

Teachers, this document (which begins on the next page) is still a work in progress, but I'm posting it in case anyone would like to take a look and use it, in whole or in part. I welcome your feedback!!

For the Word file of this document (which you can adapt for your purposes), email me at:

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I'll be posting a revision to this document in late April (to reflect some input I'll be receiving in mid-April).

This current version is as of 24 Feb 2020.

Thanks for your interest in helping your students learn more about voting!

# *Interviewing an Elections Official:*

## **A Guide for Teachers and Students**

Dear Teachers:

This document contains questions that can be asked of an elections official, such as your city or county clerk. You could use it in conjunction with inviting an official to visit your classroom.

It can be adapted for any grade level, from early elementary to high school.

The purpose of the questions and the interview are:

- 1) To help your students better understand **the importance of voting**. This understanding will make it more likely that they will be active participants in democracy as adults.
- 2) To help your students better understand **potential barriers to voting** and **solutions to those barriers**. This will encourage and empower them to advocate for voting rights.

There are quite a few questions listed – you don't have to use them all. You can copy and paste and reformat this document into whatever format works for your purposes.

If your students are young, I'd suggest selecting just a few questions to use. If your students are older, you can use more of the questions, and/or you can ask your students to research some of the answers ahead of time.

You or your students will likely also think of additional questions to ask. If so, I'd love to hear about those questions! I will periodically update this handout and add new questions to it, so I welcome your feedback.

Thank you for helping your students learn about and speak up for the right to vote!

*Deborah L. Diesen*

# Dear Students:

This handout will help you learn about voting in your area and how it compares to elsewhere in the U.S.

## **Why are there differences?**

In the United States, you can vote in elections if the following are true: you're a U.S. citizen; you meet your state's residency requirements; you are 18 years old on or before Election Day; and you are registered to vote by your state's voter registration deadline.

But the details of voter registration and the process of voting are different from state to state. Some aspects of voting are different depending on the location you vote at. With over 100,000 polling locations in the U.S., that's a lot of potential variation!

## **Why do the differences matter?**

Policies that make it harder to register to vote or to vote lead to fewer people participating in democracy. Policies that expand opportunities for voter registration and that make voting convenient and easy lead to higher levels of voter participation.

## **Who can help you with these questions?**

You can ask these questions of a local elections official (such as your city or county clerk) or of a state-level elections official (such as your Secretary of State).

Or you can ask these question of *any* of your elected officials (such as your city council person, your county commissioner, your state representative, your state senator, your governor, your U.S. Representative, your U.S. Senators, or even your President!). Elected officials are responsible to the public they serve, including *you*.

Another way to answer these questions is to do research – on your own, with your teacher and class, or with your school. Your teacher can guide you in identifying sources of information for answering these questions.

## **What if you can't find all the answers?**

There are a lot of questions listed, so your teacher might assign just a few for your class to work on. But no matter how many you answer, the things that you learn will help you better understand voting procedures and voting rights.

## Voter Registration

Some states have policies that encourage voter registration, such as online registration, same day registration, and automatic voting rights restoration after serving prison time. Other states do not. Learn more about your state's voter registration policies with these questions.

### In our state,

- Are all eligible voters automatically registered to vote?
- Is same day registration available for all elections? If so, can that registration take place at the polling place?
- If same day registration is not available, how many days ahead of the election do you have to register to vote?
- Can sixteen and seventeen-year-olds preregister?
- What documents are needed in order to register to vote? What is the cost of those documents?
- Can people register online? If so, how does that process work?
- Can people register by mail? If so, how does that process work?
- Where does in-person registration take place? How long is the wait? How long does the process take? Is there a cost?
- Can someone register to vote if they're in jail or prison? If so, how do they register, and how do they vote?
- If someone was convicted of a felony but has served their time and been released, are they allowed to register to vote? Is this done automatically? If not, what's the procedure?
- Can you register to vote if you don't have a street address? (e.g. if you're homeless, or if you live somewhere that doesn't have a named street)
- How do you register to vote if you're a college student? Are where do you vote if you're a college student?
- Does our state do voter registration purges or removals of inactive voters? If so, who oversees this process? What are the reasons for removing a voter's name from the registered voter list?
- Can organizations conduct voter registration drives?
- Is our state level of voter registration higher or lower than the national average?

