

Elections and the Youth Vote

Compelling Question: How can we inspire more young adults to vote?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45 Minutes	Reading: R1, R2 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2, SL4, SL5 Language: L4, L6
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

[How do Polls Inform, Influence and Impact Elections?](#)

[Identity and Diversity in My Generation](#)

[Representing the People: Diversity and Elections](#)

[Voting Rights Then and Now](#)

Other Resources

[9 Ways to Teach about the Election: A Social Justice Approach](#)

[Debate Watching Teaching Guide](#)

[Teaching about Elections Voting Rights and the 2020 Election](#)

[Strengthening Our Democracy: Civic Participation in the 21st Century](#)

Key Words

absentee voting
activists
affordability
climate change
cohort
default
Gen Z
hinder
information deficit
margins
mid-term elections
Millennials
mistreatment
movement
political engagement
probability
racism
social change
stakeholders

LESSON OVERVIEW

During every election cycle, the “youth vote” captures the attention of pollsters, political reporters, those running for office, and young adults themselves. In 1971, with the ratification of the 26th Amendment, the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18. 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 until it reached a low point in the 1990s. Following that decline, there has been a steady increase among young adults who vote.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the role and importance of the youth vote, consider barriers to the youth vote, and propose ideas for taking action to increase the youth vote.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand more about the historical context of “the youth vote.”
- Students will reflect on a series of interviews with teenagers about elections and voting and then consider their own thoughts and ideas.
- Students will identify obstacles to youth voting and then work with others to address at least one of those barriers.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Background Information on Youth Voting](#)
- *SRL Presents Turning Out: The Youth Vote* YouTube Video (2018, 1 min., PBS News Hour, www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=66&v=mWg-vmxDf4c&feature=emb_logo)
- Turning Out the Youth Vote Stories (PBS News Hour’s Student Reporting Labs, <https://studentreportinglabs.org/youth-vote/>)
- “Lack of Voting Information Could Hamper Youth Turnout” (Gallup News, July 14, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/315761/lack-voting-information-hamper-youth-turnout.aspx>, one copy for each student)
- [Action Plan Organizer](#) (one for each student)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: *Have you ever had the opportunity to vote in a school election? Why or why not did you vote? What was it like to vote?*

2. Engage students in a brief discussion about elections by asking: *Have you ever voted in a U.S. political election? If you could vote in the next election, would you? If so, what made you decide to vote or not to vote? What was that like? If not, have you ever gone with anyone (family members, friends) to vote? What was that like? Have you heard the term “the youth vote?” What do you think it means?*
3. Share some or all the [background information on youth voting](#).
4. Watch the video, [SRL Presents Turning Out: The Youth Vote](#). After viewing, engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
 - What did you think and feel while watching?
 - What do you agree with and why? What do you disagree with and why?
 - Do you think the youth vote is important? Why or why not?
 - What is your biggest takeaway from the video?



Video Viewing: What Teens Think about Voting and Elections

1. Share a link with students to [Turning out the Youth Vote Stories](#) and explain that it includes 48 videos of teenagers from around the country that reflects how they feel about voting and elections. Have students each select 2–3 of the videos to watch or assign them so video watching is evenly distributed. Provide students 15 minutes to watch and take notes on what they heard.

Note: If you do not allow phones or devices in your classroom, have students watch the videos on their own for homework the evening before. If you are teaching online, watch one or two of videos together in synchronous class time and then have students watch others on their own.

2. After students watch the videos, engage them in a brief discussion by asking some or all of the following questions. Based on the discussion, as students share barriers to youth voting, record them on the board/smart board.
 - What do you take away from hearing teenagers’ thoughts about voting and elections?
 - Which are some quotes or ideas that most resonate with you and why?
 - What are some of the barriers or issues to voting that the young people highlighted?
 - What are some of the ideas you heard for making voting easier or more likely for young adults?
 - What insights do you have about what teenagers think about voting?
 - Do you think your school or community does enough to inform and encourage voting among young people? Please explain.
 - If you were interviewed about voting and elections, what would you say?
3. Working with a partner, have students create their own videos that respond to the question, “How do you feel about voting and elections?” First have students write down some notes for how they would respond to the question. Then have them share their ideas with their partner. Next, have each practice what they would say, and partners can give each other feedback. Finally, have one student in the pair share their thoughts while their partner records their response. You can then compile all the videos together and make one cohesive video for your school or class.



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of the article “[Lack of Voting Information Could Hamper Youth Turnout](#)” to each student and give them 10–15 minutes to read it silently.
2. Engage them in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions:
 - What did you find surprising in the data about the youth vote?

