

Why No One Should Vote (but Me)

Should elections in the United States represent the views of the greatest number of Americans or the views of the most qualified voters? This exercise explores the tension between these two ideas by featuring current and historical examples of expansions and limitations on voting.

Outcomes

- Help students understand historical impediments to voting in the United States
- Encourage students to consider why reasonable people might want certain restrictions on voting
- Foster student inquiry about the purposes of voting in a democratic society

Procedures

(1) Quick poll: which statement do you agree with more?

- U.S. elections should be organized to include the greatest number of Americans
- U.S. elections should be organized to include the most qualified Americans

(2) About Voting in the United States

- No explicit right to vote: *U.S. v. Reese* (189?)
- Instead, specific protections against the denial or abridgement of the right to vote
- Denial: no you cannot
- Abridgement: only under certain circumstances

(3) Why would anyone want to restrict the right to vote? Working as a large group, ask students to brainstorm as many reasons as they can. Probable answers include:

- Age
- Education
- Citizenship
- Criminal status (felon or ex-felon)
- Location
- Mental Competence
- Politics
- Race
- Registration
- Residence
- Sex
- Wealth

(4) Divide students into small groups of 4-6. Have each group choose a recorder. Ask the groups to classify the reasons as either “good,” “possible,” or “suspect.” For each choice, have them provide a short explanation.

(5) Ask small groups to report out to the large group. Record answers and explanations using the format below:

GOOD REASONS	POSSIBLE REASONS	“SUSPECT” REASONS

In cases where the same reason is placed in two or more categories, ask each group to offer their explanation for discussion by the class.

Questions to Consider

- What current restrictions (e.g., age, citizenship, criminal status) would you keep? change?
- After our discussion, which do you think is more important for U.S. elections: including the greatest number of Americans or the most qualified Americans?
- In your view, who should decide who has the right to vote?