

Social Studies/Civics Lesson Plan
**Increasing Student Agency in Elections:
The “Why Vote?” Tool**

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Description and rationale

The Right Question Institute's "[Why Vote?](#)" Tool is used to foster a strong sense of urgency to vote. Voting is framed as a self-advocacy role students can and will want to play. Whether students can or cannot yet vote, they will:

1. Understand the connection between specific public services they rely on or issues they care about and the role of elected officials
2. Name for themselves the importance of voting
3. Ask questions using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)
4. Explore ways (in addition to voting) that people can take action and advocate for public services they rely on or issues they care about

This lesson plan is designed to bring elements of the 'Why Vote' Tool into the classroom and can be used in remote, hybrid, or fully in person settings.

Students will first examine their neighborhood and engage in discussions of public vs private space, funding, and places close to home. Then they will think about which issues matter most to them, and if time, write an argumentative piece explaining their answer. They will then work to produce their own questions using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) that can be used as a jumping off point for research or taking action to advocate for local issues or services that are important to them.

This lesson could be used as a standalone or as a springboard for additional lessons or student-led independent research into the larger history of voting, voting suppression, and movements for voting rights in the United States. Since the founding of the United States, significant portions of the adult population has been left out of the voting rolls due to racism, xenophobia, and sexism. Since the founding of the United States, oppressed groups have fought for freedom and their right to vote.

- **Teaching a civics class?** Focus on contemporary efforts to increase access to the right to vote. *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, the work of the Dream Defenders to enfranchise ex-felons in Florida, and Stacey Abrams and Black Futures Lab are good sources for this topic. Consider addressing barriers to citizenship (and therefore the right to vote) and different policies for voting state by state.
- **Teaching a history class?** From suffragettes to the Freedom Summer of 1964, to the 26th Amendment, the historical struggles for the right to vote for all citizens regardless of race or gender are ripe material for next lessons. Students can compare the past to the present – who is currently still not allowed to vote and why? Would students change the rules? How?

Time frame: 2-5 lessons

Given the widely differing time blocks during remote and in person learning, this lesson is designed to be used flexibly based on your schedule. Squeeze it all into 2 Zoom sessions or extend to a week, depending on your situation. Some factors to consider when considering length and background for this lesson:

- Do students already have a familiarity with US government and/or government services?
 - If not, spend more time introducing new terms/concepts in step 3 “Discussion of public services”
- Do students have experience voting in their school (for class president, etc), their classroom, or with participatory budgeting?
 - If not, add a ‘do now’ discussion or partner talk about why it is important for people to have a say in decisions that affect them. Think of a time when you did/did not have a say in a decision that affected you – how did it make you feel? What do you wish happened instead?
- Have students experienced the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)¹ before, or will this be their first time? You have options:
 - If it is students' first time, you might opt to lead students through a full QFT on an unrelated topic first. This will save you time when students encounter the QFT in this lesson, as they will be familiar with the steps and rules and you will be able to condense certain steps. Find resources to introduce the QFT at <https://rightquestion.org/education/resources/>
 - You can also introduce the QFT as part of this lesson. This lesson is written as if students are experiencing the QFT for the first time. Be sure to follow all of the steps of the QFT and give students time to reflect on what they learned from the process of questioning.
 - If you have previously used the QFT with your students, you can tailor it as you feel is best for your students, setting, and objectives. Certainly, you can cut or condense the discussions about the 4 rules and the advantages and disadvantages of closed- and open-ended questions.

¹Developed by the Right Question Institute

Suggested timing

Day 1: Introduction activities

- Introduce topic of the day: voting
- Draw your block activity
- Extension vocabulary activity

Day 2: “Why Vote?” & the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

- Discussion of government services/key issues
- Making connections
- Formulating questions with The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

Day 3+: Next steps and taking action

- Discussion of possible next steps and actions
- Individual action plan
- Optional extension activities

Materials needed

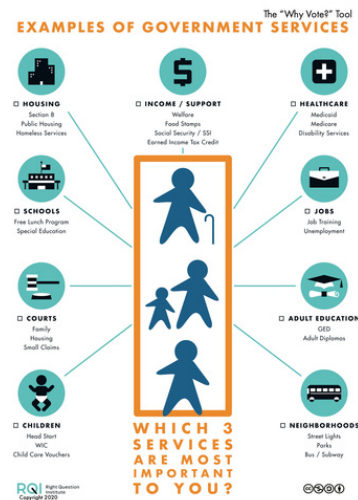
Please note that you have the option of using two handouts available:

1. [The “Why Vote?” Tool for youth](#) - this handout focuses on issues such as equality, jobs & the economy, education, and the environment.
2. [The “Why Vote?” Tool](#) - this handout focuses on government funded services such as healthcare, jobs, neighborhoods, and education.

