

3

What's an Election?

Students will describe the elections process and understand the impact of voter apathy.

(30 - 45 minutes)

Discussion

Voting is how we decide together about laws that make sure we are safe, that everyone is treated fairly, and that taxpayer money is spent wisely. Elections are when voters are asked to decide a course of action, or to choose a leader who will make decisions on their behalf. There are three types of elections:

1. A "special election" is typically when voters decide local budget issues, like how to pay for schools or parks. Only people living in the affected districts vote in special elections, which usually take place in winter or early spring.
2. Washington's Primary is very different than other states'. On the first Tuesday in August, Washington holds a "Top 2 Primary" to narrow down the field of candidates. Unlike in other states, candidates here can declare any party preference. In fact, candidates can (and do) make up their own parties! In some states, voters must declare their affiliation to a party when they register, and may only vote in that party's primary. But in Washington, voters may choose any candidate regardless of party preference. The two candidates who receive the most votes in the Primary advance to the General Election in November. Sometimes two candidates with the same party preference both advance to the General Election.
3. The Tuesday after the first Monday in November is our national Election Day. In the General Election, voters make their final selection for representation. In Washington, local county and city representation is typically decided in odd-year General Elections, while federal and state candidates usually appear on the ballot in even years. Frequently, Washington voters are also asked to approve or reject laws proposed by citizens of our state. These are called "initiatives."

Not everyone chooses to vote, even people who register. Sadly, local elections and special elections can have the biggest impact on our daily lives but have the lowest voter turnout.



Primary Sources

U.S. Census voter turnout statistics (p. 20)

2008 Top 2 Primary
U.S. Supreme Court decision (p. 21)

election

an event when people vote to decide a course of action, or to choose their leaders who will make decisions for them

primary

a process to reduce the number of candidates running for office

office

an official position of responsibility

candidate

someone who wants to hold a political office

voter turnout

the percentage of registered voters who participate in an election

voter apathy

lack of interest in politics or voting

Elementary Lesson

In elections, a small group of people make decisions that affect us all. For example, in 2012 only 6 out of 10 U.S. citizens voted in the General Election.

1. Ask the class to consider two candidates' ideas to improve public safety. On a slip of paper, have each student vote for Candidate A or Candidate B. Tell students to hold on to their ballots.

Candidate A	Candidate B
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Install streetlights• Increase activities for youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hire more police

2. Pretend your students represent all Washington adults. Tell 3 students (10 percent) to stand up and move to one side of the room. They represent the 10 percent of Washington residents who are not citizens and can't vote.
3. Tell 4 students (15 percent) to join the non-voters. They represent the 15 percent of Washington adults who are eligible to register but have not done so.
4. Count off another 4 students (15 percent) and have them join the non-voters, representing registered voters who choose not to vote or forget to return their ballot.
5. Tally the votes of the remaining 60 percent of the class and announce the results. Add in the other groups' votes one by one. Do the results change? Ask students, was the election fair? Was everyone represented?

2013 voters' pamphlet
art contest entry

Middle & High School Lesson

1. Discuss our Top 2 Primary system. What are some pros and cons of our Primary compared to other states?
2. Ask students to read the U.S. Supreme Court decision and dissenting opinion regarding Washington's Top 2 Primary (p. 21). Assign teams to defend one side in a "mock trial." What were the concerns presented by each side? What was the opposing counsel's response to those concerns? Which side does the class think the justices should have upheld?
3. Under Washington's Top 2 Primary, both candidates in the General Election can be from the same party. In students' opinions, is this better or worse for encouraging voter turnout?
4. Ask students, why do some people vote regularly while others vote rarely, if at all? If voting is so important, should people be fined or punished in some way for not voting?



Homework

Ask students to discuss the importance of voting with an adult and write down their thoughts following the conversation. Here are a few prompts:

Why is it important everyone votes?

Are there reasons why people should not vote, aside from being ineligible?

Assessment Questions

Elementary: Very few people choose to vote in the Primary or special elections. But many people get upset when there are no candidates they like in the General Election or they have to pay extra taxes. Should voting be mandatory?

Middle & High School (students may choose):

1. Only half the eligible voters in this country vote. Would more ballots in non-English languages encourage more people to vote?
2. We elect people to represent our interests in communal decisions affecting us. As the American Revolutionaries famously cried: "No taxation without representation!" Teenagers pay taxes but can't vote. How does the U.S. Supreme Court decision regarding the Top 2 Primary (p. 21) open the door for 17-year-olds voting in a Primary if they'll be 18 by the General Election?

Former Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed (right) and former state Attorney General Rob McKenna answer reporters' questions after the U.S. Supreme Court heard the case dealing with our state's Top 2 Primary (2007).

