TEACH DEMOCRACY

Ranked-Choice Voting

Civil Conversation Lesson Plan

Materials

- Handout A1: Middle School Text
- Handout A2: High School Text
- Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide
- Teacher Presentation

Standards and Topics

- CCSS.SL.6-12.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively
- CCSS.R.6-12.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- C3.D2.Civ.11.6-8. Differentiate among procedures for making decisions in the classroom, school, civil society, and local, state, and national government in terms of how civic purposes are intended.
- C3.D2.Civ.11.9-12. Evaluate multiple procedures for making governmental decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels in terms of the civic purposes achieved.

Topics: voting, government, democracy, U.S. history

Overview

In this Civil Conversation, students discuss the merits and drawbacks of ranked-choice voting. First, they examine a text that offers multiple perspectives on the issue of ranked-choice voting. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation on the text. In this structured discussion method, students are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

Objectives

1. Evaluate the implementation of ranked-choice voting
2. Participate effectively in a civil discussion by expressing clear and persuasive arguments, while building on others' ideas
3. Consider other perspectives with a sense of empathy

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

A. Have students make a list of their favorite movies and rank them (Alternatively, the rankings can come from another category: favorite foods, tv shows, activities). For each, movie they should explain their ranking. Then, ask students to consider the following questions: (1) What influenced your choices when ranking the movies? (2) What if we used these rankings to make a decision on what movie to watch in class? Would it be fair? Why or why not?

B. Inform students that ranked-choice voting is a method of selecting public officials that is gaining popularity in the United States. Their task today is to consider the issue of ranked-choice voting by examining multiple perspectives.

II. Reading : Ranked-Choice Voting

A. Briefly provide students with an overview of the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the overview above to help you.

B. Give each student a copy of Handout A: Ranked-Choice Voting

C. Distribute a copy of Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide to each student to complete as they read. Each student should fill in their own guide.

III. Civil Conversation

A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.

B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what's best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)

- **Time:** Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with.
- **Small Groups:** This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text together.

C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the guide to get started.

D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.

E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment / Closure

A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:

- What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
- What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
- Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.

B. If you want to also debrief the content of the Civil Conversation, you might ask students:

- Was there any surprising information you learned from the reading? What was it?
- What are the merits or drawbacks of ranked-choice voting?
- What do you think is the most important reason for your position?

C. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:

Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.

Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.

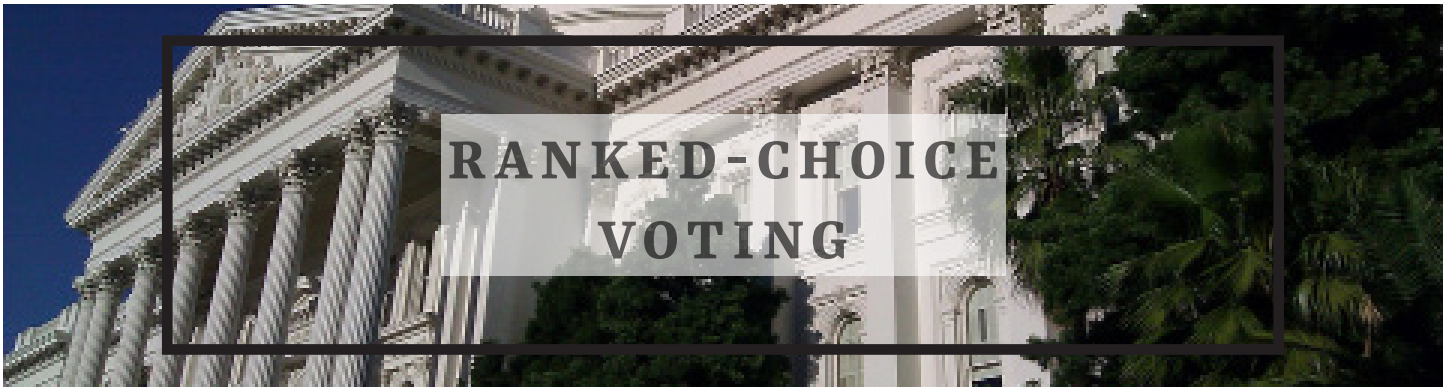
Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.

Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be "about the same as others").

Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.

Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.

D. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.



Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is a voting system that's gaining popularity in the United States. Rather than voting for only one candidate, voters rank more than one. RCV is being used in at least 50 **jurisdictions** (state and local) across the country. Many predict that it will be adopted in more and more jurisdictions over time.