1. The “Why Vote?” Tool for youth



2. The “Why Vote?” Tool



In addition to your choice of one of the Why Vote Tools above, additional supplies include:

Remote Learning student supplies:

- [Student facing handout](#)
- Connection to Zoom or other video conferencing capacity
- Paper and writing utensil with two different colors if possible

Remote Learning teacher supplies:

- [Student facing handout](#)
- Connection to Zoom
- Breakout room capacity if possible
- Blank Google Doc for each small group to work from during the QFT

In person supplies:

- [Student facing handout](#)
- Paper and drawing materials
- Either chart paper and markers, or, a blank Google Doc for each small group to work from during the QFT (depending on the feasibility of close, in person group work)

Lesson plan

Purpose: Students will think about issues/public services that are important to them, the role of elected officials, and the connection between voting and their daily lives.

Lesson plan components:

1. Introduce the topic of the day: voting
2. Draw your block activity
3. Extension vocabulary activity
4. Discussion of government services/ key issues
5. Making connections
6. Formulating questions using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)
7. Next steps and taking action

1. Introduce topic of the day: voting

Welcome the class and preview the lesson and objectives. [*Remote learning suggestion:* start with a social-emotional short check in]

"Today/this week we will be discussing how we can impact decisions that affect us all. We will begin by reviewing what's on your block and whether it is public or private space. We will also look at the issues or services that are important to you and people in your community, the role of elected officials, and we will ask questions about voting. At the end, we will have some specific ideas about the value of voting and how to support it in our communities."

2. Draw your block activity: [Handout 1](#)

Give students the following directions:

- On a piece of paper, draw your block or street. Try to include as much detail as possible (roads, street signs, bus stops, sewers, fire pumps, schools, stores, buildings, etc.). If you think you've finished, add 5 more details.
- Take a different colored marker and circle or highlight on your block - what is provided by the government, i.e. "public"? What is "private" space?

Then, ask students to discuss in pairs (if possible) the following questions:

- What do you notice about your drawing?
- What do you care about the most on your block?

3. Extension vocabulary activity: [Handout 2](#)

Depending on the grade level of your students, you may like to preview vocabulary that may be new to students in the next part of the lesson.

- First ask students which of the following words and terms are new: Elected officials, decision, eligible, and any other term you think may be new for students.
- Ask if there are other words students would like to add to the list.
- Then, create a t-chart of new words in a shared Google Doc and ask students to contribute to definitions or to give some real life examples they can think of.

For older students who may not otherwise need support with vocabulary, you may still need to create or review a common definition of the term "elected officials," which will be a key part of the QFT on page 9.

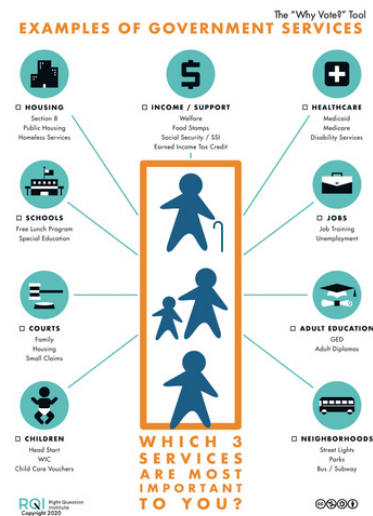
| New Words | Definitions |
|-------------------|--|
| Elected Officials | People that must win an election to get their job (often to get their job – let’s keep in mind that in local elections people work almost as volunteers who have full time jobs), who then make decisions about public spending and about the services/issues that are important to you. |
| Decision | A choice between 2 or more options |
| Eligible | Those who qualify based on established rules and policies |
| | |
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| | |

4. Discussion of government services/key issues: [Handout 3](#)

I. Select one of the two "Why Vote?" Tools below to review with students. Each handout lists different examples of key issues or government services.

- Examples of Issues (page 1): equality, jobs & the economy, education, and the environment

- Examples of Government Services (page 2): healthcare, jobs, neighborhoods, and education



II. Facilitate a discussion with students based on the following:

- Which 3 issues/services are most important to you? Students share, via chat box or google doc, three issues or services that are most important to them. [*Remote learning tip: you might experiment with using Zoom polling or similar for this step*]
- After everyone has shared, reflect: What do you notice about this list? What is surprising? What is not?

