



Voting—Alternate Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Discuss the importance of voting in democratic societies.
- Learn how *compulsory voting* works in democratic countries that use it.
- Analyze the reasons for supporting and opposing compulsory voting.
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement with other students.
- Decide, individually and as a group, whether compulsory voting is a necessary democratic reform; support decisions based on evidence and sound reasoning.
- Reflect on the value of deliberation when deciding issues in a democracy.

Question for Deliberation

Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?

Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Worksheet
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Alternate Reading (*abbreviated and written at a lower reading level*)
- Selected Resources
- Deliberation Question with Arguments
(*optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited*)



Voting—Alternate Reading

Deliberation Question: *Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?*

1 Voting is key in a democracy. Elections are a vital way for people to express their views and
2 promote change. Elections affirm a country's commitment to democracy. In a democracy,
3 every adult citizen should have the right to vote. Governments that do not offer their citizens a
4 choice to vote for more than one candidate are not generally viewed as real democracies. People
5 around the world value their right to vote.

6 In newer democracies, voter turnout is usually high. In other democracies, many citizens
7 choose not to vote. In the 2008 U.S. national elections, fewer than 60 percent of eligible voters
8 cast ballots. When the first open elections were held in Lithuania in 1993, more than 78 percent
9 of registered voters took part. In 2008, about 50 percent turned out. In the 2006 election in the
10 Czech Republic, about 65 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. Fourteen years earlier, 85
11 percent voted.

12 **Worries about Low Voter Participation in Elections**

13 Many people in democratic countries are concerned about low voter turnout. Democracies
14 have tried a number of ways to increase turnout. Ideas that seem to increase voting include:

- 15 • Advertising to convince people to vote.
- 16 • Mailing sample ballots and voting information in advance.
- 17 • Allowing early voting (before election day) at convenient locations.
- 18 • Using electronic or mail-in ballots, where citizens can vote from home.
- 19 • Allowing people to register on election day.

20 • Keeping the polling places open longer hours on election day.

21 Some people have proposed requiring people to vote. This is called compulsory voting.

22 **Civic Participation and Compulsory Voting**

23 In several democracies, citizens are required to vote in national elections. Among these
24 countries are Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Ecuador, Italy, Mexico, and Peru. In these countries,
25 voting is both a right and a responsibility. Compulsory voting also has a history in the United
26 States. Some years ago, North Dakota and Massachusetts amended their constitutions to allow
27 compulsory voting. But their legislatures never passed laws to make voting compulsory.

28 In countries with compulsory voting, each citizen must register and vote. They are not
29 required to vote for any particular candidate. Sometimes people deliberately spoil their ballots.
30 They do this to show their disapproval of the candidates. Others vote randomly for any
31 candidate.

32 In some countries with compulsory voting, those who choose not to vote and do not have a
33 valid reason must pay a fine. In Australia, those who refuse to pay the fine may be jailed. But this
34 punishment is rare. In other countries, the penalties are not enforced. Some countries, like Mexico
35 and Italy, have no punishments for not voting.

36 Generally, countries that have compulsory voting also have strong, centralized voting systems.
37 In Peru, for example, an official organization coordinates the voter registration system. It
38 maintains the national voting database. People are given a national voter identification card when
39 they reach voting age. The card has a photograph and thumbprint. Registration is transferred
40 whenever a person moves.

41 **Compulsory Voting: Advocates and Opponents**

42 Advocates for compulsory voting make several arguments for the practice. First, compulsory
43 voting laws *do* increase voter turnout. Studies show that compulsory voting increases turnout by 8
44 to 15 percent. The increase is most often seen among people who normally do not vote. This
45 includes the poor and less educated. Bringing all people to the voting booth is a positive thing.
46 The higher the rate of voter participation, advocates say, the more those elections can be said to
47 represent legitimately the will of the people.

