

Cultivating Curiosity and Active Citizenship: Teaching Voting and the History of Voting Rights

Rebecca Valbuena

“Why can’t we just vote? That’s the only way to make it fair!” I overhear this anxious plea as a group of fifth graders head out the door. They are deciding the best way to use their precious 15 minutes of recess time: handball or basketball.

Children are no strangers to voting. They generally understand voting in its simplest form, decision-making. From a family vote of where to eat dinner, to reality television where contestants work for the public’s votes to remain on the show, to playground politics during which a vote is held on what game to play, kids have experience with voting.

Why, then, is our nation presented with such sobering voter participation statistics? According to the 2012 California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning, the U.S. ranked 139th in voter participation of 172 democracies around the world. Of the 18–24 year olds eligible, less than half voted. Fewer than 50 percent of high school seniors viewed active involvement in state and local issues as their responsibility.¹

A Mission of Civics

Educators have long held that schools have a strong civic mission: to foster knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens. Voting represents one way to be an active and involved citizen. Yet how many students really understand the importance of voting? What happens when students begin to understand that the right to vote was not always a right that everyone could enjoy?

As elementary teachers, we have the privilege and duty to develop the habits of mind of our youngest citizens. Deliberate teaching of voting and the history of voting rights—centered on inquiry, primary sources, and project-based learning—can effectively help us meet curriculum standards. More importantly, it can set the stage for students’ future involvement as engaged, informed citizens.

The stimulus for involvement begins with inquiry. How does one cultivate curiosity about voting and voting rights? In my elementary classroom, student interest begins when four high

school seniors visit the classroom during an election season. “Democracy in Action,” a local program sponsored by the Arsalyn Program of Ludwick Family Foundation, allows high school students to teach a lesson on voting and elections to elementary students.² For 45 minutes, the seniors talk about who is allowed to vote in America, and then they review the ballot of a recent or upcoming election. With the time left at the end of the class period, my students inevitably ask each senior if he or she has registered to vote. The seniors, who are 18, proudly announce that they have! This excites my students, but then they start to question the importance of voting. Many of my students are unsure about whether adult family members participate in elections, either by filling out forms for early voting or making their way to the polls on election day. (This topic becomes part of our message during discussions with parents: celebrate voting with your children! Share with them when and where and how you vote!)

After the guest speakers have left, fifth graders have the option to use their recess time to participate in the mock election. Using a ballot that closely matches the actual ballot that adults will see, students mark their choices concerning candidates, local measures, and statewide initiatives.

Addressing Low Voter Turnout

Even though students have expressed excitement about the idea of voting, our own voter turnout rate (during the recess time) is a little over half the fifth grade population. When this fact is presented to the class, audible gasps can be heard. How could this happen? Why do people who are given the chance to vote pass on this chance? Students’ reactions run the gamut from outraged, to curious, to apathetic. A compelling question grows from the ensuing discussion: Does voting matter?

When the question comes up, I ponder along with the students. After a few moments, I say, “That’s a good question. Let’s write that down so we can think about it some more.” Awareness.

That's the beginning! Because the question came from them, not me, and because it presents both academic rigor and relevance to their lives, the question is truly compelling.³ For several days, this is the topic of discussion first thing in the morning. The question gets under their skin. It demands an answer, and the kids are determined to research and investigate.

An Opinion Survey

The day following our informal election, we decide to conduct a survey and find out what adults think about the issue of voter participation. Each child is tasked with asking four adults (over 18) if voting matters. Excitedly, students write their predictions in notebooks. During guided collaborative conversations, I hear students discuss their own views. Mirroring adults, some are passionate, but others are unsure because they think there must be a legitimate reason why so many people do not make it to the polls.

Running a Simulation: You Can't Vote

Later in the day, I run an activity that simulates what it is like to lose suffrage, to have one's vote denied. This will begin an investigation on the history of voting rights. We have read many good books together, so I announce that we will vote on our favorite book for our PTA Newsletter article. We discuss which books to place on the multiple colored ballots sitting randomly at each desk. Ballots are prepared; then, I make the announcement: "The rule for voting is that your card ballot must be either green or white. If you have a blue or red card, you are not voting today. I just don't think you know enough about the books to vote."

