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Caution: An election at school can be nothing more than a popularity contest in which students are elected on the most irrelevant criteria—gender, physical appearance, and athletic ability, for example. You can point out this problem to students and encourage them to identify relevant criteria for doing the job. “What knowledge or skills will our delegate to the student advisory council need?” Or, “Will the chairperson of our newsletter committee need any special skills?” Or, “We need one of us to feed our rabbit for the week. What will that person need to know and do?” Listen carefully as students respond, and you will learn how they are thinking about the job to be done. Ask a fast writer to record the list on the board. Help students prioritize items on the list. Then hold an election.

Hold Mock Elections

Every four years in November is a presidential election; every two years is a congressional election. City, county, state, and school district elections often coincide with these, but sometimes are held at other times. Each election is an opportunity to hold a mock election.

A mock election is and is not a real election. It is not an actual election because one need not be a citizen or a registered voter or at least 18 years of age to participate, and the votes cast in mock elections do not actually elect anybody. It is a real election, however, because voting does occur, and so do all the learning activities that lead up to and prepare children for the voting; namely, deliberation, press conferences, speech writing, research on candidate positions, and so forth.

Tennessee teacher Carole Hamilton Cobb routinely conducts mock elections with her kindergarten children. They vote in local and presidential elections. But first they learn about the candidates and discuss some of the issues. Then they register to vote and receive a voter registration card, which they take to the polling place (in the hallway) on voting day. Meanwhile, they help make polling booths from refrigerator boxes, such as the one shown in the photo.

Preparing for an Election

All sorts of learning activities help prepare children for an election, real or mock. Here are several.

Mock press conferences. Mock press conferences provide terrific opportunities for role-playing and learning about elections. A committee can be formed to plan a press conference, gather information, and assign the roles (candidates, press, moderator, audience). Every student in class should have a role. Many can be members of the press—reporters representing television stations and newspapers. Tape recordings of press conferences can be made from television news programs and shown to students to give them a clearer idea of the real thing.

Guest speakers. Invite members of the press to share information and personal experiences on covering elections and campaigns and participating in press conferences.

Speech competitions. Here is another good opportunity to infuse language arts instruction. Help students study the general concept of speech writing and speech giving with some famous examples (e.g., Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death”; Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream”; Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?”; and Abraham Lincoln’s



When children participate in mock or real elections, it is best to assure a secret ballot. Here, a refrigerator box is transformed into a polling booth. (Photo courtesy of Carol Hamilton Cobb.)

Gettysburg Address). Some will be found on video- and audiotapes and CDs. These speeches can be read aloud then dramatized by the class. Next, help students form the more specific concept of campaign speeches. These examples can be drawn from the speeches reprinted in the newspaper and seen on television. With this background knowledge, students are ready for a speech-writing competition of their own. Attend to these things: choose judges, determine criteria for judging speeches, select topics, establish due dates and length (e.g., five minutes), decide on location and time, invite an audience, and prepare the audience.

Deliberation. Elections—real and mock—are another opportunity for students to practice the democratic skill of deliberating controversial issues with a diverse group of citizens. Prior to an election, the issues should be identified, studied, and thoroughly deliberated. Here is a good opportunity to teach newspaper-reading skills (using the directory to find

the editorials, skimming the letters to the editor, or interpreting political cartoons), to help students form the attitude that voting is one's duty, and to show students that voting should always be informed voting.

In addition to the specific issues of the election, general voting issues can be discussed:

- What difference does one vote make?
- Are secret ballots really necessary?
- Should voting be required or voluntary?
- Should the voting age be lowered? Raised?

Field trips. Visit a city council meeting, a naturalization ceremony, or a polling place. (Advice on conducting a field trip can be found in Chapter 10, "Resources.")

Issues-finding discussions. Before the election or press conference, the teacher can lead the class in several issues-finding discussions. The purposes of such discussions are to

- Help children develop the concept of a *public issue*—a controversial, shared problem on which reasonable people have different positions but must nevertheless reach a decision that will be binding on all. Public issues can be classroom, school, local, national, or world issues.
- Assess what the children perceive to be the public issues that candidates should be addressing (drugs, crime, poverty, homelessness, parks and recreation facilities, global warming, etc.).
- Decide what issues should be included in deliberative forums, covered in press conferences (the issues about which candidates should and will be questioned), and voted on in the election. In preparing for a press conference, the teacher might ask: "What should the members of the press ask our candidates about?" Students can be prompted with reminders of local issues, for example: "Several of you have been concerned about the homeless people you see lying on streets. Do you want to ask the candidates for their ideas about that?" Or "The city council is trying to decide where to put the new park. Shall we ask the council candidates about that?" And "On what other public issues do you want to know their positions?"

Once issues have been identified, a data-retrieval chart such as the one shown in Figure 3-6 can be used during and after the press conference to help organize and record candidates' positions on the issues.

Visiting candidate websites. Candidates in national elections now typically have websites. Create a data-retrieval chart with students, similar to the one in Figure 3-6, to help them organize the information they collect from several candidates' web pages.

Bulletin boards. Fill the board with candidates' photos, issues, speeches, bumper stickers and campaign buttons, yard signs, editorials, and political cartoons—created by students and found in the newspaper, at party headquarters, and elsewhere.

Writing the classroom newsletter. So much reading and writing goes on in conducting an election, whether real or mock, it would be a shame for it not to be featured in a special election day issue of the classroom newsletter.

FIGURE 3-6 Comparing candidates on the issues.

	Public issue # 1 Location of new park	Public Issue # 2 Park play equipment	Public Issue # 3 Regulating dogs in the park
Candidate #1			
Candidate #2			

Newspapers in the classroom. Children can learn a good deal about the organization and contents of daily newspapers during mock elections that coincide with actual national or local elections. Here is the teachable moment for distinguishing between news stories, editorials, Op-Ed (opposite the editorial) page columns, and letters to the editor, and between the literary genres of narrative (sometimes news stories are in narrative form), exposition (laying out the facts of the matter), and persuasive argument (in editorials and letters). Can your students find the lead in a news story? Children can be assigned to follow the press coverage of different candidates and to watch for the day when the city newspapers endorse one candidate over another and advise readers on how to vote on ballot initiatives. Call your local newspaper to find out about the Newspapers in Education program.

Visiting voting websites.

- Kids Voting USA is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to securing democracy for the future by involving youth in the election process today. Click on "Education" and examine the voting-related activities for each grade level.
- At Project Vote Smart, hundreds of volunteers and student interns have labored "to provide their fellow citizens with the most crucial tool to citizens in a democracy: abundant, relevant information on those who govern us, or wish to replace those who already do." Students can enter their home zip code and find their elected representatives. There are engaging lesson plans and many links to other good voter-education resources.

Link to these voting websites on the companion website at www.prenhall.com/parker.

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND ACTION

The real test of a social studies program comes in the out-of-school lives of children. If the school has provided new insights, improved skills, and increased civic-mindedness, such learning should be apparent in students' out-of-school behavior now as children and later as adults. One way to help bridge citizenship learning in school with citizenship experiences in the community and the world is through community-service activities.

Participation can be social or political in nature. If children are concerned with vandalism of school property, for example, they might volunteer to clean up and repair some of