

## Why Should I Vote? Does It Really Matter?

by  
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**Lesson Description (Abstract):** In this lesson students will analyze disaggregated voting data to determine how voting trends impact the issues upon which politicians choose to focus. The types of disaggregated statistics students will be analyzing will be percents of voters broken down by age, gender, race, education and economic status.

**Goal(s):** The goal of this lesson is an increase in the level of civic participation, particularly among individuals who belong to groups that traditionally exhibit low levels of involvement. Students will realize that voting patterns influence government as to which issues are focused upon; and that their participation in the democratic process is the only way to get issues important to them to be heard.

**Grade:** 9-11<sup>th</sup> grade

**Time Required:** two 50 minute periods.

**Materials Needed:**

1. Demographic voting report of the census at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html> (click and print "Voting and Registration in the Election of 2004" - report <PDF 589K>)
2. Handout #1: Voting Data Analysis
3. Handout #2: Big Idea Questions
4. Extended and Selected Response sheets

**Benchmark[s] Addressed [Civics Standard Three 9-12a]:** Students will understand that citizens are individually responsible for keeping themselves informed about public policy issues on the local, state, and federal levels; participating in the civic process; and upholding the laws of the land.

**Essential Questions Addressed:**

- What are the consequences of citizens not participating in democracy?
- Why are citizens expected to participate in a representative democracy?

**Lesson Content:** A representative democracy depends on a citizenry that remains informed and active because government policies are in large part shaped and determined by the decisions of its citizens. Furthermore, liberty is preserved and government remains limited through the vigilance of citizens who prevent and protest what information reveals to be ethical and legal breaches. A citizenry that fails to keep itself informed and participate in civics processes risks losing its liberty and suffering the effects of flawed policy.

Voting, in many ways, is the core of a representative democracy. Voting provides evidence of the health and vigor of our body politic. When citizens keep elected officials informed and monitor their actions through voting, government is put in a better position to serve the common good and be restrained.

One of the problems in American society is that disproportionate attention is paid to the interests of certain groups within our population. This disproportionate attention is due, in part, to the failure of some groups to remain engaged in the civic process at levels that command attention. With limited resources, elected officials will focus mainly on those who generate the most leverage. This leverage can come from funding or voting. Since elected officials depend on votes for their jobs, they are likely to pay much less attention to the interests of those who do not show up in large numbers to vote.

Trends from recent elections show that some groups of citizens are less likely to participate in elections than others. The results are that some issues are taken more seriously than others. Some issues are only given lip service until the VOTING masses demand politicians to focus on them. For example, because fewer low-income citizens vote than upper-income, issues related to welfare and national health care programs are not given due attention. On the other hand, since senior citizens vote more often than other age groups, Social Security benefits are routinely discussed.

The enduring understanding, therefore, is that those who participate actively in civic life are most likely to have their issues addressed and interests met.

With this in mind, it is necessary for voters to be informed about the issues that are being debated in government. Are the issues that impact you being taken seriously or are other issues taking to forefront?

**Assessment:** see Extended and selected responses (pp. 5-6).

**Procedures:**

1. Prior to class, write the following questions on the board:
  - “ To whom do elected officials listen and why?”
  - “ Why should people vote?”
2. Ask each student to write down their individual demographical information (e.g. age, gender, level of education, income, marital status etc.). Tell them they will be looking at this over the course of this lesson.
3. As a class, brainstorm a list of issues that governments (local, state, and federal) deal with. Write their responses on the board.
4. Have class break into small heterogeneous groups of 3 to 4 students and engage them in small group discussions around the following questions:
  - Which of the issues that we just brainstormed have a significant impact on you?
  - Which of the issues have little, if any, impact on you?
  - Which issues do you believe are the most important in the minds of policy makers today?
  - Which issues do you wish received more attention?
5. Ask the students who they think elected officials listen to and why. Students may come up with a variety of answers.
5. Distribute copies of “Voting and Registration in Election of November 2004” (available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html> - go to “Voting and Registration in the Election of 2004.” Click “Report” and print out Table B on page 4).
6. While still in groups, have students analyze the “Voting and Registration” chart found in this report. The report focuses on registration and voting patterns based on such disaggregated data as sex, age, race, income, education, etc.
7. Distribute “Handout 1- Voting Data Analysis” - have groups answer the questions on this handout using statistical evidence from Table B in the report to support their answers. An alternative “Handout 1 may be found on page 10 of this lesson. The alternative requires students to use a chart to analyze the data rather than a series of questions. Teachers can opt to use either version.
8. Ask for volunteers to report out their findings.
9. Distribute Handout 2 - “Big Idea Questions.” Students should discuss possible answers for these questions in groups, but write their answers individually. These questions are going to ask students to draw inferences from the data and discuss their conclusions.

