



Lesson Plan: Improving Elections

OVERVIEW

This lesson plan is designed to be used with the film, *Election Day*, which shows the experiences of a number of people in various parts of the United States on Election Day 2004. Classrooms can use this lesson to study how the voting process differs around the country, and to discuss issues related to elections administration.

P.O.V. documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVD's and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE!

Please visit our Film Library at http://www.amdoc.org/outreach_filmlibrary.php to find other films suitable for classroom use or to make this film a part of your school's permanent collection.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Use viewing skills and note-taking strategies to understand and interpret video clips.
- See and discuss ways that the voting process varies from place to place in the U.S.
- Write a position paper that addresses the question: How well does the U.S. election process achieve the nation's democratic ideal of free and fair elections?

GRADE LEVELS

6-12

SUBJECTS

Civics, Current Events

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Method (varies by school) of showing the class online video clips
- Computers with access to the Internet

ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION

One 50-minute class, plus homework time to complete the position paper

SUGGESTED CLIPS

Clip 1: Voter Registration in Ohio (2:21)

The clip begins at 14:40 with, "Anyone else know if they're ii or bb..." and ends at 17:01 with, "I have to. I have to."

Clip 2: Voter Registration in Wisconsin (1:24)

The clip begins at 18:04 with the title card, "18-year-old Franny will vote..." and ends at 19:28 with Franny sitting at a table and voting.

Clip 3: Waiting to Vote in Poor and Rich Areas in Missouri (2:35)

The clip begins at 21:18 with the title card, “St. Louis, Missouri” and ends at 23:53 with the quote, “People take their responsibilities as citizens very seriously.”

Clip 4: Lined Up to Vote in Missouri (1:42)

The clip begins at 1:02:04 with a clock showing the time as 8:15 PM and ends at 1:03:46 with the quote “...for two hours then they should too.”

Clip 5: Tricky Ballot in Illinois (2:46)

The clip begins at 49:37 with the quote, “Hi, James Fuchs.” The clip ends at 52:13 with the quote, “I wonder if there is a trick involved.”

BACKGROUND

The administration of elections in the U.S. is handled by state election boards and local supervisors (titles may vary). As a result, voters across the country have uneven experiences with voter registration, technology used to cast votes, resources at polling places, etc. The documentary, *Election Day*, provides a unique snapshot of the voting process as it occurred in different states on November 2, 2004. In that election, Senator John Kerry ran for president against incumbent George W. Bush. Sixty-four percent of Americans of voting age, or 122 million people, turned out to vote.

After weaknesses in local polling practices were highlighted in the 2000 presidential election, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). This legislation provides minimum standards for elections administration, requires states to offer provisional ballots to voters whose registration status is in question, and offers federal funds to replace outdated and unreliable voting equipment. Despite this effort to improve the voting process, the 2004 election was also marked by controversy. Allegations of unfair practices damaged voter confidence in the election process, giving rise to calls for additional reform.

ACTIVITY

1. As a warm-up activity, have students provide a written response to the question, “How important are free and fair elections in a democracy?” After a few minutes, have one or two students share their thinking.
2. Explain that in the United States, elections are managed at the state and local level, so voting experiences vary quite a bit from place to place. Tell students that the class is going to take a look at some of these differences by watching a series of short video clips from a film called *Election Day*, which documented the 2004 Election Day activities of different people in various states.
3. Tell students the first clip shows a polling place in Ohio. Ask them to take notes as they watch on the environment of the polling place and some of the challenges faced by voters. Then, show the clip, “Clip1: Voter Registration in Ohio.” Afterwards, engage the class in a discussion about what they saw. What was the polling place like? (Was it empty, crowded, busy, calm?) Why couldn't the man with the dark hair and glasses vote? (He thought he had registered at the DMV, but his name wasn't on the list of registered voters.) Why do you think the woman with the baby was so motivated to vote? (Answers will vary)

4. Next, have students take notes on the polling environment as they watch the clip, “Clip 2: Voter Registration in Wisconsin.” Ask students how this polling environment compared to the one shown from Ohio. What Wisconsin law made it possible for the 18-year-old girl to just show up and vote in her first election? (Same-day voter registration) What was her ballot like? (Paper and pencil ballot) How did her voting experience compare to the woman with the baby in the first video clip? Based on what students have seen, how did voter registration procedures affect participation?

5. The next clip shows the different experiences of voters in St. Louis, Missouri. Show students the clip, “Clip 3: Waiting to Vote in Poor and Rich Areas in Missouri.” Explain that the woman shown traveling from one polling place to another is a poll watcher from Fair Election International. She observes the voting process on Election Day and writes a report about what happened. Ask students to note what differences she observed at the polling places in the poor area versus the affluent area. Explain that the long lines in the poor area continued throughout the day. Show the clip, “Clip 4: Lined Up to Vote in Missouri.” Tell students that Fair Election International’s report pointed out that low-income areas of St. Louis had fewer machines and poll workers than wealthier areas. Ask students to discuss the implications of Fair Election International’s findings.

