

## Lesson Title: To Vote or Not to Vote

### Suggested Time

Three to four 50-minute class periods (activities can be conducted individually)

### Grade Level

8-12

### Essential Question

Why is voting an important responsibility for citizens?

### Objectives

- Analyze the efficacy of messages encouraging people to vote
- Examine the history of voting regulation since the Civil Rights Act of 1965
- Analyze voting regulation between the states and the federal government
- Analyze the potential power of the Latino vote
- Evaluate the importance of voting

### Overview

For many Americans, voting is not a “prime time” event. Less than 60 percent of eligible voters voted in the 2012 general election. Yet, for other Americans, voting is a very meaningful, almost sacred duty. In this lesson, students will view three short films that explore the importance of voting. Each film/activity examines the topic from a different, thought-provoking perspective. Show each film in sequence and follow with the discussion questions or activity provided. Culminate with an activity that revisits students’ initial ideas about the importance of voting.

### Materials

- *We The Voters* film “First Time Voters”
- *We The Voters* film “So You Think You Can Vote?”
- *We The Voters* film “Citizen Next”
- Copies of Student Handouts:
  - Handout #1: Importance of Voting Survey
  - Handout #2: “So You Think You Can Vote?” 3-2-1 Strategy Chart
  - Handout #3: “Citizen Next” Graphic Organizer

### Procedure

#### Day 1: The Importance of Voting

**Opening Activity:** Organize the class into small groups. Distribute Handout #1: Importance of Voting Survey to each group. Ask them to review several websites that provide reasons for voting (examples are listed on the handout) and

complete the chart. Have students meet as a class and discuss the reasons the websites were effective in encouraging voters to vote.

**Film Viewing:** Keep students in their small groups and have students watch the *We The Voters* film “First Time Voters,” more than once if necessary, and then discuss the post-viewing discussion questions below.

Film Summary: A farcical tale of José, a first-time voter, who sends a mixed message to his friend Olivia about his first time voting. The couple end their conversation still in confusion and José begins his journey to the polls. Suddenly, he is confronted by a middle-aged Agent of Negativity, who tries to convince him that voting is a waste of time, especially for millennials. The two debate the merits of voting all the way to the polling place. Olivia is there explaining to José that she’s reconsidered his proposal to vote for the first time. Suddenly the two young people discover the Agent of Negativity’s motivation for discouraging them from voting.

### **Post-Viewing Discussion Questions:**

Discuss the following questions with students either in small groups or as a whole class.

- What is the main message to José sent by the “Agent of Negativity”?
- What are some of the arguments that José gives in response to the Agent’s claims?
- Explain how any of the following issues mentioned in the film might directly affect you: education; healthcare; immigration; minimum wage, environment, policing, foreign policy?
- The film cites the statistic that millennials are one-third of all eligible voters—83 million people. How might this voting group have a big impact on the next election?

### **Day 2: Challenges to Voting**

**Film Viewing:** Distribute Handout #2: “So You Think You Can Vote?” 3-2-1 Strategy Chart. Then, show the *We The Voters* film “So You Think You Can Vote?” more than once if necessary. Then organize a “four squares activity” with a quarter of the class in each of four corners of the room. Have students share things they learned from the film and one of their questions about the film’s content with at least two people in the other groups.

Film Summary: Despite what you might have been led to believe, there is no “right to vote” in the Constitution. The film tracks the history of voting rights in the U.S., leading us to a newfound understanding of what obstacles might prevent us from casting our vote in future elections. Armed with that knowledge and a motivation to right that wrong, this film explores just what it would take to amend the Constitution today.

Bring the class together and have students ask the questions they generated in the second section of the chart and share their most memorable moments of the film.

Go a little deeper into the film's rich historical content. Divide the class into six groups and assign one of the following key points from the film to each group. Have students conduct quick research on their topic question using the resources listed below and others. (This can be done as a homework assignment.) Have students prepare their findings and present them to the class.

- What does the Constitution say about who regulates voting? (See Article I, Section 2, Clause 1, U.S. Constitution). What do the following Amendments to the Constitution say about voting? The 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> amendments (ProCon.org, <http://felonvoting.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=000649>)
- How have some states, particularly in the South, placed barriers to voting? ([http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/voting\\_literacy.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/voting_literacy.html))
- How did the 1965 Voting Rights Act help African Americans overcome legal barriers that prevented them from voting in some state and local elections? (History.com <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement/videos/voting-rights-bill>, LBJ speech before Congress <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcBL9pZ9Znw>, key excerpts from the speech <http://d3i6fh83elv35t.cloudfront.net/newshour/extra/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/11/johnsonspeech.pdf> and Impact of the Voting Rights Act <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/immediate-impact.html>)
- Describe the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby v. Holder* and explain how it overturned a key provision in the Voting Rights Act. Review the dissenting opinion. (Oyez <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2012/12-96>, FRONTLINE <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/with-voting-rights-act-out-states-push-voter-id-laws/>)
- What are voting ID laws and what is the controversy that surrounds them? (FRONTLINE: Voter ID Laws <http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/fln33-soc-voterfraud/wgbh-frontline-why-voter-id-laws-arent-really-about-fraud/>, and <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/why-doesnt-everybody-have-a-voter-id/>) How have some federal courts responded to these voter ID laws? (<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/08/02/488392765/as-november-approaches-courts-deal-series-of-blows-to-voter-id-laws>)

### Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions with students as a whole class, with each group contributing their findings to the discussion.