10. As a class, look back to the lists of issues brainstormed in the beginning. Ask them to predict which issues will and will not be given real consideration by elected officials and why.

**Debrief:** Revisit the Essential Question for this lesson: *What are the consequences of citizens not participating in democracy?* In “Think-Pair-Share format, have students generate and share answers to the question. Explain that the consequence of not participating is that you are less likely to have issues that are important to you addressed.

**Extension Activity:** Have students take what they know about the voting participation of various sub-groups and how some groups are to being adequately serviced by government because of it, and create a script for an advertisement. The ad should focus on convincing the disenfranchised groups to vote. Have them present these ads in class or on camera.

**Teacher Tips:**

1. Students spent more time discussing the data during field testing than was originally expected. Much of this discussion focused on why they thought different groups did not vote. Monitor their discussions to make sure that they are focused on constructing the enduring understanding for this lesson.
2. Some students needed practice at analyzing data put in different forms, notably graphs and charts. While many preferred working with graphs, the charts provide more details.

**Bibliography**

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>

This web site is maintained by the U.S. Census Bureau and includes all census information. The voting information specifically is kept for national elections in the form of PDF files or Excel spread sheets.

**Extended Response Item**

Table C.  
**Characteristics of Voters and Nonvoters: 2004**

Characteristic	Percent distribution		
	Total citizens	Voters	Nonvoters <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total, 18 years and older.....</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Sex</b>			
Men .....	47.8	46.5	50.1
Women .....	52.2	53.5	49.9
<b>Race and Hispanic Origin</b>			
White alone.....	82.7	84.8	79.1
White alone, non-Hispanic.....	75.2	79.2	68.2
Black alone.....	11.9	11.1	13.1
Asian alone.....	3.2	2.2	4.9
Hispanic (any race).....	8.2	6.0	11.9
<b>Nativity Status</b>			
Native.....	93.3	94.4	91.5
Naturalized.....	6.7	5.6	8.5
<b>Age</b>			
18 to 24 years.....	12.6	9.3	18.6
25 to 34 years.....	16.7	14.5	20.4
35 to 44 years.....	19.5	19.5	19.4
45 to 54 years.....	19.8	21.3	17.1
55 years and older.....	31.4	35.3	24.5
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Married.....	56.7	62.8	46.0
Widowed.....	6.7	6.5	7.1
Divorced.....	10.3	9.4	11.9
Separated.....	2.1	1.6	3.1
Never married.....	24.1	19.7	32.0
<b>Educational Attainment</b>			
Less than high school graduate.....	13.0	8.1	21.8
High school graduate or GED.....	32.3	28.5	39.0
Some college or associate's degree.....	28.7	31.0	24.7
Bachelor's degree or more.....	26.0	32.4	14.5
<b>Annual Family Income</b>			
Total family members.....	100.0	100.0	100.0
Less than \$20,000.....	10.6	7.8	16.1
\$20,000 to \$49,999.....	27.3	26.0	29.9
\$50,000 to \$99,999.....	31.0	34.9	23.4
\$100,000 and over.....	15.6	19.2	8.6
Income not reported.....	15.5	12.1	22.1

