

# Your Vote Is Your Voice

by  
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**Lesson Description (Abstract):** In a representative democracy, elected leaders need to know the will of the people. Students will examine election data from various presidential elections and determine what effect the number of eligible voters who chose not to vote might have on the president's ability to govern. Students must understand how the electoral college works before beginning the lesson.

**Goal(s):** Students will understand the impact of not voting.

**Grade:** 9-12

**Time Required:** 3-4 periods, 1.5 – 2 blocks

**Materials:** Handout 1: Voter Registration Form, Handout 2: Presidential Election of 1960, Handout 3: Presidential Election of 1992, Handout 4: Extend Response Item, Handout 5: Selected Response Item, Visual 1 Class Election Results, poster paper, markers, two different color index cards (one per student)

**Benchmark[s] Addressed:** 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 Question Addressed:** What are the consequences of citizens not participating in a democracy, specifically in the form of voting?

**Lesson Content:** Even when a presidential candidate wins a majority of the popular vote, there is no certainty that a majority of the voting age population supports that candidate. In the election of 1972, Richard Nixon polled 61% of the popular vote and George McGovern received 38%, yet only 55% of the voting age population chose to vote. How a president chooses to govern is affected by the support he perceives he has in the country. If large numbers of people choose not to participate in the process, it is difficult for a newly elected president to determine the level of support he has. This has been especially true in the last several elections when presidents have received a bare majority or even less than a majority of the popular vote.

Elected officials are supposed to reflect the will of the people in a democracy. If large numbers of people choose not to vote and express their preferences, questions arise as to how well the policies of government express the will of the people. The end result may be a diminution of the government's legitimacy within the ranks of the governed. In addition, voters provide a check on the actions of elected officials. Low voter turnout may lead a candidate to a false sense that he/she may act with little or no regard to voters' wishes. Herein lays the root of abuse of power scandals that further weaken people's faith in democracy.

**Assessment:** There are three assessments for the lesson.

1. Students will be asked to write a letter to the editor persuading people of the importance of registering and voting in the upcoming elections.
2. Students will complete the extended response item (see Handout 4).
3. Students will complete the selected response item (see Handout 5).

**Procedures:**

1. The day before the lesson - Tell students they will elect someone to speak for the class. This person will have the authority to make decisions for the class any time you wish to give the class options. Everyone in the class is an eligible voter, but they must register to vote. Give students the voter registration forms (**Handout 1: Voter Registration Form**). Emphasize that their signature on the form must be witnessed by an adult or the registration will not be valid.
2. The next day collect the registration forms as the students enter the classroom making sure they are filled out completely including their signature and the signature of an adult witness. Discard any registrations that are not completed properly.
3. Give each voter who registered properly an index card and ask them to write the name of the student they would like to represent the class.
4. Next give out a different color index card to every student, even those who did not register properly, and have them vote for a class representative whether they are a "registered" voter or not.
5. Before tabulating the votes, ask the students:
  - a. "Do you think the results will be the same in both elections?" Why or why not?" Answers will vary, but students should recognize that there is no way of knowing if the people who voted represented the will of the entire class. "Do you think that the person who won the election had the support of a majority of students?" Consider also, the following questions:
  - b. "Do you think that the chances of someone getting a majority of votes increases or decreases if everyone votes?"
  - c. What might be some effects of electing a candidate who does not receive the support of a large number of voters?
  - d. Why might some argue that not voting in a democratic society is a problem?

\*There may be a need to discuss the difference between a plurality and a majority.

Tabulate the results from both elections and put the results on **Visual 1 Class Election Results**. You may assign candidates a letter rather than using their names if it might be embarrassing for candidates only receiving one or two votes. Even if the results are the same for both elections, point out to students there is no way of knowing if the elected representative is truly

representative of the whole class if large numbers of the electorate do not participate.