48 Supporters believe voting is a necessary part of a citizen's work. While they acknowledge this
49 policy might compel people to vote against their will, people are compelled to do many things.
50 As American commentator John Dean notes, "Requiring citizens to vote is no more restrictive than
51 requiring them to register for the draft. And it is far less restrictive than requiring us, for example,
52 to attend school; to serve on juries, possibly for weeks or months at a time; to pay taxes; or to
53 serve in the military when drafted.... (V)oting is the least a citizen can do for his or her country."

54 Furthermore, advocates claim voting helps educate voters. If people know they must vote, they
55 will pay closer attention to the issues. They will thus go to the polls more informed. Compulsory
56 voting laws reinforce the idea that voting is a vital part of democratic citizenship.

57 Opponents of compulsory voting argue that, at least in the United States, citizens do not want
58 it. This claim is supported by a 2004 survey conducted by ABC News. Opponents also argue that
59 low voter turnout may well be a sign of overall voter satisfaction with the current system. People
60 are happy with things as they are. Thus, they feel no need to vote.

61 Voting is an expression of faith in the political system. Opponents of compulsory voting
62 therefore argue that deciding *not* to vote is one of the few ways citizens can challenge corruption

63 or fraud. Sometimes, people believe that their votes will not be counted, will be tampered with, or
64 will be otherwise misrepresented. In such cases, forcing people to vote compels them to support a
65 false outcome. Canadian scholar Filip Palda agrees. He says, “The less legitimate politicians feel,
66 the more they try to pass laws that build . . . a . . . façade of citizen involvement. This is why
67 Soviet Bloc countries forced their citizens to vote.” Forcing people to vote in a corrupt election
68 weakens citizen power in a democracy.

69 Opponents also worry about the central government’s control of the information that
70 compulsory voting requires. Today, computers and databases can reveal much about a person.
71 Having election information controlled locally is thus an important way to protect citizens from
72 the national government.

73 Opponents argue that voting is not a duty but a privilege. There are easier—and better—ways
74 to achieve the goal of greater citizen participation. One way is for countries to better educate their
75 people. Better educated citizens understand public issues better. They know how to address those
76 issues meaningfully. Instead of being forced to vote, people should choose to vote. Making this
77 choice fosters the personal responsibility necessary in a democracy. Finally, critics say that forcing
78 millions of people who neither know nor care about an election to participate will just result in
79 millions of uninformed votes.

80 Is making voting compulsory a step toward greater participation by better informed voters?
81 Or will it weaken citizen power? As democracies try to increase voter turnout, citizens must be
82 prepared to deliberate this and other proposals aimed at making elections truly representative.



Voting—Selected Resources

- ABC News, “ABC News Poll: Compulsory Voting” (June 11, 2004),
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<http://www.cartercenter.org/viewdoc.asp?docID=140&submenu=news>.
- “Compulsory Enrollment and Voting” (Kensington, NSW, Australia: Australasian Legal Information Institute, Legal Information Access Centre, 2001),
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/liac/hot_topic/hottopic/2001/4/4.html.
- Dean, John W., “Is It Time to Consider Mandatory Voting Laws?” *Writ: FindLaw’s Legal Commentary* (February 23, 2003), <http://writ.findlaw.com/dean/20030228.html>.
- Gratschew, Maria, “Compulsory Voting” (Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, April 2001),
http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm.
- “Presidential Elections: IDEA Voter Turnout Report” (Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, November 12, 2004),
<http://www.idea.int/vt/pres.cfm>.
- Jackman, Simon, “Compulsory Voting,” a contribution to Elsevier’s *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (December 1, 2004),
<http://jackman.stanford.edu/papers/cv.pdf#search='Compulsory%20Voting%20Simon%20Jackman%20to%20appear%20in%20the%20International%20Encyclopedia>.
- Palda, Filip, “Vote. Or Else!” *Fraser Forum* (February 2001),
http://oldfraser.lexi.net/publications/forum/2001/02/section_09.html.
- United Press International, “Mandatory Voting Proposed in Canada,” *The Washington Times* (January 1, 2005), <http://www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050101-102110-6338r.htm>.



Voting—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?