Those who support RCV think there should be no restrictions on the people's right to freely choose their representatives. Those who oppose RCV believe that the essence of democracy is the right to vote freely for the candidate of one's choice.

jurisdictions areas or regions with specific laws

ballots paper or electronic forms used to vote in an election

threshold the minimum amount or level required for something to happen

How Does RCV Compare to Traditional Voting?

Most elections in the United States are fairly straightforward. Most use single-choice voting (SCV), meaning that voters pick one candidate in any race on their **ballots**.

In jurisdictions (state or local) with a majority **threshold** for elections, the candidate with more than 50 percent of the votes wins. If a candidate gets a plurality (50 percent or less, but still the highest number of votes), then an additional election between the top candidates occurs. This additional election is called a runoff election.

In jurisdictions with a plurality threshold, the candidate who simply wins the most votes — even if it is not a majority — wins the election. There is no runoff. Either way, whether in a majority or plurality threshold system, voters vote for just one candidate.

In a RCV system, voters do not choose a single winner. Instead, they rank their top three candidates on their ballots. If a candidate wins a majority of first-place votes, that candidate wins. The election is over.

If no candidate receives a majority, then the candidates with the fewest first-place votes are eliminated from the race one by one. Each time a candidate is eliminated, the second-place choices on all the ballots for that candidate are counted. This process is repeated until one candidate finally has a clear majority and wins the election.

Is RCV fair? Let's look at the arguments for and against RCV.

Arguments for RCV

1. RCV is more truly representative of the people's will:

The instant runoff feature of RCV ensures that no candidate can win with only a plurality. Also, in crowded races with candidates from various parties, only candidates with the most support will eventually get a majority of votes.

2. RCV lessens polarization in elections:

Many voters are concerned that our politics has become extremely divided (or polarized). Fewer politicians seek **compromise** with each other to get bills passed. In RCV, candidates need to have a broad appeal to gain as many second-choice votes as possible. Those second-choice votes are as valuable as first-choice votes in the instant runoff.

3. RCV increases voter turnout:

According to Stephanie Houghton of FairVote Washington, "Voters who have used ranked-choice voting say it's simple to use." In Maine in 2020, more than 828,000 people voted (after RCV was approved in 2018), compared to 771,000 in 2016 (before RCV was approved). Some argue, however, that the use of absentee ballots due to COVID-19 could account for the increased **turnout**.

In addition, the current runoff elections in majority-threshold jurisdictions commonly have low turnouts. And runoff elections are expensive for the state. They include the costs of printing ballots, mailing ballots, and hiring poll workers and election workers to count ballots. Instant runoffs eliminate the need for those expenses.

Arguments Against RCV

1. RCV is confusing for most voters:

The system of instant runoffs, in which second-choice votes of eliminated candidates are distributed to the remaining candidates, is more complicated than a simple winner-take-all system. Picking one candidate on a ballot is easier than ranking two or more.

2. RCV does not reflect the will of the people:

RCV is **flawed** in that it allows candidates with fewer first-choice votes to win in the instant runoff. After Maine voters approved RCV in 2018 for federal congressional elections, Republican Bruce Poliquin and Democrat Jared Golden competed in the state's first RCV general election. After the first-round vote, Poliquin led Golden by 2,000 votes. But when the least-chosen candidates were eliminated, their second-choice votes mostly went to Golden, allowing Golden to win.

