

Lesson: How do elections contribute to democracy?

Big idea

Free and fair elections are a significant characteristic of a healthy democracy. Ontario has a system of representative democracy and a voting system called First Past the Post. Citizens vote for a candidate that represents a political party and the winner is the candidate who gets the most votes. There are other voting systems in other democracies. In a democracy, there are winners and losers. However, the winning candidate must represent all the people once they take office. Voting is a responsibility for all citizens to ensure their voices are heard in Ontario's democracy.

Curriculum connections

B3. Understanding Context: demonstrate an understanding of the roles and key responsibilities of citizens and of the different levels of government in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments.

B3.5 describe different processes that governments can use to solicit input from the public (e.g. elections, town hall meetings, public hearings, band council meetings, Métis general assemblies or community council meetings, commissions of inquiry, Supreme Court challenges, processes for granting easements, referendums, nation-to-nation discussions with First Nations and/or Inuit governments), and explain why it is important for all levels of government to provide opportunities for public consultation.

Learning goals

I am learning to:

- understand the different ways elections are run and votes are counted
- consider the advantages and disadvantages of different voting methods
- evaluate my options before I vote and choose the best option/candidate

Success criteria

I can:

- explain the different voting methods (First Past the Post, Runoff Ballot) and identify the advantages and disadvantages for each one
- practice running an election, being a candidate in an election, making a speech and/or voting
- think about what characteristics a political candidate should have and research how my local candidates either do or do not have those characteristics (election year)
- vote for a candidate/choice that is best for me

Inquiry question

How do elections contribute to democracy?

Required materials

1. Appendix A Student handout:
[Plus minus interesting](#)
2. Appendix B Printable material:
[Ballot template](#)
3. Appendix C Student handout:
[Speech planning](#)
4. Appendix D Printable material:
[Runoff tally sheet](#)
5. Appendix E Student handout:
[Choosing a political candidate](#)
6. Appendix F Student handout:
[Self-assessment tool](#)

Minds on

1. Remind students that fairness is an essential characteristic of democracy (If students have not completed lesson 1, consider doing so before this lesson. Alternatively, provide a brief overview of the characteristics of democracy to students). Democracies are fair when groups are represented well.
2. Begin by asking the whole class a question they will have a strong opinion about. This should be a closed YES/NO question.

Some examples of questions are:

- a. Are dogs better pets than cats?
- b. Should school take place outdoors?
- c. Is summer a better season than winter?
- d. Is physical education the best subject in school?

3. Hand out YES/NO signs to students and take a final vote. Alternately, students can raise their hands to vote or use a digital voting system.
4. Tally the results in a visible spot using a First Past the Post majority takes all system. Declare a winner.
5. Next, have students who voted YES find a student who voted NO and try to convince them to change their position. They can use any method to influence their decision.
6. Have students vote again but this time using a secret ballot (a **template** [Appendix B] has been provided; instead of a candidate's name, enter one of the options for this vote). Note any differences in the results using First Past the Post or if majority takes all again. If there is a difference, ask students to think about the reasons for the difference. If there was no difference, ask students whether it is better to vote publicly or in secret?
7. Next, tell students they will vote one final time but this time there will be many options for their vote. Use a question that has several preferences. Use the same **Ballot template** (Appendix B) included in this lesson. For example, use the question: "Which season is the best (spring, summer, fall or winter)?" or select several popular musicians and ask, "Which one is the most talented?". Another possibility is to ask which subject is the best in school with several options or ask which sport is the best.
8. Have students vote using a ballot system or online voting tool. Tally the results with a First Past the Post winner takes all and declare a winner. Calculate the percentage of the popular vote as well. Note how many students voted for the actual winning response. Was it the majority? Did the winner get 50% of the vote? Ask students if it is fair to say the winning response represents all students.
9. Ask students if this system of voting and tallying results seems the fairest. They can jot down their thoughts or share with an elbow partner before having a larger class discussion.
10. Give students time to record their thoughts about what they just learned on the student handout **Plus minus interesting** (Appendix A).