YES – Arguments to Support Deliberation Question

1. Most democratic nations require citizens to do many things that are in the public interest, such as paying taxes, sending children to school, and serving as jurors. Voting is just as important.
2. Democracy is based on the idea that everyone participates and is responsible for the common good. If democracy means government by the people, then being a good citizen means actively selecting who will represent you.
3. There is consistent evidence that compulsory voting increases voter participation, particularly among poor and less educated people.
4. Democratically elected governments are more legitimate when a high proportion of the population votes.
5. If people know they will be fined for not voting, they will pay closer attention to the issues and stances of candidates and go to the polls informed.
6. Political parties can focus more on educating people about their ideas and candidates instead of trying to convince them to vote.



Voting—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should voting be compulsory in our democracy?

NO – Arguments to Oppose Deliberation Question

1. People should have the right to refuse to participate in politics. Just as the right of free speech includes the right to be silent, the right to vote should include the right NOT to vote.
2. Forcing people to vote in what they believe are fraudulent or meaningless elections breeds cynicism about democratic processes and betrays core democratic principles.
3. Compulsory voting requires extensive and centralized databases of citizen information. In today's world, where computers and information databases can reveal so much about a person, the decentralized control of election information is an important way to protect citizens from an increasingly powerful national government.
4. Low voter turnout may indicate that voters are satisfied with the current system and see no need to change it.
5. People who are required to vote will not be wise or informed voters. Also, people who are voting against their will may simply vote for a candidate at random.
6. High rates of voter participation do not mean that people have freedom or support the government. Totalitarian governments often force people to vote. For example, voter turnout in the Soviet Union between 1950 and 1984 averaged 99.97 percent.



Lesson Procedures

Step One: Introduction

Introduce the lesson and the Student Objectives on the **Lesson Plan**. Distribute and discuss **Handout 1—Deliberation Guide**. Review the Rules of Deliberation and post them in a prominent position in the classroom. Emphasize that the class will deliberate and then debrief the experience.

Step Two: Reading

Distribute a copy of the **Reading** to each student. Have students read the article carefully and underline facts and ideas they think are important and/or interesting (**ideally for homework**).

Step Three: Grouping and Reading Discussion

Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Group members should share important facts and interesting ideas with each other to develop a common understanding of the article. They can record these facts and ideas on **Handout 2—Deliberation Activities** (Review the Reading).

Step Four: Introducing the Deliberation Question

Each **Reading** addresses a Deliberation Question. Read aloud and/or post the Deliberation Question and ask students to write the Deliberation Question in the space provided on **Handout 2**. Remind students of the Rules for Deliberation on **Handout 1**.

Step Five: Learning the Reasons

Divide each group into two teams, Team A and Team B. Explain that each team is responsible for selecting the most compelling reasons for its position, which you will assign. Both teams should reread the **Reading**. Team A will find the most compelling reasons to **support** the Deliberation Question. Team B will find the most compelling reasons to **oppose** the Deliberation Question. To ensure maximum participation, ask everyone on the team to prepare to present at least one reason.

Note: Team A and Team B do not communicate while learning the reasons. If students need help identifying the arguments or time is limited, use the **Deliberation Question with Arguments** handouts. Ask students to identify the most compelling arguments and add any additional ones they may remember from the reading.

Step Six: Presenting the Most Compelling Reasons

Tell students that each team will present the most compelling reasons to **support** or **oppose** the Deliberation Question. In preparation for the next step, Reversing Positions, have each team listen carefully for the most compelling reasons.

- Team A will explain their reasons for **supporting** the Deliberation Question. If Team B does not understand something, they should ask questions but NOT argue.
- Team B will explain their reasons for **opposing** the Deliberation Question. If Team A does not understand something, they should ask questions, but NOT argue.

Note: The teams may not believe in or agree with their reasons but should be as convincing as possible when presenting them to others.

Step Seven: Reversing Positions

Explain that, to demonstrate that each side understands the opposing arguments, each team will select the other team's most compelling reasons.

