This guidance supports the revised National Curriculum for citizenship published by the DFE in 2013, for first teaching from September 2014. The topic, the electoral system and political parties addresses the following requirements in the revised 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)

One of the aims of the subject 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 appreciate how to vote, how their votes are aggregated into the process of government formation and the role of political parties in mediating this process.

What’s the big idea?

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Key concepts

Teaching about political parties and the electoral system could get bogged down in lots of examples and scenarios. The key to making this teaching effective is to return to a few clear central concepts throughout:

(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

We usually vote 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 invitation to compare different systems in KS4 is helpful because we can 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 have referenda rarely and of course the most recent example was the referendum on changing the electoral system. Here then one should be aware both that we should teach young people how voting happens (how we actually 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 a clear example of how to incorporate referenda in simple rules (1) and in the USA the Initiative and Referendum Institute (2) provides background information on recent examples. These may be particularly interesting precisely because they often relate to inherently interesting and controversial issues that children will probably have opinions about, for example, gay marriage, legalizing cannabis and the death penalty.

Voters

Once students understand how important a place voting occupies 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 at the moment, given that the Scottish Parliament has decided to include 16 year olds in their referendum, but interestingly, 16 year olds cannot 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

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 and in the USA there has been a long record of parties trying to organise voters to get registered so they can participate in elections. This has notably been seen as one of the key strengths of President Obama’s campaigns (7) and is being discussed by some organisations in the UK, such as Operation Black Vote (8).
(IV) Political parties

Clearly many voters are somewhat sceptical about the main political parties in the UK. However, it is important to stress what a vital role they 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 them well e.g.

(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;

(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) On-going accountability

We also need to recognise that whilst a vote is simply a single act, the consequences live on for years — as long as the representative is in office. This implies that citizens cannot simply vote and leave it at that, but that they should have an on-going relationship with their representatives. This invites us to consider MPs surgeries, the role of lobbying, and the organisation of party conferences etc which all serve a purpose in influencing the actions of our representatives.

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

Footnotes

Assessment

If you link the teaching to these concepts then assessment should reflect the extent to which students are 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 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. In a sense, it is more important for assessment purposes to 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

Here are some brief suggestions to illustrate possible approaches. There are exemplar lesson materials on the ACT website.

Case studies of different electoral systems in action, for example comparing and contrasting votes on the legalisation of gay marriage in US states with a referendum versus the centralised Westminster Parliament’s debate and vote. When should we have a referendum?

Debate on the age of voting and / or limitations on the franchise.

Simulations of different voting systems in action. If you hold a mock election you could count the votes in different ways to assess the impact of various 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.

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 run programmes and publishes resources to help you plan and teach for an MP’s visit to school. www.hansardsocociety.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/event_background_documents/

lobbying_workshop_handout.pdf

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

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

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

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

BBC Education have a page of short clips which could be used to introduce issues relating to the topic.

hww.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/topics/secondary/citizenship_and_modern_studies/politics_and_government_the_democratic_and_electoral_processes.shtml

Students should be made aware of the UK Youth Parliament.

www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/elections/

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

www.citizen.info/pdf/commarticles/Philp%20Gale.pdf

Video clips:

What’s the point of a political party conferences?

www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/a-to-z-of-parliament-p-for-party-conferences/14318.html

Can you live in a democracy where the same party always wins power?

www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/authoritarian-democracy-in-singapore/10102.html

What happens if entire social groups are under-represented and under-participate in the electoral system?


Why join a political party?

www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/joining-a-political-party/7261.html

What do we have elections?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5b2WKn2ejs