Activity

1. Begin by showing students a video that briefly explains First Past the Post. Explain that it is the voting system used in Ontario and Canada for its municipal, provincial and federal elections. An example of a video is below but the teacher could conduct a search to determine if there is a more recent video available online.
 - a. **Our Electoral System*** (Civix Canada, 2015) explains the basics behind First Past the Post.

*Available online at: elections.on.ca/learning

2. Ask the students whose favourite season or choice did not win the vote in the Minds On activity: Do you feel that your voices were heard? Were there too many voices and points of view represented? Remind students an important aspect of democracy is representation of the people.
3. Explain to students that there are other methods to run elections. For example, the Assembly of First Nations in Canada uses a runoff voting system:
 - a. The Assembly of First Nations leadership elections are held every 3 years and only the chiefs of each First Nation in Canada are eligible to vote.
 - b. A candidate needs 60% of the votes to win an election.
 - c. If a candidate receives less than 15% of the vote, they are dropped from the election.
4. Divide the class into different camps based on their votes for the last question. This should create three to four groups.

Teacher note: *Although the vote was completed by secret ballot, now students are publicly moving into a group with others who voted the same way. Observe whether students move confidently into a group or whether they look to see where their peers are going. This could make for an interesting continuation of the discussion around secret ballots vs voting publicly from the Minds On.*

Invite a couple of students to be undecided voters, along with the teacher who is also undecided. They should go to a separate area and discuss how they are thinking of voting.

5. Once in their groups, tell students they must select one person to become their spokesperson. This will become their candidate who will make a short speech to convince the class why their side is the best option.

Teacher note: *Use the same question from the Minds On (e.g. best season, best sport, best subject).*

6. Groups can use the handout **Speech planning** (Appendix C) to help them create a speech for their candidate.
7. The student-candidates make their short speeches. Encourage students to cheer and support their candidates.
8. Next, have all students, including the teacher and undecided voters, vote one last time using a secret ballot. Tally the results using the method used by the Assembly of First Nations. There is a **template** (Appendix D) included in this lesson to record the results.
 - a. Keep holding runoff elections until there is a choice that receives 60% or more of the popular ballot.
 - b. Do not forget to eliminate choices once 15% of the popular vote has not been achieved.
9. Give students time to continue to add to their **P.M.I. charts** (Appendix A).

Alternative activity: Election years

1. Students can research candidates running in any election where appropriate. For example, students can focus on the federal election or an election happening in another part of the world. Students can decide which electoral district to focus on. The teacher can create a short bio for each candidate in the district and display it in a visible spot in the class.
2. Ask students, “What makes a good political candidate for our electoral district?”.
3. In small groups, students create a ranking list of the qualities and characteristics they would like to see in a political candidate for their community/electoral district. Distribute the handout, **Choosing a political candidate** (Appendix E) to each group to record their thinking. Some criteria students could create are:
 - Cares about the environment
 - Wants to create jobs in the electoral district
 - Has a plan to improve health services in the community
 - Has a strong connection to the community
 - Wants to increase funding for certain school programs
 - Has a lot of experience working with people
 - Speaks the language of the ethnic groups in the community

4. Students then consider the actual candidates against their criteria. Additional research can be conducted by students to learn more about the candidates. The teacher can organize this as a group activity or an individual task.
5. Have the class vote on which candidate they think is best for the electoral district using a secret ballot and declare a winner. Students can share their work through verbal presentations, in a carousel format, or through digital products. The teacher can use all the different voting methods explained above.
6. Explain to students that in representative democracies, this is how political representation happens. Candidates are selected from groups of like-minded individuals (political parties) to represent all citizens in their electoral districts.

Consolidation

1. Show students the TVO video **How to Vote in Ontario***. Use this video to help reinforce understanding of Ontario’s voting system and to clarify any outstanding questions with students and review key concepts.
2. Students can summarize their learning by completing the **P.M.I. chart** (Appendix A).

*Available online at: elections.on.ca/learning

Assessment

A **self-assessment tool** (Assessment F) has been included in this lesson for students.