

Lesson 3

Democratic Participation



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the impact of different levels of voter participation on our democracy?
- 2 What are some barriers to participating in the electoral process?

PURPOSE

A healthy and vibrant democracy is based on an active and engaged citizenry, where all citizens are ready, willing and able to participate. Engagement includes staying informed, debating issues, engaging with politicians and participating in the voting process.

In this lesson, students will examine voter turnout statistics over the last thirty years and consider the significance of the trends and impact of different levels of voter participation. Students will reflect on their own attitudes toward democratic engagement, before examining the barriers that some people face when participating in the electoral process. In the *Consolidation* activity, students will debate different proposals to increase voter turnout or democratic engagement.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

- explain the impact of low voter turnout amongst youth and the importance of democratic participation;
- analyze factors influencing voter participation and attitudes towards politics;
- assess which barriers could affect their decision or ability to vote in the future;
- evaluate the potential impact of different proposals on proving voter turnout.

Starter

1. Explain the term 'voter turnout'. Voter turnout is the percentage of eligible electors or registered voters that cast ballots in an election. Spark an initial discussion with students:
 - What do you think voter turnout was in the last federal election?
 - Do you think voter turnout stays the same over time?
 - Do you think voter turnout varies across age groups? Why or why not?
2. Review voter turnout statistics at the federal level from 1970 to 2015 (see Slide Deck 3).
 - What trends do you notice from 1970-2015? How has voter turnout changed over time?
 - What factors do you think lead to an increase in turnout? (e.g., “change” election, competitive election)
 - What do you think voter turnout will be this election and why?
3. Show students the infographic comparing voter turnout by age group in the 2011 and 2015 federal elections (see Slide Deck 3) or Handout 3.1 (voter turnout by age group, 2008 to 2015).
 - What do you notice about the different age groups? What do you think the reasons are behind the differences?
 - Why does youth voting matter?
4. Share the 'First Time Matters' slide (see Slide Deck 3). This graph shows that voting is habit forming: if you vote in your first election, you will probably be a lifelong voter.
 - Will you vote when you are eligible?
 - How do programs like Student Vote help future voters?

Activities

1. Using a 'Stop and Jot' strategy, have students respond to the following questions. You can ask students to draw a rectangle and write down their responses inside or you can ask them to write each answer on a sticky note.
 - What attitudes do you have about participating in politics and elections?
 - What or who has shaped your attitudes towards politics and democracy?

Afterwards, review as a class. If you choose to use sticky notes, you can organize the responses on the board and group similar thoughts.

TEACHER NOTE

Be mindful and aware that there are barriers to democratic participation by certain groups due to language, class and negative historical experiences.

2. Provide copies of Activity 3.2 to each student and ask them to answer each question as honestly as they can. Afterwards, give them a few minutes to discuss their responses with a partner.
3. Review some key research findings about voting and the barriers to electoral participation using Slide Deck 3.
 - There are many different barriers to voting, including motivational barriers and access barriers. Motivational barriers have been found to be most significant.
 - Motivational barriers include low levels of political interest and political knowledge, lack of perceived importance, cynicism and lower sense of civic duty.
 - Access barriers include not knowing when and where to vote, lack of personal identification, challenges getting to the polling station, and language and literacy skills.
4. Independently or with a partner, have students reflect on how many zeros they recorded on the voting survey (Activity 3.2) and which barriers could affect their decision or ability to vote in the future.

Consolidation

Discuss different ideas to increase voter turnout or democratic engagement through a 'Four Corners' debate. Designate the four corners of the classroom as “Strongly Agree”, “Somewhat Agree”, “Somewhat Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree”. Select a small object (e.g., tennis ball, bean bag) to be used as a “talking stick” to determine whose turn it is to speak.

Proposals (included in Slide Deck 3):

- Voting should be a legal requirement and those who do not vote should be fined
- Election day should be a holiday so that people have sufficient time to vote
- Online voting would make it easier to cast a vote
- The voting age should be lowered to 16 years of age
- A proportional voting system would make voters feel that their vote mattered
- Civics and citizenship education should be expanded in curriculum
- School council elections should be reformed to give the council more decision-making power
- Include youth in more government consultations

After each statement is read aloud, provide time for students to think and then move to the corner of the room that corresponds most closely with their own point of view. Students should be prepared to justify their opinion. Encourage them to link their thinking to the research about barriers to voting. Students can move around the room if their opinion changes as a result of the discussion.

Extended Learning

1. Divide students into groups and ask them to imagine they have been hired by Elections Canada to encourage participation and engagement in the 2019 federal election. Students will design an advertising campaign that incorporates social media, digital, print and/or audiovisual elements.
2. Have each group present their marketing campaign, as well as the rationale behind it. Guiding questions:
 - What was the inspiration behind the campaign? Where did the ideas come from?
 - How will this ad campaign increase youth engagement?
 - Are there any connections to the research findings?
 - What are the intended outcomes?
3. Post advertisements around the school or play the videos in the lead-up to the election. Submit your productions to CIVIX by email or share them through Twitter, YouTube, Facebook or Instagram.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

Voter turnout at federal elections has fluctuated over time. There have been some periods that showed a decline in voter turnout and others that have shown an increase. For instance, voter turnout in 1962 was 79 per cent. In 2008, it was 59 per cent and in 2015, it was 68 per cent.

Low voter turnout tends to be disproportionately concentrated among young people. This is concerning, because studies have shown that habits of voting and non-voting persist over time. Essentially, if young people do not vote during their first few eligible years, there is a concern they may never establish the habit.

The 2015 federal election saw the largest increase in youth voter participation on record. Electoral participation among 18-24 year olds

increased by 18 percentage points to 57 per cent (up from 39 per cent in 2011). However, we do not know if this trend will continue.

In 2011, Elections Canada commissioned the first *National Youth Survey* following the federal general election to better understand the reasons why youth may or may not participate in the electoral process. The most significant **motivational barriers** were a lack of political interest and knowledge, and a lower sense that voting was a civic duty. The greatest **access barrier** was a lack of knowledge about the electoral process, including not knowing about different ways to vote and not knowing how or when to vote. The study found that youth who did vote were more likely to have discussed politics with their family while growing up.

Elections Canada conducted a follow up survey in conjunction with the 2015 federal election. The 2015 *National Youth Survey* found that youth who said they voted were much more likely than those who did not vote to say they learned about government and politics in high school, and more likely to have participated in a mock election (such as the Student Vote program).

This research underscores the importance of civic education and election simulations, which increase political knowledge and interest, encourage political conversation with family, and improve attitudes towards democratic participation among young people. By giving youth an opportunity to practice voting in elementary or high school, they will be more likely to cast a ballot when they become eligible.