Vote “Yes” to teaching about “Voting” this election

Given the increasingly contentious nature of election campaigns over the past decade and shifting rules for televised debates, many teachers have deliberately decided to avoid direct teaching about voting, even in presidential ballot years. They feel it is difficult to celebrate the democratic process without being caught in the crossfire ongoing conflicting candidate positions and behaviors. Best to just keep to the mandated curriculum calendar. This is true for even Social Studies teachers and English teachers, increasingly asked to teach argument writing and persuasive writing. Yet , given the primacy of voting as a right in our democracy, we want to educate our students to exercise, avoiding this empowering teachable United States calendar moment is short sighted and detrimental to our goals of educating our students for empowered citizenship.

However, how do we empower and inform them about the right to vote, that they will access in the future without getting up in controversies of ongoing campaigns? Bypass the campaigns, focus on voting as the process and the hard earned right.

Start with a short survey to ascertain what the students come to class knowing about the right to vote in this country. Ask them to jot down the age at which a citizen can vote. Have them decide whether the following can vote or not: a prisoner convicted of a felony incarcerated, a prisoner who is on parole or probation, a senior citizen living in a nursing home unable to get to the poll site, a person who is ill and in the hospital unable to get to the poll site and a person who pays taxes and has lived in this country for decades, but never become a citizen. Give them a few minutes to jot down their answers and talk about them. Then share with them an informational document with these answers that is relevant to their states laws governing voting. This is one for NYS- <https://www.nyclu.org/resources/know-your-rights/voting-criminal-record>

Next, have the students develop questions to interview their family members about their first voting experience or a vote that the family member interviewed, felt strongly about having cast. Have them get the details about the candidate and the issue or just the details about pulling the levers in a ballot booth or even mailing in an absentee ballot. If your students are from ESL family backgrounds, stress that these voting experiences are even more important in that they offer an international comparison for the extent to which voting differs in different international government structures. During one of these activities, three of my ESL students brought in videos of their parents passionately stating that there was no voting in their native country or none that was real since the winner was already assured and the ballots counted for nothing. These videos of course drove home the importance of the US right to vote.

Get the students involved as well ahead of the election, while they cannot vote, they can make “Get the Vote” out. Show them a student made, not a commercial trailer focused not on a particular candidate but on getting the vote out, to measure the health of our democracy by highlighting the percentage of eligible voters who turn out to vote. This is a nonpartisan sample trailer: <https://youtu.be/18joKxd5alc?si=em7L-96V8SJ7YLk2>

Challenge the students to make a measurable difference by posting Vote signs in their apartment building or with permission of neighborhood storeowners. Have the students who are artists or graphically inclined or in afterschool art-making programs, create a logo or certificate to parallel the “I voted” stickers given out at polling sites.

Many students have older siblings or cousins eligible to vote for the first time this election or who have only cast a ballot or two prior to this election. Give them the opportunity to interview these “closer” to their age new voters about the process and record these young voters reaction to it.

Many picture book, middle school, and teen high quality texts focus on nonpartisan election or voting rights experiences from the perspectives of young reader peers getting the votes out or accompanying older voters to the polls. These books- some informational told at students’ grade and age level with civics content accuracy and some fictional can easily be used or excerpted to make the voting experience come “real” for students-

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/84443-2020-election-themed-novels-for-young-readers.html/>

<https://www.denverlibrary.org/teen/list/voting-books-teens>

Even in the act of students reading excerpts of these books to peers or younger peers, they are voting to share the right to vote, not how to cast the ballot or what choice to make.

The renowned American Poet, Nikki Giovanni wrote a poem called “Vote” in which she states “Folks vote to make us free. . . it is a vote saying you area citizen.” <https://www.democracynow.org/2020/11/3/nikki_giovanni_poem_vote> Surely in these times, teachers need to cast our curriculum ballots for inculcating our students in this election time experience of studying and celebrating our country’s voting process. Vote “yes” with a period or two of study, so our students vote as soon as eligible. That vote will elect an informed engaged citizenry.