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- Why do you think the Constitution left to the states the authority for regulating voting? Throughout history, what have been the pluses and minuses of this for some voters?
- What were some of the voting “tests” Southern states devised to restrict African Americans from voting? How did the Voting Rights Act take some of this authority away from the states, and what were the results?
- Describe the effect the decision in *Shelby v. Holder* had on the Voting Rights Act. What was the Court’s reasoning in the majority decision? What was the dissenting position? Which side do you agree with and why?
- Describe some voter ID laws that were enacted in some states and how recently federal courts have responded to them. Do you agree or disagree with these courts’ decisions and why? Because of these states’ actions and the federal courts’ decisions, do you think the Supreme Court should reconsider the Shelby case? Explain.

### Day 3: Expanding the Right to Vote

**Film Viewing:** Distribute Handout #3: “Citizen Next” Graphic Organizer and have students watch the *We The Voters* film “Citizen Next,” more than once if necessary. Working in small groups, have students complete the handout. To promote good question writing, have students use the summarizing points and their film notes on the organizer to formulate questions they are most curious about. Bring the students/groups back to a whole class discussion after viewing, having students pose their questions to the class.

Film Summary: Immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants, face many challenges to becoming U.S. citizens: the cost, the difficulty learning English, anti-immigrant sentiment, and more. Immigrants may want to become American citizens for many reasons: the United States is their home, the time is right, they want to benefit their families, with citizenship comes civil and legal rights, with citizenship comes the right to vote and have a voice. The film concludes at the citizenship ceremony where the new citizens testify to why they became so.

**Article Investigation:** To provide students with some background on the potential of Latino and particularly millennial voters, have students read the PBS NewsHour article, “Latino millennials could be major voting bloc—if turnout is high enough.” <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/latino-millennials-could-be-major-voting-bloc-if-they-vote/>

### Post-Reading/Viewing Discussion Questions

After reading the article and viewing the film, have students discuss the following questions either in small groups or as a whole class:

- What potential voting power do Latinos have in the United States?

- According to the article, why does the Latino millennial population have the lowest voter turnout—behind African Americans and whites?
- Why might lower voter turnout in key “toss-up states” change the outcome of this election?
- The article was written in January 2016, before each major party had nominated its candidate. How might Latino voters respond to the two current presidential candidates? Have students discuss their preference for the two candidates running for president and their reasons why.

**Culminating Activity:** Have students return to the opening activity in this lesson where they took the “The Importance of Voting Survey.” Ask students to reflect on what they’ve learned since taking the survey and explain if any of their survey answers would change. Has their initial answer to the question, “What value do you see in voting?” changed? If so, how? If not, why not?

**Extension Activities:**

1. Have students conduct a voting survey in their school or community on an issue they feel is important. This could be completed with an online voter survey tool like Survey Monkey, Zoho Survey, or QuickSurveys.com. Have them tabulate the results and summarize how the survey respondents feel about the issue.
2. Have students do an even deeper exploration of voting rights and attempts by states to restrict voting of certain segments of the population, beginning with the black codes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to the more recent enactment of voter ID laws. What have been the reasons for states to enact these laws and what have been the arguments against them? What is the overall effect of these laws on certain portions of the population’s right to vote?
3. With the knowledge and understanding students have gained from this lesson, have them formulate a public awareness campaign to alert their peers and members of the community to the importance of voting. They can present their findings in a hard-copy pamphlet, or an online blog or social media post.

**Additional Resources**

- Huffington Post, “Millennial Voters”  
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/millennial-voters/>
- The Best Colleges, “9 Reasons We Need Young Voters More Than Ever”  
<http://www.thebestcolleges.org/9-reasons-we-need-young-voters-more-than-ever/>
- Bipartisan Policy Center, “Voter Turnout”  
<http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/2012-voter-turnout/>

- Brennan Center, “Voter Challengers”  
[https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/publications/Voter\\_Challengers.pdf](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/publications/Voter_Challengers.pdf)
- Teaching Tolerance, “The Voting Rights Act, 1965 and beyond”  
<http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/voting-rights-act-1965-and-beyond>

## Standards

### Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

### College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

D2Civ.2.9-12 Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system.

D2Civ.4.9-12 Explain how the U.S. Constitution establishes a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits that have changed over time and that are still contested.

D2Civ.5.9-12 Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2Civ.9.9-12 Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

### National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education)

Standard 15: Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power.

Standard 17: Understands issues concerning the relationship between state and local governments and the national government and issues pertaining to representation at all three levels of government.

Standard 21: Understands the formation and implementation of public policy.

Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.