

13. Every Vote Counts

But do they all count the same?

Themes	Citizenship, Democracy
Level of complexity	Level 3
Age	10 – 13 years
Duration	2 x 60-minute sessions
Group size	10 – 30 children
Type of activity	Discussion, planning, simulation
Overview	Children design a democratic decision making process and hold a mock vote according to one of their plans.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand the meaning of fair and democratic elections • To practise holding fair elections • To learn the mechanics of democratic voting • To recognise the importance of citizen participation
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy Situation Sheet for each group. • Copy and cut out role cards.
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation Sheet for each group • Paper and pencils for ballots



Instructions

Session 1:

1. Explain that the UDHR guarantees everyone the right “to participate in your government, either by holding an office or by electing someone to represent you” and that “governments should be elected regularly by fair and secret voting” (Article 21). Ask the children what they think this means:
 - a. What is a ‘fair’ election?
 - b. Why should voting be secret?
 - c. Who gets to vote?
 - d. What does it mean for someone to ‘represent you’?
 - e. What are the responsibilities of that person?
 - f. Who are some of the people who represent people in their community at the national level? At the local level?
2. Observe that although children cannot vote until they are adults, they can still participate in various forms of elections to decide things in their own lives. Ask the children to discuss their opportunities to choose:
 - a. What are some examples of situations where you have a say or a vote?
 - b. Is it a ‘fair’ decision or election?
 - c. Is it secret?
 - d. Who gets to decide or vote?
 - e. Who decides whom or what they are deciding or voting on?
3. Explain that in this activity they will create democratic methods of making decisions. Divide the children into an even number of groups, with five or six in each group. Give each group a Situation Sheet and assign at least two groups to work on the same situation. Be sure that you assign two



- groups to Situation E, which will later be used as a simulation. Point out the questions to consider at the bottom of the page and explain any terms that may be unfamiliar in the questions.
- a. Alternative: Give all the groups Situation E to emphasize the variety of solutions to the same situation and the negotiation process that follows in Step 5.
4. When the children have had time (about 15-20 minutes) to plan in small groups, ask each group to explain their situation and the decision making process they developed to address it. Call on the groups with Situation E last. After each presentation, ask the other children to critique the plan:
 - a. Is it democratic?
 - b. Does everyone concerned have a chance to express a choice?
 - c. Is it fair?
 - d. Is it secret?
 - e. Does everyone who votes know who or what they are voting for?
 5. When all the situations have been presented, ask the children to turn their attention to Situation E. Explain that they are going to hold a mock vote to decide on this situation. But to do so, they need to agree on one plan for how to decide. Ask them to compare the different plans developed for Situation E:
 - a. How are the plans alike? Shall we use these agreements for our mock vote?
 - b. How are they different? Which idea will work best? Which should we use?
 6. As the children reach agreement on a plan, write down their decisions on chart paper and discuss it, asking questions such as these:
 - a. Is anything missing from our new plan for Situation E?
 - b. Do you think it will be democratic?

Session 2:

1. Remind the children of Session 1 and the facts of Situation E. Reintroduce the plan developed in Session 1 and explain that you will try out their plan with a mock vote on Situation E.
2. Hand out role cards to the children and explain the simulation:
 - a. The Election Manager will ask the 3 spokespersons to give their opinion.
 - b. The Election Manager will then ask the audience to ask questions and give their opinions as well.
 - c. The Election Manager then asks if everyone is ready to vote and explains what it takes to win the vote according to the group's plan (e.g. a simple majority, a proportion of the vote).
 - d. The Voting Official will then ask everyone to vote, according to the method in the group's plan. Together the Voting Official and Election Manager will collect and count the votes.
 - e. The Voting Official announces the result to the vote. If it qualifies to win, the Election Manager declares the group's decision. If it does not qualify to win, the Election Manager announces that there will have to be a run-off vote.
 - f. In the case of a run-off vote, the Voting Official makes new ballots and proceeds as in Step e above.

Debriefing and evaluation

1. Debrief the activity by asking questions such as these:
 - a. Do you think the vote in the simulation was fair and democratic?
 - b. Were you able to recognize real-life situations in this activity?



- c. How are decisions like this usually made? Do children get to have an opinion or choice?
 - d. Are there some decisions that only adults can make?
 - e. Are decisions in your group usually made democratically? Why or why not?
 - f. What can you do to ensure that your group makes decisions democratically?
2. Relate the activity to human rights by asking questions such as these:
- a. What do we mean when we talk about 'government'?
 - b. What are some offices in your community that are chosen by election? In your country?
 - c. Besides holding an elected office, what are some ways that people can participate in their government?
 - d. How old must you be in your country before you can vote?
 - e. Are there ways you can participate in government before you can vote?
 - f. Why do you think the right to participate in government is important enough to be a human right?
 - g. What would happen if some of the children in your simulation decided not to vote? What happens when people don't exercise their right to participate in their government?
 - h. Why is it important to use your human rights?

