

Choose Your Party

OBJECTIVES

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Identify the major political parties in their community.
- Describe the party platform for each party.
- Learn how to register to vote.

OVERVIEW

In this activity, students will visit the local Democratic and Republican Party headquarters and one third-party political office. They will learn the differences among these parties' platforms and the different positions each takes on major issues in the community. Students will examine different campaign materials and learn how a candidate gets elected. Students will also learn the size of their precinct, how parties and candidates urge their constituents to vote, how funds are collected to support the parties' activities, how volunteers help during a campaign, and what exactly occurs when a candidate wins an election. Any political office can be studied. Students may use this information to discuss their own political leanings. Students will obtain voter registration forms to complete.

PLANNING

Suggested Time Plan to spend at least one 45-minute class period and one homework assignment on this activity. Students will also spend time visiting local political offices.

Resources Students can obtain voter registration forms from local or state election offices.

Preparation You may have to contact party headquarters in writing if no campaigns are currently under way. Some offices are not staffed between elections. However, all parties will make available a staff member to discuss the party. If no staff member is available to visit, invite the local political representative from that party to address the class.

IMPLEMENTATION

1. Discuss the project with the class. You might begin by asking students to discuss what they know about the parties and how elections are conducted. You also might discuss with students what they know about different issues and what is each party's stand on an issue. Distribute copies of the Planning Guidelines, Standards for Evaluating Your Work, and Task Sheet to the class. Explain to students that they will be visiting the headquarters of the major political parties in their area.
2. Have the class formulate areas of interest about a campaign. Have them write questions to ask the staffs of the offices they visit or the guest speakers they invite to class. Students might be organized into two or three groups to take the lead on addressing the different parties' platforms. Students might also be organized into small groups to handle certain areas, such as campaign finances, volunteerism, campaign materials, and election-day activities.
3. Have students examine the voter registration form. Discuss with them the reasons for each question. Ask them to explain why the voter registration form does not require more extensive information.
4. When the class has completed the office visits (or guest speakers have visited the class), discuss with the class their views on the different parties' platforms. Which party is predominantly represented in your community? What are the political leanings of the members of the class?

ASSESSMENT

To evaluate students' work, use the Standards for Evaluating Work on page 39 of this booklet, along with Rubric 9: Comparing and Contrasting, and Rubric 12: Drawing Conclusions, in the *Alternative Assessment Handbook* or in a customizable format on the One-Stop Planner.

Planning Guidelines

In this activity, you will be visiting the local offices of the major political parties in your community. After identifying the two major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, you will also research other political parties that might exist in your community. When you visit a political party's office, you should be able to see what occurs there. If you visit during an election campaign, you will see how an office runs, what the people who work there do, what information is gathered, what materials are created or used in the campaign, and how the voters are solicited or encouraged to vote. In addition you will be able to see how volunteers are used to help the parties operate. You can also ask about the party's political platform, that is, their position on important public issues. You should ask questions about current or future candidates and see how many of their ideas you agree or disagree with. At the end of your visits, you will register to vote and participate in a class discussion about what political leanings the students have. You will learn which party is the most popular in your community.

1. Before meeting with your small group, determine the most popular party in your community. Also identify a third political party that is lesser known than the two main parties.
2. In your group, discuss how to handle your visit, what kinds of questions to ask, what issues to learn about, and who in your group will be responsible for collecting and asking the questions. You might divide the task into components, with one person asking about financing, one about volunteers, etc. Make a list of all the questions you want answered.
3. When you visit the offices, look around. Note what you see. What kind of office is it? Are there many people around? What are they doing? Is there a campaign currently underway? What literature do you see?
4. Ask questions of the person addressing your group. What is the party's position on the issues you have identified? You might ask what statistics are gathered by the party's office. How much information do they have about the voters?
5. After you complete your visit, discuss with the class your opinions about what you learned. What are some differences between parties? Are the differences significant? What is your political leaning?
6. After obtaining a voter registration form, fill it out. What questions does it ask? Why does the agency registering you to vote need to know the information asked for on the form?

Standards for Evaluating Work

EXCELLENT

- Student is aware of and has participated in selecting the main and third-party political offices to visit. The questions developed for the visits to the political offices are relevant and show an interest and complete understanding of political parties and the voting and campaigning process.
- The student's participation at the political offices is excellent. The student observes all aspects of the office and asks cogent questions that help to illuminate the inner workings of the office. The student has excellent questions about the issues chosen to be addressed and asks good follow-up questions.
- The student completely and correctly fills out the voter registration card. The student participates in the discussion about why the card asks for certain information and why it is necessary to register to vote. The student has identified his or her political leanings based on an understanding of the parties' platforms on issues. The student's position is well-reasoned.

ACCEPTABLE

- Student has been somewhat helpful in identifying the political parties in the community. The student's questions are cogent and cover some aspects of the task. Student shows an interest in the political system and a grasp of the voting and campaign process.
- Student has good participation at the political offices. Student observes and understands most of what the office reveals. Student has good questions about the issues and understands the purpose and workings of the political headquarters.
- Student fills out the voter registration form correctly. Student participates in the discussion about why the card asks for certain information but does not show a complete understanding of the issues. Student has identified his or her political leanings but cannot fully support them.

UNACCEPTABLE

- Student's input into identifying the political parties is minimal and the student is unable to contribute to choosing the third-party office to visit. The questions add little to understanding the political process and what voting and campaigning involves.
- Student participates little or not at all while visiting the office. Student does not ask questions about the issues and does not understand the workings of the office.
- Student fills out the voter registration card, but it is not complete or correct. Student barely participates in the discussion about the importance of the card. Student cannot identify his or her political leanings, and cannot support these leanings with reasons.

Task Sheet

Check off the following tasks as you complete the activity.

- 1.** Obtain the addresses of the political parties in your community for the Democratic, Republican, and one other party. Choose a time to visit these headquarters.
- 2.** In your small group, develop questions to be answered by the staffs at the offices you visit. Divide the task of developing the questions into categories, such as campaign finances, volunteerism, getting out the vote, etc. Develop questions to ask about the party's position on certain key issues that you identify.
- 3.** Visit the offices and collect as much data as you can while there. Make notes about what you learn and about the political party's position on issues that you have identified.
- 4.** Obtain a voter registration card and fill it out. Discuss with your classmates the questions on that card and the reason the information is needed.
- 5.** Have a class discussion on the political parties and what you learned. What were the differences in their positions on the issues you identified? What tactics did they use to contact voters and get their candidates known? Based on what you learned, what kind of voting patterns does your community generally exhibit? Are you persuaded to join one party over the other? Why? What have you learned about your community's voters? Would you help on a political campaign? Why or why not?