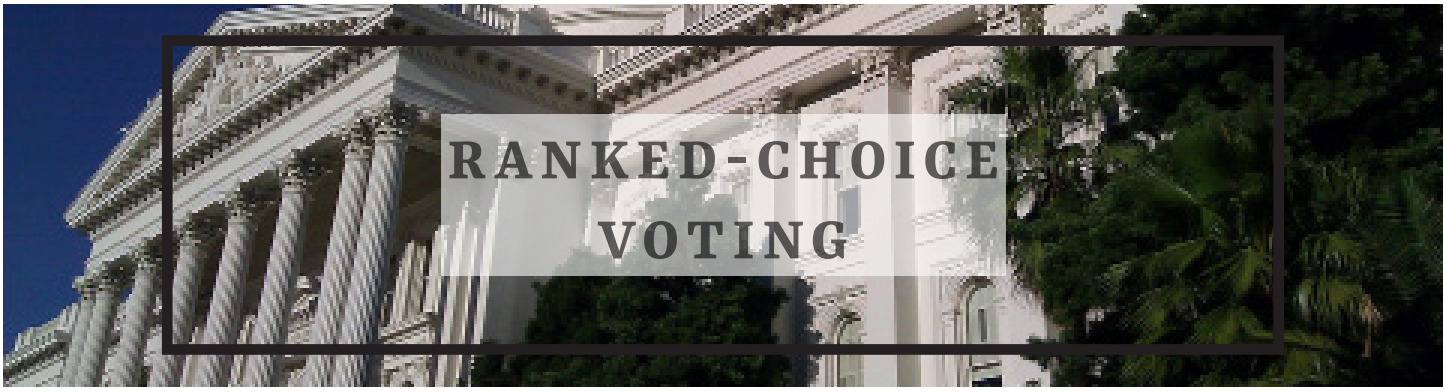
3. RCV reduces voter turnout:

In a letter to the editor of the Alaska Daily News, two citizens of the state argued that "RCV does not encourage more people to vote." They cited that Alaskans cast 100,000 fewer ballots in 2022 – the first statewide RCV election – than in 2020.

compromise agreement where both sides give up something to reach a solution

turnout the number of people who participate

flawed having mistakes or imperfections



"The right to vote freely for the candidate of one's choice is of the essence of a democratic society, and any restrictions on that right strike at the heart of representative government."

- Chief Justice of the United States Earl Warren, Reynolds v. Sims (1964)

This quote is from a Supreme Court decision about the importance of state legislative districts being equal in size. But Chief Justice Warren's statement could equally apply to a controversial voting issue arising in the United States. The issue is ranked-choice voting, a system in which voters can rank more than one candidate, rather than voting for only one candidate. Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is being used in at least 50 **jurisdictions** (state and local) across the country. Many predict that it will be adopted in more and more jurisdictions over time.

Those who support ranked-choice voting would agree with Warren that democracy depends on there being no restrictions on the people's right to freely choose their representatives. Those who oppose RCV would agree with Warren that the essence of democracy is the right to vote freely for "the candidate of one's choice."

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3. RCV eliminates the "spoiler effect" of third-party candidates:

Candidates from smaller third parties are often viewed as spoilers, taking away votes from candidates in the two major parties: Democratic and Republican. For example, in the 2016 presidential election, an analysis by CNN showed that if half of the supporters of the Libertarian Party candidate and all of the supporters of the Green Party candidate in four key states had voted for Democrat Hillary Clinton, Clinton would have won. She would have had enough electoral votes to become president. Therefore, many Clinton supporters viewed the Libertarian and the Green as spoilers.

If, however, voters had the option of voting for third parties as their second or third choice, the spoiler effect would be eliminated. Most first-choice votes would likely go to the two major parties. But third parties would have a chance to build support without directly challenging the major-party candidates.

4. RCV increases voter turnout:

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3. RCV rewards more extreme candidates in instant runoff:

Often, political commentators distinguish between "extreme" far-left or far-right candidates and "moderate" candidates. So-called extreme politicians seek radical solutions to problems. They are typically unwilling to compromise. So-called moderate politicians, however, are more willing to "reach across the aisle" and find common ground with their opponents.

In analyzing the 2022 RCV election of Mary Peltola in Alaska, law professor Nathan Atkinson and business professor Scott C. Ganz characterized Peltola as an "extreme" far-left candidate. (They implied that Sarah Palin was an "extreme" far-right candidate.) The "moderate" Nick Begich III, in their opinion, had more popular support when looking at all the ballots that had him in second place. But because Alaska's voters were largely polarized between the far-left and far-right, they argued, Peltola unfairly pulled ahead.

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Name: _____

Ranked-Choice Voting

Civil Conversation Guide

Step 1: Read.

A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.

B. Re-read the selection and annotate ("talk to") the text:

- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
- Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
- Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a "?".
- Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...

B. The MAIN POINTS are:

Is Ranked-Choice Voting Fair?

C. In the reading, I agree with:

D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and Listen.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

Start by taking turns sharing your answers to the questions in Step 2, sections A-D. Then, you will likely find at least one discussion question at the end of the reading. If time permits, you can discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

Rules for a Civil Conversation

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying
3. Ask clarifying questions if your do not understand a point raised
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? ___ Less than, ___ About the same as, ___ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)