

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 or registrar. You can use it in conjunction with inviting an elections official to visit your classroom (in-person or virtually) or when taking a field trip to a clerk's office.

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.

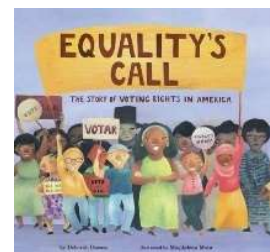
There are quite a few questions listed – *you don't have to use them all*. You can copy and paste and reformat this document into whatever format works for your purposes.

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 and 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 harder 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.

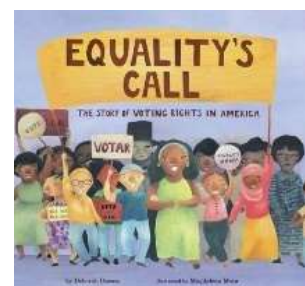
Who can help you with these questions?

You can ask these questions of a local elections official (such as your city or county clerk or registrar) or of a state-level elections official (such as your Secretary of State). Or you can ask these questions of *any* of your elected officials! 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 can you do with the information?

Throughout our nation's history, many people have spoken up for the right to vote. Changes to our constitution and our laws have expanded and protected that right. But the journey's not over. What you learn will help point the way to work still to be done.



Deborah L. Diesen

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?
- 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 sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds preregister?
- Do we have a statewide program in our high schools to register and preregister young voters?
- 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? Is there a cost? Do fines, fees, and restitution have to be paid before their right to vote is regained?
- 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? Is a list of voters to be purged released to the public prior to the removals?
- 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 all-state 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?
- If a voter wants to change their vote-by-mail or absentee ballot after submitting it, are they allowed to do that? If so, what's the procedure?
- If an absentee voter's ballot is rejected after the ballot is received, are they notified and given an opportunity to correct the problem?
- Do we have in-person early voting? If so, what are the requirements for participating in early in-person voting? Does the in-person early voting run for a week or more, and include weekend days?

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?
- Do we have ranked choice voting? If not, do some communities within our state use ranked choice voting for some of their elections?

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? What's the highest number allowed?
- How many poll workers are at each polling location? What's the lowest number? How does the number of poll workers impact wait time for voters?
- Who is responsible for training poll workers? What kind of training do they receive? Is the training the same throughout the state?
- How many voting machines are at each polling location? What's the lowest number allowed?
- 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?
- If someone is in jail but not serving a sentence (that is, they've been accused of a crime but not convicted), can they vote? If so, how do they vote?
- If someone is in jail and is serving a sentence, can they vote? If so, how do they vote?
- If someone has been released from jail or prison, can they vote?
- Is our state level of voting higher or lower than the national average?

Comparisons

How does our state compare to other states? How does my local polling location compare?

	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, equipment, 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?