- Team B will explain to Team A what Team A's **most compelling** reasons were for **supporting** the Deliberation Question.
- Team A will explain to Team B what Team B's **most compelling** reasons were for **opposing** the Deliberation Question.

Step Eight: Deliberating the Question

Explain that students will now drop their roles and deliberate the question as a group. Remind the class of the question. In deliberating, students can (1) use what they have learned about the issue and (2) offer their personal experiences as they formulate opinions regarding the issue.

After deliberating, have students find areas of agreement in their group. Then ask students, as individuals, to express to the group their personal position on the issue and write it down (see My Personal Position on **Handout 2**).

Note: Individual students do **NOT** have to agree with the group.

Step Nine: Debriefing the Deliberation

Reconvene the entire class. Distribute **Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation** as a guide. Ask students to discuss the following questions:

- What were the most compelling reasons for each side?
- What were the areas of agreement?
- What questions do you still have? Where can you get more information?
- What are some reasons why deliberating this issue is important in a democracy?
- What might you or your class do to address this problem? Options include teaching others about what they have learned; writing to elected officials, NGOs, or businesses; and conducting additional research.

Consider having students prepare personal reflections on the Deliberation Question through written, visual, or audio essays. Personal opinions can be posted on the web.

Step Ten: Student Poll/Student Reflection

Ask students: “Do you agree, disagree, or are you still undecided about the Deliberation Question?” Record the responses and have a student post the results on www.deliberating.org under the partnerships and/or the polls. Have students complete **Handout 3**.



Handout 1—Deliberation Guide

What Is Deliberation?

Deliberation (meaningful discussion) is the focused exchange of ideas and the analysis of arguments with the aim of making a decision.

Why Are We Deliberating?

Citizens must be able and willing to express and exchange ideas among themselves, with community leaders, and with their representatives in government. Citizens and public officials in a democracy need skills and opportunities to engage in civil public discussion of controversial issues in order to make informed policy decisions. Deliberation requires keeping an open mind, as this skill enables citizens to reconsider a decision based on new information or changing circumstances.

What Are the Rules for Deliberation?

- Read the material carefully.
- Focus on the deliberation question.
- Listen carefully to what others are saying.
- Check for understanding.
- Analyze what others say.
- Speak and encourage others to speak.
- Refer to the reading to support your ideas.
- Use relevant background knowledge, including life experiences, in a logical way.
- Use your heart and mind to express ideas and opinions.
- Remain engaged and respectful when controversy arises.
- Focus on ideas, not personalities.



Handout 2—Deliberation Activities

Review the Reading

Determine the most important facts and/or interesting ideas and write them below.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Deliberation Question

Learning the Reasons

Reasons to Support the Deliberation Question (Team A)	Reasons to Oppose the Deliberation Question (Team B)

My Personal Position

On a separate sheet of paper, write down reasons to support your opinion. You may suggest another course of action than the policy proposed in the question or add your own ideas to address the underlying problem.



Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation

Large Group Discussion: What We Learned

What were the most compelling reasons for each side?

Side A:

Side B:

What were the areas of agreement?

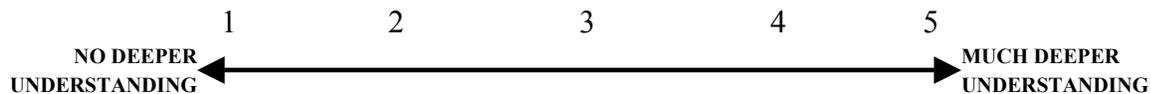
What questions do you still have? Where can you get more information?

What are some reasons why deliberating this issue is important in a democracy?

What might you and/or your class do to address this problem?

Individual Reflection: What I Learned

Which number best describes your understanding of the focus issue? [circle one]



What new insights did you gain?

What did you do well in the deliberation? What do you need to work on to improve your personal deliberation skills?

What did someone else in your group do or say that was particularly helpful? Is there anything the group should work on to improve the group deliberation?