6. Tell students that they will now apply what they learned from the class election to presidential elections.
7. Thinking with Data: Give students **Handout 2: *The Presidential Election of 1960***. Make sure students understand what the numbers mean. They may be confused by the difference between “Popular Vote” and “Voting Age Population”. The two numbers under “Popular Vote” are the actual number of people who voted for the candidate and the percentage of the total popular vote the number represents. The “Voting Age Population” is the number of people who were eligible to register and vote. “% who voted” represents the percentage of the voting age population who voted in the election.
8. Complete Handout 2 as a class.
9. Think-Pair-Share: Divide the class into pairs and have the pairs complete Handout 3 (*The Presidential Election of 1992*).
10. Presentation: Divide the students into groups of 3 or 4. Tell them they are to develop a presentation of 3-4 minutes for high school seniors telling them why it is important to vote. They should create a poster and include some data from the presidential election of 1960 or 1992 that supports the reasons for voting.
11. Applying Understanding: Tell students it is several months before an actual election. They are to write a letter to the editor in which they urge people to register and vote. The letter should include why it is important to vote and use data from a presidential election to reinforce what they are arguing.

**Debrief:** Ask students:

1. “What is the fundamental principle upon which representative democracy is based?” People elect representatives who govern in their name.
2. “How is this principle undermined when large numbers of people do not vote?” The people who are elected may not represent the views of the majority.
3. “We looked at presidential elections. How does what we learned apply to elections for other elected officials on the federal, state and local level?” The principle is the same not matter what type of election. If a large number of people choose not to vote, elected officials may not represent the views of the majority of citizens.
4. “Why is lesson called *Your Vote Is Your Voice*?” Citizens can express their views in many ways, but the most powerful way to speak is through voting.

**Bibliography:**

<http://www.uselectionatlas.org>, Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections

**Handout 1: Voter Registration Form**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Voter's Signature      Date      Adult Witness      Date

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Voter's Signature      Date      Adult Witness      Date

**Handout 2: Presidential Election of 1960**

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote		Electoral Vote		Voting Age Population	% who voted
		John Kennedy	Democratic	34,220,984	49.72%	303	56.42%
Richard Nixon	Republican	34,108,157	49.55%	219	40.78%		
Unpledged Electors*	Democratic	286,359	0.42%	15	2.79%		
Other		216,982	0.32%	0	0.00%		

\* Cast votes for Harry Byrd (President) and Strom Thurmond (Vice President)

1. What percentage of the popular vote did John Kennedy receive in the election? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many popular votes did Kennedy get? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How many people either did not vote for John Kennedy or did not bother to vote at all? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Based on the election data, how much support could President Kennedy assume he had among the people?
  
5. At the time of his assassination, many people were urging Kennedy to push Congress to pass civil rights legislation. Many people even in Kennedy’s party opposed passage of a civil rights bill. Use your answer to question 4 and explain why Congress might have been reluctant to pass a civil rights bill.
  
6. What could President Kennedy have done to gain support for a civil rights bill?
  
7. Why might the need to gain support for the civil rights bill have hurt the chances of Congress passing the rest of his program?

**Handout 3: Presidential Election of 1992**

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote		Electoral Vote		Voting Age Population	% who voted
		William Clinton	Democrat	44,909,806	43.01%	370	68.77%
George Bush	Republican	39,104,550	37.45%	168	31.23%		
H. Ross Perot	Independent	19,743,821	18.91%	0	0.00%		
Anrdre Marrou	Libertarian	290,087	0.28%	0	0.00%		

1. How many people voted for Bill Clinton in 1992? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many people either voted against him or did not vote at all? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What conclusions could be drawn from these numbers about support for President Clinton when he took office?
  
4. Why might presidents who win close elections or who are elected in elections with low voter turnout not be overly concerned about what non-voting citizens want?
  
5. One of Bill Clinton’s promises during the election campaign was to reform healthcare in the United States. After the election, President Clinton sent to Congress a very controversial healthcare reform plan. The plan failed when even Congressional Democrats did not support his plan. How do the election statistics help explain why this happened?

**Handout 3 (continued): Presidential Election of 1992**

6. Election turnout for congressional elections tends to be low especially in years when there is no presidential election. Why might this lead to the election of a U.S. Representative who does not represent the will of his/her district?