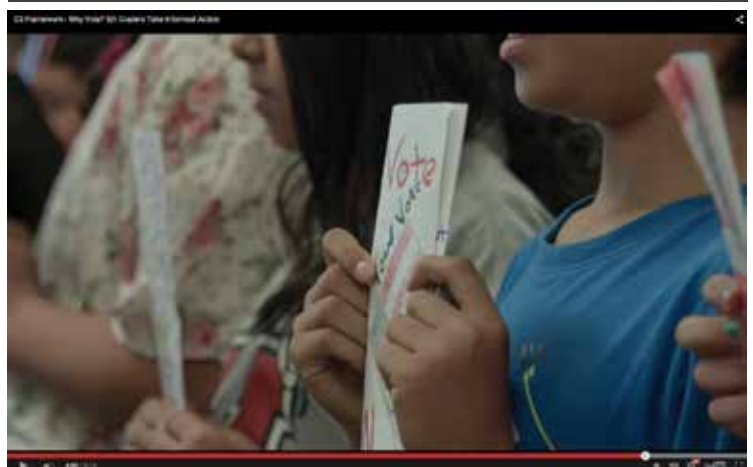
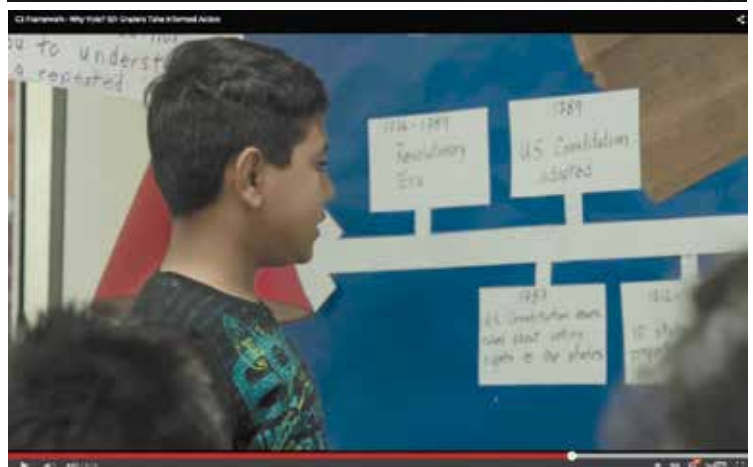
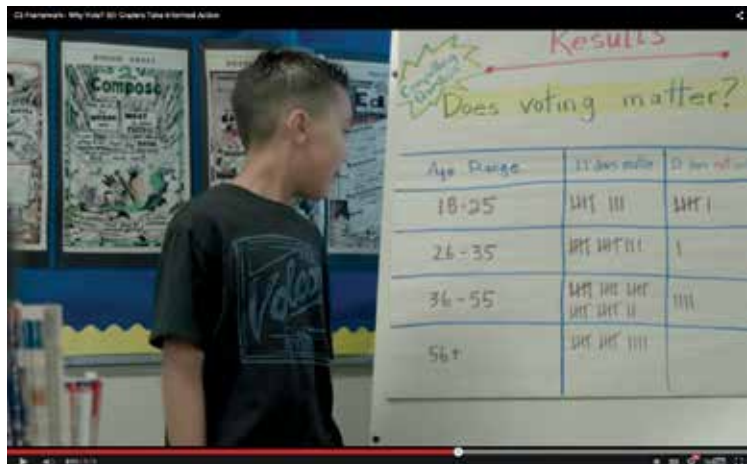
"What? No way! That's not fair" and the like are heard throughout the classroom. Hands are slamming the desks; many students are indignant and frustrated.

We review the ballot choices, and the children who have been allowed to vote proceed to mark their choice. Some are smiling; some are noticeably troubled. I keep a straight face and proceed with the simulation for just another minute, announcing the book that won as our "favorite book." Expressions of outrage ensue.

