and others to vote?
2. How can you apply for an absentee ballot? Where can you vote early and when?

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You can consider your own *values* and that of others by asking:

1. What candidate espouses the values you hold as most important? Be sure to define the values by which you are judging the candidate (you might consider justice, inclusion, government transparency, etc.).

Putting what you learn into *action* means asking:

1. Which candidate for the race you researched do you think people should vote for and why?
2. What organizations endorse the candidates and how can you contribute to their communication efforts?
3. What upcoming opportunities exist in the community to learn more about the candidates?

Assignment Instructions

- Since voting requirements and processes are established at the state level and carried out differently at the local level, it is important for you to understand how your home state oversees elections. Go to this website for that information: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-administration-at-state-and-local-levels.aspx>.
- In class, Individually or in a small group, as directed by your instructor, research on your computer, tablet, or smart phone the ways in which people in your community can register to vote. Find out how you can confirm your voter registration information on-line. Find out the deadlines for registering for the next election in your community, how to get a sample ballot, and the ways you can vote in the upcoming election (by mail, in person, early voting, etc.). In doing so, you're expanding your voter skills.
- Out of class, choose an upcoming electoral race to research and write a short 2 or 3-page paper detailing what you learned about the candidates, based on at least 3 sources (Facebook pages, newspaper articles, candidate web sites, voter election guides, etc.). Provide answers to the questions posed above regarding knowledge, values, and action. Finally, be prepared to provide a 3-minute presentation in class on the day designated by your instructor, based on your research and writing

Reflection Instructions

While listening to your classmates give their presentations, determine what other information you would like to make informed decisions in the upcoming election. If you hear something troubling or promising, make note of that as well. Use your notes for small group or large class discussion following the presentations.

For Instructors

Rationale

Some faculty are surprised to learn that students do not know how to vote, where to vote, and what is at stake in voting in an upcoming election. This assignment is designed to introduce students to those voting basics and demonstrate that one vote is one voice in expressing the public will. For the in-class portion of this assignment, you can help students engage in basic research to understand voting how-to in their communities. For the out-of-class portion of the assignment, students will do additional research on the issues and candidates involved in an upcoming election. This activity offers preparation for students to discuss electoral issues so that they can cast their votes with greater knowledge and confidence.

While students may not call their permanent home the location where your university or college is located, it may be easiest to use the campus location as a starting point for all your discussions. You can remind students that if they are living on campus, they can register to vote with that address.

Objectives

1. Introduce students to the process of voting including how and where to register to vote.
2. Learn where to access information for ballot items, using the newspaper, web sites, and other election resources.
3. Highlight the values communicated in campaigns affecting individuals and public life.
4. Share learning about candidates and/or issues with classmates.
5. Prompt critical questions, encourage discussion, and discuss action options surrounding an upcoming election.

Materials Required

For the day of presentations, you may want to prepare a “sample ballot” based on the races discussed by students to hand out to all so the students can follow along, take notes, and keep the paper for future voting, if they so desire.

Discussion Questions

- For races with candidates who affiliate with a political party (recognizing that some races are deemed non-partisan), what impact did that have on you and how you presented your information, if at all?
- Is there an incumbent running in the race you discussed? What impact do you think that will have on the election outcome and why?

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- What do you consider the most important values we should consider in evaluating a candidate or election issue?
- What obstacles do people in our community face with voting?
- What could help boost voter turnout?

Duration

- 45 minutes for the in-class portion of the assignment.
- A full class period, or two, for presentations and discussions.

Class Size

This assignment is best suited for class sizes of 35 or less but can be adapted for larger class sizes with the use of more small groups.

Suggested Readings

- <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-administration-at-state-and-local-levels.aspx>