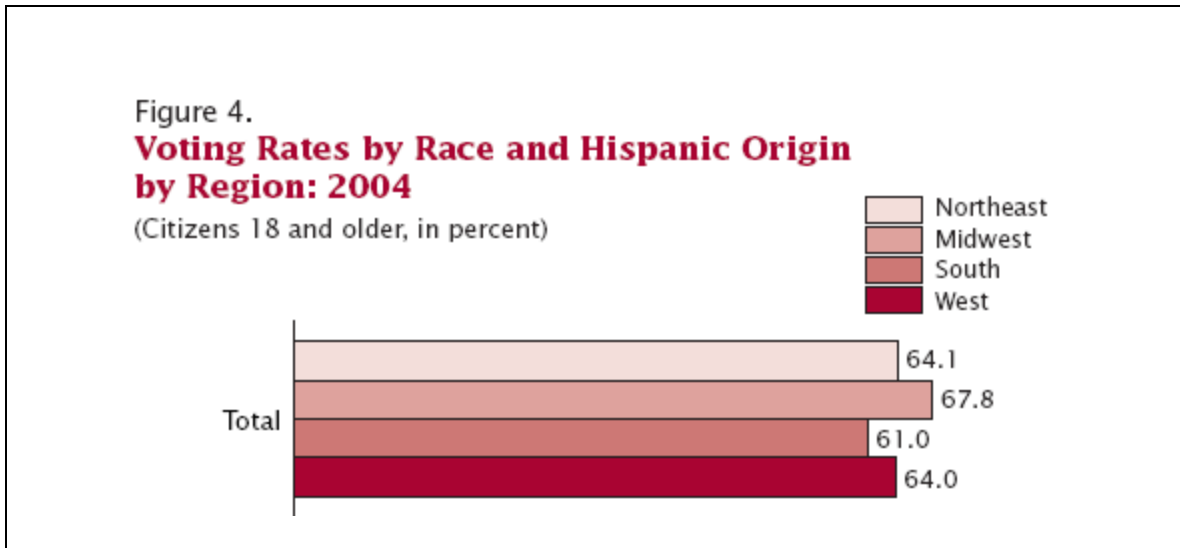
**Prompt:** Why might an elected official not consider a bill to increase federal funds for minority college scholarships to be a high priority? Use data from the table above to support your response.

**Possible Response**

Students might suggest that elected officials are most likely to attend to issues important to groups that actually vote. Noting that both minorities and those of college age have low voting rates, an elected official may find it safe to ignore a proposal that is somewhat unique to their interests.

**Rubric**

- 2 – this response gives a valid answer with an accurate and relevant explanation.
- 1 – this response gives a valid answer with an inaccurate, irrelevant, or no explanation.
- 0 – inaccurate or no response.

**Selected Response Item**

**Selected Response Prompt:** Based on the data provided above, which region of the country is most likely to be a recipient of federal funds for road repairs because of their participation in the civic process?

- a. South
- b. Midwest
- c. Northeast
- d. Northwest.

**Correct Response: b**

Appendix Handouts – figures and tables all come from this document.

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>

Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004: Report



Name \_\_\_\_\_

### Handout 1: Voting Data Analysis

**Looking at Census Report: Answer the following questions using data.**

1. What trend do you notice when looking at the age of citizens and the percent that registered to vote?
2. What trend do you notice when looking at the age of citizens and the percent that actually voted?
3. What are some possible explanations for these trends?
4. What trend do you notice when looking at the race of citizens and the percent that registered to vote?
5. What trend do you notice when looking at the race of citizens and the percent that actually voted?
6. What are some possible explanations for these trends?

**Still looking at all the data, analyze the following:** Educational Attainment, Annual Family Income, and Employment Status.

1. What trends do you notice with this data?
2. How does this data compare with the previous data you analyzed? Which groups are voting more? Voting less?
3. Which factors influence voter participation rates most significantly?" Where do you see the largest gaps between voters and non-voters?

**Handout 1 – Alternate Analytic Tool**

<b>Consideration</b>	<b>Pattern Observed</b>	<b>Explanation for the Pattern</b>
Age and Voting		
Race and Voting		
Educational Attainment and Voting		
Annual Family Income and Voting		
Employment Status and Voting		
<u>One other population Groups</u>		

- Which factors influence voter participation rates most significantly?”
- Where do you see the largest gaps between voters and non-voters?



## Handout 2: Big Idea Questions

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Think back again to Table C: Characteristics of Voters and Nonvoters: 2004. Which characteristics do you share and what are the voting patterns of those who share these characteristics?
2. Use your knowledge of voter characteristics, voting patterns, and how voting affects the behavior of elected officials to construct one or two big ideas about citizenship and civic participation.
3. How might you apply your understanding of civic participation to insure that issues important to you are addressed?
4. How might the information you gathered in this lesson be used to explain the consequences of not participating in civic processes?
5. Why should citizens participate in a democracy?