Debriefing the Simulation

Softening my tone, I ask students to meet in circles at opposite sides of the room: the voters on one side, the nonvoters on the other. I ask leading questions: "Was the voting fair? If not, what should be done about it? Who should have the right to vote in this election? How did it feel to be the ones to vote/not vote? How could this voting process be fairer?" The students present points and counterpoints. The emotion is real and so is the learning.

After explaining the purpose of the simulation, the



stage is set for further investigation. “What are voting rights? How and why have they changed over time?” Students are genuinely curious because they have felt, firsthand, inequity and injustice. Thus, we work through several lessons reviewing the Constitution and how it has changed over time. As students learn about some of the major amendments to the Constitution, they study a two-tiered timeline (showing well-known historical events above the line and major changes in voting rights below). They begin to make connections and see the relationship of history and voting rights. Students see that, at first, the U.S. Constitution allowed each state to determine who was eligible to vote. In most states, only free, adult men with property could vote.

Knowing who votes today, they begin to realize the years of struggle and sacrifice that so many people have made to secure the right to vote. At this point, collaborative conversations are less guided by me and are more passionate than ever. “Women couldn’t vote? That’s half the population! That is so ridiculous that women had to fight so hard just to be represented,” says one boy in the group. And, while pointing to the timeline, I overhear another say, “What about teenagers! They had to fight for their country in Vietnam, but when they got home they couldn’t vote? No wonder the laws had to be changed. That doesn’t make any sense!”

Applying All of the Social Studies

Learning this history of voting rights, while looking at a time line of related Constitutional amendments, is pivotal for these 10 year olds. The timeline presents historical events that they had been unaware of. They find cause and effect relationships between social movements in history and the Constitutional amendments. The surprises continue as students realize that voting rights were won by groups of people aiming to change unfair laws. As they discover the Constitution to be a living document, students better understand and respect it.

We have time, in this two-week unit of study, to present other materials for students to explore and investigate. After discussing the history of voting rights in America, reading speeches, analyzing primary source documents and photos, and watching archival footage of voting rights marches, it becomes apparent that many people sacrificed and fought for the right to vote. We begin to make connections across the disciplines of the social sciences. We tabulate our data from the surveys students conducted and find that many of the people interviewed think that voting matters. We find that the senior group, ages 55+, is the only demographic in which every person interviewed indicated that voting matters. Students ponder this result and possible reasons for it. As people grow older, and experience more of history for themselves, do they have a growing appreciation for the power of voting? Questions about civics and social behavior permeate student discussions, both formal and informal, and provide materials for students’ writer’s notebooks for days.

To look at voting through an economic lens, I give the students a photo (with questions for discussion) of re-enactors at

Colonial Williamsburg portraying the gentry as they mingle outside the courthouse on an election day. Students read the questions and talk about the cultural significance of “white men with property” as the only people qualified to vote in early America. They investigate who controlled the resources and infer the possible reasons why voting rights were once tied to wealth. One boy stated, “The rich white men wanted to keep their power. They were the only ones allowed to vote. That way, things would stay the same for them. It changed because people eventually protested. People wanted equality in voting.”

We bring geography into the lessons by looking at maps depicting present-day voting statistics and voter turnout rates in different parts of the country. Many students study the map and blame “poor weather” for lower voter turn out in the southeast, and I am reminded how little they understand about culture and politics. Age appropriate discussions ensue, as students realize that voter turnout rates differ, depending on geographic location. The map raises more questions than answers, specifically questions about the Electoral College and which states are swing states. “I bet [presidential] candidates pay more attention to states that are swing states. I mean they would get the most campaign attention. And states with the most campaign attention probably have more people voting,” explains a student to his table group. Although this is a difficult concept for elementary students, we investigate and develop these general understandings. Students’ curiosity is cultivated, and they perform research on their own by calling family members in other parts of the country and by reading archival newspaper articles and other resources on the Internet.