## Early and Absentee Voting

Some states have policies that make voting easier for people who cannot vote in person on Election Day or who would prefer not to vote in person on Election Day. Other states do not. Learn more about your state's early and absentee voting policies with these questions:

### **In our state,**

- Do we have vote-by-mail? If so, how does that process work?
- Do we have absentee ballots? If so, what are the requirements for receiving an absentee ballot? (Do you have to give a reason why you would like to vote absentee?) Can you vote absentee if it's your first time voting? Can you choose to always vote absentee?
- Do we have in-person early voting? If so, what are the requirements for participating in early voting?

## **Ballot Design and Voting Equipment**

Voting equipment is a key part of the voting process, and ballot design can have an impact on voting results.

### **In our state,**

- Who designs how the ballots look? Who checks for design errors?
- What are the rules for the order the candidates are listed in?
- Do some polling locations have bilingual ballots? Who decides which locations and which languages? Who creates the bilingual ballots?
- Who provides equipment to voting precincts? Who purchases it? How is it paid for? Is the equipment the same at every polling place in the state? Who selects the kind of equipment? Who tests it? How old is the equipment?
- Are hand-marked paper ballots required in our state?

## **Polling Locations and Voting**

Distance from a polling location and wait times at polling locations can have a significant impact on voting.

### **In our state,**

- How are polling locations established? Who decides if there need to be more? Who approves location changes? Who approves closures?
- How many polling locations have changed physical address since the last election?
- How many polling locations have been added since the last election?
- How many polling locations have closed since the last election?
- What’s the longest distance someone in our state might have to travel to get to their polling location?
- How many people are served by each polling location?
- How many voting machines are at each polling location?
- How many poll workers are at each polling location?
- What time do polling locations open and close?
- Who checks locations to make sure they’re accessible to people with disabilities?
- Election Day is not a national holiday. Is it a holiday in our state? If so, what percent of working people receive the full day off as a paid holiday?
- Are employers in our state required to provide paid time off for a portion of Election Day? If not, are they required to provide unpaid time off?
- Are students allowed to take time off from school to vote?
- Are voters asked to provide picture identification at their polling place? If so, what kind of identification is acceptable, and what is the cost of this identification? What percent of adults in our state do not have this form of identification?
- If someone does not have picture identification at the polling place, can they still vote? If so, how do they do that, and how long does it take?
- Is our state level of voting higher or lower than the national average?

<b>Comparisons</b>
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How does our state compare to other states? How does my local polling location do?

	U.S. Average	State Average	Polling Place
% of eligible voters who are registered			
% of registered voters who vote			
Voters served per polling place			
Voting machines per voters served			
Poll workers per voters served			
Average distance from polling location			
Average wait time			
Number of voters turned away			
Number of ballots not counted			

## Other Issues and Questions

- Do you think it's right that the voting experience (voting registration, absentee voting, ballot design, polling location wait time, etc.) is different depending on where you live?
- Do you think citizens should have voting guarantees for maximum distance to their polling place and for maximum wait time for voting? Why or why not?
- The U.S. Constitution protects our right to vote but does not explicitly say that all U.S. citizens have a right to vote. Do you think there should be a Right to Vote amendment to the U.S. Constitution? Why or why not?
- Have voting policies in our state been changed due to *Shelby County v. Holder*?
- Have voting policies in our state been changed due to citizen initiatives?
- Are there laws in our state that prevent or address gerrymandering?
- What else is important for students to know about the right to vote?