7. If the election turnout for the election of a governor is low, how might this cause the election of someone who does not represent what the people of Delaware want?

**Handout 4: Extended Response Item**

**Lesson Title:** Your Vote Is Your Voice

**Benchmark Statement:** Civics 3, 9-12 - Students will understand that citizens are individually responsible for...participating in the civic process...

“I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge.”

Richard Nixon – November 3, 1969

**Presidential Election of 1968**

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote		Electoral Vote		Voting Age Population	% who voted
		Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Richard Nixon	Republican	31,783,783	43.42%	301	55.95%	120,328,186	60.8%
Hubert Humphrey	Democratic	31,271,839	42.72%	191	35.50%		
George Wallace	American Independent	9,901,118	13.53%	46	8.55%		
Other		243,258	0.33%	0	0.00%		

**Prompt:** In a November 1969 speech only one year after being elected, Richard Nixon appealed to the nation to support his policy to end the Vietnam War. Why was it necessary for him to do this if he was recently elected on a platform “to end the war in a way we could win the peace”? Use data from the election to support your answer.

**Response:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Handout 5: Selected Response Item**

**Lesson Title:** Your Vote Is Your Voice

**Benchmark Statement:** Civics 3, 9-12 - Students will understand that citizens are individually responsible for...participating in the civic process...

Presidential Election of 1976							
Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote		Electoral Vote		Voting Age Population	% who voted
		James Carter	Democratic	40,831,881	50.08%	297	50.08%
Gerald Ford	Republican	39,148,634	48.02%	240	44.61%		
Eugene McCarthy	Independent	740,460	0.91%	0	0.00%		
Other		810,609	0.99%	1	0.19%		

**Selected Response Prompt:**

What conclusion can be drawn about the support of adult Americans for the proposed policies of president elect James Carter from the above election data?

- a. the majority of adult Americans supported his policies
- b. difficult to know because of the number of people who did not register or vote
- c. the combined vote for other candidates showed a majority opposed his policies
- d. some regions of the United States supported his policies more than other regions.

**Response:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sample Responses to Handout 2: Presidential Election of 1960**

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote		Electoral Vote		Voting Age Population	% who voted
		John Kennedy	Democratic	34,220,984	49.72%	303	56.42%
Richard Nixon	Republican	34,108,157	49.55%	219	40.78%		
Unpledged Electors*	Democratic	286,359	0.42%	15	2.79%		
Other		216,982	0.32%	0	0.00%		

\* Cast votes for Harry Byrd (President) and Strom Thurmond (Vice President)

1. What percentage of the popular vote did John Kennedy receive in the election?  
49.72%
2. How many popular votes did Kennedy get? 34,220,984
3. How many people either did not vote for John Kennedy or did not bother to vote at all? 74,938,016 (*Voting Age Population – Kennedy’s popular vote*)
4. Based on the election data, how much support could President Kennedy assume he had among the people?  
*Based on the fact that so many people did not vote or voted against him, he should have assumed that there was not a huge amount of support for his agenda. Only 63% of the voting age population voted and he received less than half of the 63% who voted*
5. At the time of his assassination, many people were urging Kennedy to push Congress to pass civil rights legislation. Many people even in Kennedy’s party opposed passage of a civil rights bill. Use your answer to question 4 and explain why Congress might have been reluctant to pass a civil rights bill.  
*The members of Congress might feel they could oppose the president and face few consequences. Since Kennedy received less than a majority of the popular vote and since only 63% of the voting age population voted, he would have little power to convince congressmen to vote for a controversial law, even members of his own party.*
6. What could President Kennedy have done to gain support for a civil rights bill?  
*President Kennedy could have to go to the people to build support for the civil rights bill. He could have given speeches and called in individual congressmen to persuade them to vote for the bill.*
7. Why might the need to gain support for the civil rights bill have hurt the chances of Congress passing the rest of his program?