Motivated to Action: The Brochure

Knowing that 35 percent of eligible citizens are not registered to vote, and that only a little over half of Californians who are registered actually did vote in the last presidential election, students want to take action. They want to improve the voter turnout rate in our community, even though we discovered that the city’s voter turnout rate is slightly higher than the state and national averages. The class discussed several suggestions and finally settled on creating informational brochures to be placed in community buildings and distributed at school events to families and community members. These handwritten and illustrated brochures offered a summary of voting rights through time and voter turnout statistics from the 2012 Presidential campaign. Students found these numbers to be shockingly low (56.5 percent of voters, nationally; 55.47 percent of voters in California; 54.16 percent of voters in Los Angeles County).⁴ Students hoped to convince their elders to take action and be, as one pamphlet mentions, the “most powerful person in America—A Voter.”

Motivated to Action: The PSA

We also recorded short video Public Service Announcements (PSAs) to be posted on our website. The rationale for taking these actions, as written in one writer’s notebook, was this: “if

people knew what we know, they would care and they would vote.” The class watched several sample PSAs during which students took note of key ideas, image details, and the use of persuasive language. Students then worked in small groups to begin planning their own PSAs. After a few practice sessions, student groups were given video cameras and invited to find a place on the playground to begin filming. Teamwork was key to a good result. Most groups made several takes of the same scene until the students were satisfied with their 30- to 60-second PSA.

Groups spent time over the next few weeks editing their films on computers. Students uploaded finished one-minute videos to the class website, where they could be shared with the entire campus during morning announcements. “A better future awaits! Your vote is the key to a better future, and, if you want your voice to be heard and your opinion to count, be sure to register to vote the second you turn 18!” begins one PSA. The video image showed a pair of students holding American flags as they asked, “Did you know that more than one in four Americans are not registered to vote? How can you vote if you’re not registered? We need to honor the people in history who fought for this right to vote.”

Finally, there is the call to action. The student narrators continue, “If you are an American citizen over the age of 18, be sure to register and get to the polls!”

Conclusion

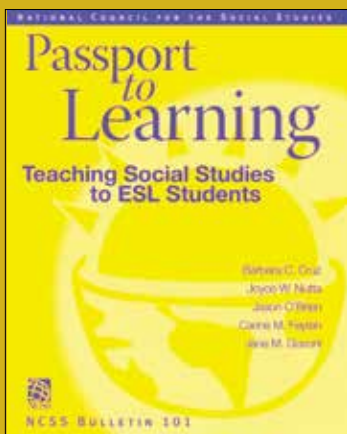
Whether a classroom holds future authors, biochemists, diplomats, caretakers, service workers, astronauts, or civic officials, they will all one day make decisions in our democracy. The opportunity to improve tomorrow is present with each teaching

day. It is of utmost importance for us to teach our children, even our youngest children, the basics of civic life. Voting is a civic responsibility and a valuable way to be heard. As one student put it, in her Writer’s Notebook, “The right to vote is part of living in a democracy. Exercising that right is a way for citizens to take responsibility for and be a part of their government.” When children are exposed to the historical sacrifices of others to secure the right to vote, they may well be more likely to appreciate and practice civic involvement. 🌍

Notes

1. California Task Force on K-12 Civic Learning, “Revitalizing K-12 Civic Learning in California: A Blueprint For Action!” (Sacramento, CA, August 2014), www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/cltfinalreport.pdf.
2. Arsalyn Program of Ludwick Family Foundation, located in Glendora, CA, is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization that encourages youth to become informed and active participants in the electoral process. Arsalyn’s goal is to ensure that voting becomes a lifetime commitment on the part of our nation’s young adults. Visit www.Arsalyn.org.
3. S. G. Grant, “Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries” (webinar, NCSS C3 Framework Literacy Collaborative Grant Project, Binghamton, New York, April 15, 2015), visit www.socialstudies.org/c3/C3LC.
4. U.S. Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012, Detailed Tables Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex and Single Years of Age.” (November 2012), www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.html; California Secretary of State, “General Election: Statement of Vote, November 6, 2012, Voter Participation Statistics by County 2014,” elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2012-general/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf.

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