5. Making connections: [Handout 4](#)

I. Ask students to explain their three choices either as a brief discussion or as an optional extension formal writing exercise. [*Remote learning tip: students can share responses on Google Classroom, Padlet, or an individual Google Doc*] In their response students should:

- Explain why the issues/services you chose are important to you
- Give an example of the importance of the issues or services you chose
- Explain how can these issues or services affect your neighborhood or community
- Include an assertion, reasoning, and evidence. Personal experience can be used as evidence.

II. Facilitate a discussion with students based on the following prompt: Elected officials make decisions that affect all these services. Why would you/people would like to have a say in whose making these decisions?

III. **Transition:** "By voting, people can have a say in who's making decisions about the services/issues that are important to you."

6. The Question Formulation Technique (QFT): [Handout 5](#)

There are many ways to facilitate the QFT remotely. [Find tips and resources here](#). We recommend using Zoom breakout rooms with small groups of 4-5 students for this lesson. Depending on your context and setting, you may prefer to explore a different platform. If you do use breakout rooms, remember to set up each group on a Google Doc that they can use to complete the QFT. If small groups are meeting in person, you might have them work together on a piece of chart paper or on a shared Google Doc, as is most feasible.

I. Introduce the rules for producing questions

- Rules for producing questions:
 - Ask as many questions as you can
 - Do not stop to judge, discuss, or edit the questions
 - Write every question exactly as stated or as they first came to mind
 - Change any statements into questions
- Ask students what they think might be challenging about following these rules

II. Introduce Question Focus (QFocus) or prompt

- **Question Focus:** Elected officials make decisions that affect all these services/issues. By voting, people can have a say in who's making those decisions.

III. In small groups, students ask questions about the Question Focus for 5-6 minutes. Remind them to follow the 4 rules and number their questions.

IV. Students work to improve questions by exploring closed- and open-ended questions

- Review or introduce the definitions of closed- and open-ended questions:
 - Closed-ended questions can be answered with a “yes” or “no” or with a one-word answer.
 - Open-ended questions require more explanation.
- In small groups, students identify their questions as either closed-ended, marking them with a "C," or open-ended, marking them with an "O."
- Facilitate a discussion about the disadvantages and advantages of each type of question.
Ask students:
 - What could be some advantages of asking closed-ended questions? What could be some disadvantages?
 - What could be some advantages of asking open-ended questions? What could be some disadvantages?
- Remind students that there are advantages and disadvantages to *both* types of questions and *both* are good and valuable, depending on the setting, situation, and information they're looking for.
- In small groups, students work to improve their questions by thinking strategically and flexibly about the wording of particular questions. They should:
 - Change one closed-ended question into an open-ended question
 - Change one open-ended question into a closed-ended question
 - Add these as new questions on the bottom of their list

V. In small groups, students prioritize their questions, keeping the QFocus in mind.

- Students select the "three questions that are most important for you to answer first."
- Students select "three questions which are most important for you to affect decisions about the issues/services you care about."
- Time permitting, you might ask students to look at the sequence of their priority questions in their original full list of questions (for ex: were they in the middle of the list? the bottom?) and discuss any patterns they notice.

VI. Ask students to reflect, individually or with a group, on their learning:

- What did you learn today?
- How can you use it?

7. Next steps and taking action: [Handout 6](#)

I. Facilitate a discussion with students about ways they might begin to get answers to their questions and impact the decisions, services, and issues that are most important to them.

- In small groups have students discuss the following questions:
 - What would be your next steps to answering your priority questions?
 - What would you now like to know about voting?
 - What should your friends and family know about what you learned?
 - If you can vote, what do you now need to know in order to vote?
 - If you cannot yet vote, what are other ways, beyond voting, that people can impact decisions being made about the services/issues that are important to them?
- Debrief small group discussions and work with students to generate additional ways people can have a say in decisions about services and issues, beyond voting.

| Method of impacting decisions about issues/services important to us | Real life example |
|---|-------------------|
| | |
| | |

II. Ask students to individually write their own, short action plan statement.

- Based on what they now know about voting, elected officials, and the issues/government services that are important to them, what one action do they now want to take and why?
- What is one concrete way, even if it is small, that they will try to impact a decision that is important to them?

Suggestions for possible optional extension activities:

- Help students compile resources about voting and elected officials in your locality. Then, students research information related to some of their priority questions.
- Students produce a short Public Service Announcement (PSA) or social media post based on what they have learned about voting.
- Each student researches a priority question and presents on their findings. [*Remote learning tip: students can each complete a Google Slide or a Padlet post to share findings*]
- Follow up lessons on voter suppression, voter eligibility, or movements for voting rights
- Students research a historical or current voting rights movement, for ex: women's suffrage, the civil rights movement, the 26th Amendment, or felony disenfranchisement