
V O T E

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION! ACTIVITY

OBJECTIVE:

Students learn about the responsibility of being a citizen in a representative democracy and the different ways to participate in civic life.



HOW GOVERNMENT WORKS

Ask students the following questions:

1. What is a representative democracy?

A representative democracy is a type of government where people elect officials to make policy – usually laws – which affect everyone. This means that the power of government comes from the people, so it is important that they understand and act on their civic responsibilities.

2. Why is it important for citizens to participate in government?

Representative democracies work best when citizens participate. Only through citizen participation can the government be “of the people, for the people, and by the people” as written in the United States Constitution. The Constitution was based on the principle that citizens have responsibilities that contribute to the success of the common good. The common good describes a type of “good” behavior that is beneficial to all or most members of a community.

3. What are some examples of how citizens participate in a representative democracy?

Keep a list of your students’ ideas. When the students are finished, share with them any ideas not mentioned from the following list:

- Vote in local, state or national elections
- Call, e-mail or write a letter to an elected official
- Join a group that shares similar opinions and ideas
- Campaign for a candidate
- Show support for a cause, political party or candidate by signing a petition
- Show support for a cause, political party or candidate by gathering at a public event or rally
- Testify at a public hearing
- Run for public office

Each one of these rights offers an opportunity for citizens to create change within government. By expressing individual beliefs or values, identifying problems and suggesting solutions, and supporting organizations and candidates, citizens can help government change its path and move in a new direction. This is possible because our government is a representative democracy and our elected officials work on behalf of the citizens.

Divide the class into small groups. Each group should answer the following questions. Afterwards, allow the groups to share their responses with the class.

- How can your rights in a representative democracy create change within government?
- If there was an issue affecting your education that you did not agree with, what would be the first thing you would do to promote change and why?
- What are the activities in which citizens your age can participate?

ACTIVITY EXTENSION

Ask the students the following question:

- Why would a citizen write a letter to an elected leader, such as a legislator, governor or president?

After compiling a list of student suggestions, share items that were not mentioned:

- To express an opinion
- To ask a question
- To ask an elected leader to support or oppose a specific issue
- To make a complaint
- To say “thank you”
- To point out a problem that needs to be solved
- To ask for help
- To share an idea for a law
- To create change
- It is your duty as a citizen to communicate with elected leaders

Ask the students – individually or in groups – to write a letter to one of their State legislators. A sample format has been included to guide the students. Students can visit the New Jersey Legislature’s Web site at www.njleg.state.nj.us to find out who their legislators are and how to contact them.

WRITE A LETTER

Your Street
Home City, NJ 00000
Today's Date

Honorable Jane Doe
Legislator's Street
Legislator's Town, NJ 00000

Dear Assemblywoman Doe:

One way to tell your legislator what you think is to write them a letter. Your letter should start by introducing who you are and why you are writing the letter. There are many reasons why you may want to write your legislator. For example, you may want to express an opinion, to ask a question, to ask your legislator to vote a certain way, to make a complaint, to say "thank you" for helping solve a problem, to point out a problem that needs to be solved, to ask for help, or to share an idea for a law.

In the body of your letter, you need to explain in detail your feelings and thoughts on the topic of the letter. This may involve sharing how this issue directly affects you, your family, or your community. There may be a specific story that will help the legislator understand your concern or question. It may also be necessary to do some research on the topic of your letter in order to help you present facts that will support your views and that will show the legislator that you have carefully thought out your ideas.

Conclude your letter by summarizing your thoughts and thanking the legislator for his or her time.

Sincerely,

(Your Signature)

(Your name printed or typed)