The electoral system and political parties

Curriculum references

This guidance supports the National Curriculum for Citizenship and teaching about democracy as part of the DfE British Values. The topic, the electoral system and political parties addresses the following requirements in the Citizenship programmes of study:

- the operation of Parliament, including voting and elections, and the role of political parties (KS3)
- parliamentary democracy and the key elements of the constitution of the United Kingdom, including the power of government, the role of citizens and Parliament in holding those in power to account, and the different roles of the executive, legislature and judiciary and a free press (KS4)
- the different electoral systems used in and beyond the United Kingdom and actions citizens can take in democratic and electoral processes to influence decisions locally, nationally and beyond (KS4)
- other systems and forms of government, both democratic and non-democratic, beyond the United Kingdom (KS4)

What’s the big idea?

One of the aims of Citizenship is for students to “acquire a sound knowledge and understanding of how the United Kingdom is governed, its political system and how citizens participate actively in its democratic systems of government.” Clearly the act of voting is one of the archetypal acts of citizenship in a democracy. Learning about the electoral system helps students understand how to vote, how to register to vote, how their votes are aggregated into the process of government formation and the role of political parties in mediating this process.

Key concepts

The key to teaching about political parties and the electoral system is to focus on and regularly return to developing understanding of a number of central concepts:

(1) Democracy — in particular how do individual citizens really get to influence who governs and how they govern?

(2) Representation — how do democracies organise representation? How do we choose representatives, what responsibilities do representatives have to us, and what responsibilities do we have to actively hold them to account? Are governments really representative?
(I) Voting and voters

Voting

Voting takes place either in a decision-making forum, for example when the class or school council votes on an issue or when parliament votes on a Bill, or when we choose representatives to make decisions on our behalf. The KS4 Programme of Study for Citizenship and GCSE Citizenship Studies also require students to compare different voting systems. This is useful to demonstrate that in some democracies, such as US states, direct democracy still features as an everyday aspect of politics when referenda are organised. In the UK we rarely have referenda but of course the most recent example was the referendum on whether to leave the European Union. So its important to teach how voting happens (how we cast a vote) and the different ways in which voting takes places (direct decision-making or electing people to make decisions on our behalf).

New Zealand provides an interesting case study as citizens can initiate a referendum if 10% or more of the electorate sign a petition calling for a referendum.

Recent examples of Citizen Initiated Referenda and the rules for how these work are published online (1). In the USA the Initiative and Referendum Institute (2) provides background information on recent examples. These examples may be particularly interesting precisely because they often relate to interesting and controversial issues that children will probably have opinions about, for example, gay marriage, legalizing cannabis.

Voters

Once students understand the role of voting in democracy, it is useful to reflect on who should be allowed to vote. The age at which citizens can vote is of particular relevance in the UK given the decision to permit 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the referendum on Scottish Independence. However the same young people are not entitled to vote in the elections that choose MSPs. There are on-going campaigns (3) which may engage students in these debates. There are also on-going issues about which citizens might lose their right to vote and under what conditions, for example prisoners.

(II) Counting votes

There are a range of ways to collect preferences in a vote, and a range of ways to aggregate those preferences into a decision. In the UK we already use First Past the Post (e.g. in Westminster elections); Supplementary Votes (e.g. in London Mayoral elections); Proportional Representation Lists (e.g. in European elections); Proportional Representation Additional Member system (e.g. in Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections) (4). The Electoral Reform Society provides a useful source of information on the many different systems available (5).

(III) Legitimacy and voter registration

In a democracy it is important to ensure that elections are seen as legitimate. This means that they are conducted fairly, and that there are enough people participating so that the results can be reasonably interpreted as the wishes of the people. In relation to the first issue, it may be interesting to think about the ways in which people try to commit electoral fraud, from the large scale examples we often see in the news relating to corrupt governments abroad, to the local examples that are regularly reported in UK elections (6).

In relation to the issue of voter turn-out, it may be worth considering how voter-registration campaigns have influenced the outcomes of elections. In the UK there have been concerted attempts to increase voter registration including among 18-24 year olds including a government campaigns and activities led by charities such as Bite the Ballot. There are an estimated 8 million eligible citizens who are not registered to vote in the UK. In other countries voter registration is also an issue. In the USA there has been a long record of parties trying to organise voters to get registered so they can participate in elections with campaigns led by organisations such as Operation Black Vote (8).
(IV) Political parties

Some voters are somewhat sceptical about the main political parties in the UK. However, it is important for students to learn about the role the parties play in organising politics and enabling democracy to function. It is worth thinking about what role parties have in our democratic system and the extent to which they perform that role.

(i) listening to voters concerns and trying to come up with proposals that will gain the support of the voters and therefore meet their demands;

(ii) providing a mechanism for citizens to get into formal politics by joining a party and being selected as a candidate;

(iii) helping people group together so they can affect change in some organized way;

(iv) providing voters with choices over policies;

(v) they can form a government — just electing a disparate group of individual representatives to parliament would make modern government difficult to imagine.