6. Remind students about the paper and pencil ballot shown in the second clip. Tell students that the next clip shows another kind of paper ballot where voters use a tool to punch out a hole next to the candidate they choose. Show the video, “Clip 5: Tricky Ballot in Illinois.” Explain that there are many different types of voting systems and machines in place all over the country. Some voters use lever machines, others use touch screen electronic devices; there are even scanner cards where voters blacken in ovals next to their candidates (similar to how many standardized tests are taken in schools). Ask the class their opinion as to why there are so many different types of systems and machines. (Cost usually drives the decision to implement certain voting devices.)

7. Ask students to read P.O.V.’s [Election FAQ](#) to discover why voting laws are so different from state to state. Given that information, their observations from the video clips and any additional research done on this topic, have students write a position paper that addresses the question: How well does the U.S. election process achieve the nation’s democratic ideal of free and fair elections? Papers should incorporate student thinking on the importance of voting from the warm-up activity, evidence for points made about the election process and recommendations for how the administration of elections can improve.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Thoughtful responses to the warm-up question.
- Notes taken while watching the video clips.
- Participation in class discussion.
- The arguments and structure of their position papers.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS

- Investigate how the voting process has changed over time. Ask students to interview three voters from different generations to discover their elections

experiences. How old were they when they cast their first vote? What technology did they use to cast their votes? How do they view the voting process today? Students can then craft a written, audio or video documentary interweaving these stories.

- Revisit the 2000 presidential election and identify the weaknesses of local voting systems that were brought into sharp focus in the aftermath of that Election Day. Discuss how effectively the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) has addressed these weaknesses and write your elected leaders with ideas for further improvement.
- Invite someone from your local board of elections to visit your classroom. Have him or her share statistics related to local voter turnout, explain budget limitations and discuss what challenges the board is working to overcome. Be sure to also allow time for the representative to react to student recommendations for improving elections. Then, find out what students can do to improve the local voting process and give extra credit to students who volunteer.
- Profile the work of poll watchers. Begin by reading the information on P.O.V.'s *Election Day Web* site about [poll watchers](#). What types of organizations do they represent? What roles do they play for these groups? Have students create job descriptions for the different types of poll watchers and then discuss whether or not any restrictions should be placed on their work.
- Read the June 1, 2006 Rolling Stone article, "[Was the 2004 Election Stolen?](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/10432334/was_the_2004_election_stolen)" (http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/10432334/was_the_2004_election_stolen) by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who contends that the Republican Party mounted a coordinated campaign to impact voting results in the 2004 presidential election. Explain that controversy over how elections were administered in 2004 prompted an investigation by the House Judiciary Committee. Ask students to pretend they are Committee staff looking into the 2004 elections process. Have them work in pairs or small groups to review Kennedy's article, list issues that allegedly interfered with the 2004 election, and make recommendations for how the elections process could be improved in order to build greater confidence in election outcomes. Students may wish to share their recommendations on Rolling Stone's National Affairs blog (<http://www.rollingstone.com/nationalaffairs/?p=171>).
- Explore other election-related themes with additional P.O.V. films, including *Bill's Run*, *Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed*, *Last Man Standing*, *My Country, My Country* and *Street Fight*. Each film has companion website resources and educator activities to support their use in the classroom.

RESOURCES

Election Laws and Procedures

<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/elect/electlaws.htm>

The National Conference on State Legislatures site provides information on election laws and procedures, election reform legislation, and more.

National Bar Association: How Should U.S. Elections Be Managed?

<http://www.abanet.org/publiced/youth/sia/voting/elections.html>

A concise and clearly-written resource that describes issues related to voter registration and voting technologies.

The Pew Center on the States: Make Voting Work

http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/initiatives_detail.aspx?initiativeID=31670

Access research and information on initiatives related to improving the voting process.

U.S. Election Procedures

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/election04/procedure.htm>

This article from the U.S. State Department explains the voting process, the role of election administrators, the nature of balloting, and lessons learned from the 2000 presidential election.

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Civics

Standard 10: Understands the roles of voluntarism and organized groups in American social and political life.

Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.

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 20: Understands the roles of political parties, campaigns, elections, and associations and groups in American politics.

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

Language Arts

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in broadcast journalism, secondary education, and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's Director of Education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource Web site (now PBS Teachers), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.

Background Sources

Help America Vote Act (2002), <http://www.fec.gov/hava/hava.htm>;

"Political Scientists Examine Voter Confidence in Electoral Administration, Make Recommendations," The American Political Science Association, <http://www.apsanet.org/content/47925.cfm>; "Presidential Turnout Rates for Voting-Age Population (VAP) and Eligible Population," United States Election Project, George Mason University, http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.