- What did you already think or know that was confirmed by the data about the youth vote?
- Among the list of ways youth were engaged or involved, which ones could you relate to the most and why? Are there any ways youth are involved that are missing from the list?
- Among the list of top issues for young adults, which ones resonate most for you and why? Are there any issues that are important to you that are not on the list?
- How do the issues vary among racial groups and why do you think that is?
- In your community, what do you think are the top issues for young adults?
- What are some of the obstacles to voting mentioned in the article? Why do you think those obstacles affect young adults specifically?
- What is your biggest takeaway from the article?

Optional: If time permits, survey your students about the issues they care most about and why. You could then engage them in an extension activity where they would discuss which elections (school district, local, state, federal, or all) focus on these issues, research the candidates and what their positions are about these issues so they learn how to do that kind of research as voters.

Addressing Youth Voting Barriers

1. Return to the list of barriers to youth voting. Add to the list by asking: *What are other barriers or obstacles to young adults voting?* Create a list of 6–8 identified obstacles, which could look something like this:
 - They don't feel that the issues they care about are being addressed by candidates.
 - They don't know how to register or don't know you have to register before voting.
 - They don't understand or believe that voting makes a difference in their lives.
 - They face structural barriers to voting (i.e., they need to vote absentee because they're in college, voter ID requirements, etc.)
 - They don't like or feel connected to either of the main political parties.
 - They are generally turned off by politics.
 - They don't know enough about the candidates.
 - They feel negative peer pressure (i.e., they don't know anyone else who votes).
 - They don't feel like they know enough about the issues.
 - They internalize the stereotype that young people are "apathetic" (i.e., they aren't interested).
2. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 students and allow each group to choose one of the barriers. Using the [Action Plan Organizer](#), have them come up with a list of strategies to address the barrier. Their action ideas can include what can be done at schools and colleges, their community, society in general, or in the digital world.
3. After they have generated ideas, each group should determine a way to present their ideas to the class. Options can include a PowerPoint (or Google slides) presentation, letter to an elected official, speech, infographic, or another idea (to be approved). Provide a week or more (some class time and some for homework) for groups to complete their projects and then present them to the whole class.

Closing

Have students share one idea they have for getting more young adults to vote.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [9 Reasons We Need Young Voters More than Ever](#) (The Best Colleges)
- [“A History of the Youth Vote”](#) (CBS News, November 4, 2008)
- [“Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins”](#) (Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019)
- [“Gallup Brain: History of the Youth Vote”](#) (Gallup, January 20, 2004)
- [“Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X outvoted older generations in 2018 midterms”](#) (Pew Research Center, May 29, 2019)
- [“Plenty of Signs Surging Youth Vote Will Play Major Role in 2020 US Election”](#) (VOA News, June 22, 2020)
- [“The Youth Vote”](#) (Edison Research, January 23, 2020)
- [“Will it ever be possible to get out the youth vote?”](#) (PBS NewsHour, March 19, 2020)
- [“With Covid-19, We Need to Rethink the Youth Vote”](#) (The Nation, June 12, 2020)
- [Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964–2012](#) (U.S. Census)
- [“Young People Are the Pathway to Victory in 2020”](#) (Generation Progress, March 10, 2020)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

Background Information on Youth Voting

- 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 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.
- During the 2018 midterm elections, voter turnout among 18–29-year-olds increased from 20% in 2014 (the previous midterm election year) to 36% in 2018. This increase was the largest percentage increase for any age group in 2018. Midterm elections are general elections held at the midpoint of a president’s four-year term, including all House of Representative elections and about one-third of Senate elections.
- The term “youth vote” generally refers to voters who are between the ages of 18-29. That age group includes younger “Millennials” (born between 1981–1996, 24-39 years old in 2020) and older “Generation Z” or “Gen Z” (born 1997-2012, 8-24 years old in 2020). There are approximately 53.7 million people (16.4% of total population) in this age group.
- Over the past few years, a movement has been underway to lower the voting age to 16 or 17, especially for local elections. This is already taking place in some municipalities. Some of the reasons for lowering the voting age include: (1) increasing voter turnout overall, (2) many young people who are 16 and 17 can drive, work and pay taxes, (3) high school is an important time to establish civic engagement like voting and at age 18, many are going through a transition and/or disruption in their lives, (4) they are impacted by political issues so they should have a say about election, and (5) there is precedent with several countries (e.g., Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Scotland, Sudan and others) where young people begin voting at age 16 or 17.

Action Plan Organizer

Name of students in group:

In your own words, describe the barrier or obstacle that impacts youth voting. What is the problem and why is it a problem specifically for young adults? Include statistics, quotes or other supporting information.

What are your ideas to address this barrier...

a. In schools (K-12 and college)?

b. In communities or neighborhoods?

c. In society at large?

d. In digital spaces?