“The morality of a [political] party must grow out of the conscience and the participation of the voters.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

(V) Representation and MPs

Whilst a vote is simply a single act, the consequences live on for years — as long as the representative is in office. Citizens can have ongoing dialogue with their representatives about their concerns. This invites us to consider both the roles of MPs — whether in the governing party or opposition— and how citizens interact with MPs and those in power e.g. via MPs surgeries, lobbying, social media etc. which all serve a purpose in influencing the actions of representatives and ultimately the action of those in power.

 Constituents are kept up to date and can contact MPs easily through new media.

(VI) General elections

The Fixed term Parliaments Act 2011 was designed to set all future elections for the first Thursday in May every fifth year. An early election can be triggered if a motion is agreed by two-thirds majority in the House of Commons. This is what happened for the election held on 8 June 2017.

When a General Election is called, Parliament is dissolved and every seat in the House of Commons becomes vacant until the election is held. Voters in each constituency elect one Member of Parliament. Normally the political party that wins the most seats forms the new Government.

Footnotes

(1) http://www.elections.org.nz/voting-systems/referenda
(2) http://www.iandrinstitute.org/
(3) http://www.votesat16.org/
(4) http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/28517
(5) http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems
(8) http://biteetheballot.co.uk and http://www.obv.org.uk/what-we-do
Assessment

Students should be able to apply their knowledge about voting and political parties to real life. This could include giving students the opportunity to apply core concepts like representation and democracy to scenarios and judge the extent to which these scenarios embody these concepts. Students could think about what would make a situation more (or less) democratic, for example, what would make a political party more effective in promoting democracy?

Students could also think about the extent to which they think voting is important. Ask pupils to provide an explanation for their view, rather than simply judging them on whether or not they wish to vote. The depth of their understanding will be evident in their reasons rather than their opinion.

A reasonable outcome for KS3

Pupils demonstrate an understanding that democracy is an ideal, which is made up of several features. They can give examples of features which constitute democracy e.g. role of free media, political parties, access to candidacy. They can begin to differentiate between the presence of some features and the extent to which they operate democratically, for example they understand the role that elected representatives and political parties play within the electoral system and may be able to identify some features which are more or less democratic in the way these institutions currently operate. They can express an informed opinion about the role of voting, giving personal reasons for and against voting / abstention.

A reasonable outcome for KS4

Pupils can explain that some states or electoral systems are more or less democratic than others and provide reasons for their judgement. In relation to the UK they can give examples of democratic processes and identify areas for improvement in the current system. They can identify examples of citizen action and / or alternative practices and institutions which might address these areas for improvement, e.g. commenting on the fairness of different voting systems, extension of the franchise, use of referenda etc. In their discussions they appreciate that democracy is not simply ‘majority rule’ and decision-making systems must also protect minorities. They explain whether citizens should vote or be free to abstain, citing reasons which relate to individual beliefs and the effective operation of democracy.

Teaching ideas and resources

A set of downloadable teaching activities and PowerPoints are available on the ACT website www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk

Case studies of different electoral systems in action eg to help compare and contrast votes on legalisation of gay marriage in the UK and US with a referendum versus the centralised Westminster Parliament’s debate and vote. When should we have a referendum?

Debates and discussion activities for example, Should 16 and 17 year olds be eligible to vote? Should voting in general elections should be compulsory?

Simulations and mock elections run a parallel election where students present policies of prospective candidates and compare votes in school with votes in the constituency or focus on different voting systems in action. You could also count the votes in different ways to assess the impact of various voting systems.

Analysis of party manifestos in an election and over time in key policy areas. It’s more useful to use real examples here, rather than to invent your own political parties.

Invite a guest from a local political party to discuss why they joined the party and what they do. Ask your MP to talk about how they stay in touch with voters.

A research project into local voter turn-out and / or voting intentions among peers.

Resources

Parliament’s Education Service explain the electoral process to young people and provide an election toolkit to help you run a mock election in your school.

www.parliament.uk/education/online-resources/

The Electoral Commission website provides information for teachers.

www.electoralcommission.org.uk/ and www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/

The Hansard Society offer resources to help plan a mock election and organise effective MP visits to school. www.hansardsociety.org.uk/

Votes for policies offer a simple online tool where you can explore policies of the major political parties and compare your own opinions to see which party you align with www.votesforpolices.org.uk

Bite the bullet offer activities for students to learn about voter registration

www.bitetheballot.org.uk

Friends of the Earth have two useful resources that explain how to lobby and the role lobbying plays in their campaigns.

www.foe.co.uk/resource/how_to/lobby_your_elected_rep.pdf

www.foe.co.uk/resource/event_background_documents/lobbying_workshop_handout.pdf

Church Action on Poverty have a guide to holding your MP to account.

www.church-poverty.org.uk/mpan/mpanguide

Students should be made aware of the UK Youth Parliament

www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk

They Work for You a website to find out about your MP and what they have been doing on your behalf. www.theyworkforyou.com/

English Speaking Union provides resources to support debate and oracy skills.

www.esu.org

Finally, a briefing paper from 2005 for Citizenship student teachers contains useful information and links.

www.citized.info/pdf/commarticles/Philp%20GOgle.pdf

Video clips:

What do we have elections?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5BzWKVzejs