*President Kennedy might have spent so much time on gaining support for the civil rights bill that he would not have the time to spend on other important issues. He might have had to give up some other parts of his program to get the support of some Congressmen.*

**Sample Responses to Handout 3: Presidential Election of 1992**

Presidential Candidate	Political Party	Popular Vote		Electoral Vote		Voting Age Population	% who voted
		William Clinton	Democrat	44,909,806	43.01%	370	68.77%
George Bush	Republican	39,104,550	37.45%	168	31.23%		
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Anrdre Marrou	Libertarian	290,087	0.28%	0	0.00%		

1. How many people voted for Bill Clinton in 1992? *About 45 million*
2. How many people either voted against him or did not vote at all? *About 144 million*
3. What conclusions could be drawn from these numbers about support for President Clinton when he took office?

*More than 3x as many people either did not vote or voted against him than voted for him indicating that he did not have very much support*

4. Why might presidents who win close elections or who are elected in elections with low voter turnout not be overly concerned about what non-voting citizens want?  
*Presidents might assume that people who not vote are unaware or do not care what happens in the country. To be elected you only need a plurality of people who vote to win and sometimes only a plurality in the states with the majority of electoral votes*

5. One of Bill Clinton's promises during the election campaign was to reform healthcare in the United States. After the election, President Clinton sent to Congress a very controversial healthcare reform plan. The plan failed when even Congressional Democrats did not support his plan. How do the election statistics help explain why this happened?

*Since the vast majority of the voting age population did not vote, there was no risk in opposing the Clinton healthcare plan especially one as controversial as he proposed. Point out to students that the plan might have had more chance of success had Clinton done more to find out what Americans wanted or to gain support for his proposed plan. As it happened, those who opposed the plan got out their opinions much faster.*

6. Election turnout for congressional elections tends to be low especially in years when there is no presidential election. Why might this lead to the election of a U.S. Representative who does not represent the will of his/her district?

*A congressman might be elected with a minority of the vote. The people in this minority might not represent what the majority of the voting age population wanted.*

7. If the election turnout for the election of a governor is low, how might this cause the election of someone who does not represent what the people of Delaware want?  
*The governor might have a difficult time convincing the state legislature to pass the laws the governor wanted. The governor might run the state in a way that the majority of people opposed.*

**Sample Responses for Handout 4: Extended Response Item**

**Benchmark Statement:** Civics 3, 9-12 - Students will understand that citizens are individually responsible for...participating in the civic process...

I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge.  
(Richard Nixon – November 3,1969)

**Presidential Election of 1968**

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**Prompt:** In a November 1969 speech only one year after being elected, Richard Nixon appealed to the nation to support his policy to end the Vietnam War. Why was it necessary for him to do this if he was recently elected on a platform “to end the war in a way we could win the peace”? Use data from the election to support your answer.

**Sample Response**

Richard Nixon could not know from the election results if he had the support of a majority of the nation. He did not receive a majority of the popular vote cast and the popular vote was only about 61% of those eligible to vote. The speech was given to appeal for the support of the majority of the nation who either did not vote for him or did not vote.

**Rubric**

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

**Response for Handout 5: Selected Response Item**

**Benchmark Statement:** Civics 3, 9-12 - Students will understand that citizens are individually responsible for...participating in the civic process...

Presidential Election of 1976							
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**Selected Response Prompt:**

What conclusion can be drawn about the support of adult Americans for the proposed policies of president elect James Carter from the above election data?

- a. the majority of adult Americans supported his policies
- b. difficult to know because of the number of people who did not register or vote
- c. the combined vote for other candidates showed a majority opposed his policies
- d. some regions of the United States supported his policies more than other regions

**Correct Response: b**

## Suggested Scoring for the Letter to Editor

Excellent	States and fully explains at least 3 reasons and includes data from a presidential election to support the reasons
Good	States and fully explains at least two reasons and includes data from a presidential election to support the reasons Or States 3 reasons, but does not fully explain them and includes data from a presidential election to support the reasons
Fair	States and explains 3 reasons, lacks data from a presidential election to support the reasons
Poor	Less than 3 reasons are stated and explained, lacks data from presidential election to support the reasons

**Visual 1 Class Election Results**

Election 1 Results		Election 2 Results	
____% voter turnout		100% voter turnout	
Candidate	Votes	Candidate	Votes