Suggestions for follow-up

The activity 'A CONSTITUTION FOR OUR GROUP', p. 56, provides a real-life opportunity to exercise democratic debate about how the group will behave and to practise voting skills.

Ideas for action

Take every opportunity that arises with your group to model democratic decision making, whether about small matters (e.g. what kind of snacks to have, whether to play inside or outside) or large. Children learn democratic procedures best by practising them. They also benefit from being asked to consider whether everyone concerned in a decision has had a chance to be consulted.

Tips for the facilitator

- The simplest way to run this fairly complex activity is to have all the children working together on a plan for Situation C. This ensures that everyone understands the situation and emphasizes the need to create a compromise plan, itself an important democratic process.
- If you choose to use several different situations, use at least one situation that involves choosing a person (Situations A and D) and one that involves making a policy decision (Situations D and E). The policy decision situations make for better mock elections because the spokespersons represent points of view rather than themselves.
- This activity contains some terms that may be unfamiliar to children (e.g. nominations, candidates, campaign speeches, debates, run-off election, proportion of the vote, ballot). Once the children are working in small groups, go around to make sure they understand the terms. For younger children proportional representation might be explained simply as 'more than half' or 'a simple majority'.
- The instructions suggest using only Situation E for the simulation, but you can adapt the roles to use any of the situations.
- Make up other situations based on decisions faced by the children in your group.
- For a large group: Add spokespersons with other opinions to the debate.



Adaptations

To focus on questions of who gets to vote, you can assign some alternate roles such as those below. Read these out at the beginning of the simulation and ask the children to debate whether these children should have a vote. This decision itself might be the basis of a decision by vote.

Optional Roles

- You are six years old and in the first grade. You can't read yet and don't know much about the group. Should you have a vote?
- You are thirteen but in the fifth class because you have a learning disability. Should you have a vote?
- You have just moved to this community and don't really know anyone yet. Should you have a vote?
- You are a bully. You push younger children around outside and encourage your friends to join you in calling some people nasty names. Should you have a vote?

HANDOUT: SITUATION SHEET IN SESSION 1

Situation A:

Your school has been invited to send someone to represent the school in a city-wide celebration of International Children's Day at the City Hall. The choice is up to the children. There are 500 students. How will you choose a representative democratically?

Situation B:

Your sports club needs a president. You have sixty members. How will you decide democratically who the president should be? The students in your school will choose which drawings in an art contest get first, second and third prize. There were 50 drawings entered in the contest. There are 300 children in the school. How will you decide the winners democratically?

Situation D:

Students in your school are debating whether children should be allowed to bring mobile phones to school. Some want to do this. Others think it's distracting and unfair to children who don't own them. The principal of the school says that the children should be allowed to decide themselves. There are 350 children in the school. How can you do this democratically?

Situation E:

Your group has been given a gift of about 500 euros. Your group leader says that the group itself should decide how to spend it. Some children want to have a party with nice food. Some want to go on a field trip. Some want to buy new games and art supplies. One person wants to put it aside for emergencies. Another wants to buy an electric keyboard. There are 30 children in your group. How will you decide democratically how to use the money?

Some things to consider:

- How will you decide what to vote on? Will you have nominations? If so, how?
- How many candidates will you have? Should the number be limited?
- How will everyone know who or what they are voting for? Will you ask people to make campaign speeches or have debates?
- How will people vote? Will it be secret?
- How will you decide who wins?
- What if there is only a tiny difference in the number of votes between two candidates? Will you have a run-off election? Should a winner need a certain proportion of the votes (e.g. more than 50%)?



HANDOUT: SITUATION SHEET IN SESSION 2

Roles for Mock Voting on Situation E

You are the **Election Manager**. You organize the debates, explain what it takes for a decision to win and help to count the votes. If there is a run-off, you organize that as well.

You are the **Voting Official**. You make the ballot, organize the voting, count the votes and announce the results. If there is a run-off, you organize the ballot and voting.

You are a **spokesperson** for one point of view. You think the money should be spent on a big party. Give some reasons.

You are a **spokesperson** for one point of view. You think the money should be spent on new games and equipment. Give some reasons.

You are a **spokesperson** for one point of view. You think the money should be spent on a wonderful trip for all the children. Give some reasons.

