



Elections Then and Now

Introduction

Since the formation of the United States over 200 years ago, laws governing elections have changed significantly. Procedures have been updated to improve accuracy and fairness, and legislation has been passed to enfranchise most adult American citizens. This lesson uses images from the eighteenth century and today to illustrate how elections have evolved.

Materials

- Image: *The Polling*
- Image: Present-Day Voters (provided by teacher)
- Reference: Image Explanations
- Handout: 18th-Century Election Process
- Handout: Present-Day Presidential Election Process
- Handout: Elections Then and Now

Strategy

1. Tell students they will be looking at one image of voting in the eighteenth century and another image of present-day voting. Have students work together in small groups to analyze the two images: *The Polling* and the present-day photo of a polling place. Each group should complete a copy of the "Elections Then and Now" handout with things they notice about each image.
2. After five to ten minutes, have each group tell the class about the entries on their charts. Be sure students notice that all the voters in *The Polling* are white men who appear by their clothing to be wealthy, and the voters in the present-day photo are men and women of different races and appear to be of different social groups. They should notice the voters in *The Polling* are giving their votes orally by swearing their identity on the Bible. The candidates are at the polling place listening to the voters, while present-day voters cast their votes secretly. Add any more information from the image explanations that you want your students to know.

3. Have each group read and analyze the handout titled "18th-Century Election Process." Have them add information to their "Elections Then and Now" charts in the appropriate place. Introduce these vocabulary words and definitions before the groups read the handout:

writ: a formal legal document ordering an action

parish: a district of local colonial government often the same as the church parish

registered: officially recorded

freeholder: a person who owns land

4. Give each group a copy of the handout titled "Present-Day Presidential Election Process." Introduce these vocabulary words and definitions before the groups read the handout:

polls: place where votes are cast

ballot: ticket or paper by which a vote is registered

carrel: a small enclosed space

Extension

- Have students brainstorm ideas to put in a letter they might write to Thomas Jefferson explaining how the voting process has changed since colonial times. Have students write their letter to Thomas Jefferson using their ideas from their group's charts and class discussion.
- Have one half of the small groups create brief skits of the 18th-century election process and the other half create skits of the present-day election process.
- For extra credit, have students accompany an adult to the polls on election day and write a short report about their experience.

This lesson was written by Gloria Moeller, elementary school teacher, Lakeside, CA, for the September 2004 *Teacher Gazette*.

Colonial Williamsburg
TEACHER  GAZETTE.
Open to ALL PARTIES, but Influenced by NONE.

The Polling



The Polling. Plate III, by William Hogarth (London, 1758). The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

This eighteenth-century print shows a polling booth on Election Day. The two candidates sit on chairs at the back of the polling booth, one scratching his head while the other looks over the crowd. One of the men in the booth has drawn a caricature of the candidate closest to him. The pleased expression on the candidate's face suggests that he is winning. Another man in the booth has fallen asleep.

The first voter is an old soldier who has lost both arms and a leg. Therefore, the soldier takes the oath with his hook. The clerk finds this act amusing, but the nearby lawyers argue whether the oath is valid if an actual hand has not been used. Near the old soldier is a simpleton, who is being coached by a man wearing restraints on his legs. Behind him are a dying man, a blind man, and a man with crutches. The implication is that candidates who need votes will bring anyone in to vote.

In the background is a coach that is about to overturn because the coachman and footman are playing cards. Britannia, the passenger, cannot get their attention to prevent ruin. Hogarth's print serves as a warning to Great Britain that bribery and election stunts are distracting the nation from its important duties.

Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth's Graphic Works, I* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 233–234. Published in the September 2004 *Teacher Gazette*.

Present-Day Voters



Image Explanations

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Present-Day Voters

What do you notice about the people in line? These people are waiting to sign in to vote. Their signature shows only that they voted, not whom they will be voting for. After signing in, the voters will go into the private voting booths, or carrels, and cast their votes secretly.

18th-Century Election Process

1. The royal governor issued a writ ordering an election.
2. The county sheriffs received the election writ. Then the county sheriffs chose the date (within 6-8 weeks) and the place for holding the election. Usually this was a court day and was most often held in only one place in the county, the county courthouse.
3. The sheriffs gave this writ, time, date, and place for the election to the parish ministers. The ministers would announce this information every Sunday at the end of the services.
4. On Election Day, the sheriff sat behind a long table and the candidates sat at the other end of the table. A clerk for each candidate was also seated at the table.
5. The sheriff opened the election by reading the writ.
6. Voters then formed a line and presented themselves one at a time to the sheriff. Voters were not registered, but the sheriff could refuse to allow a person to vote.
7. As each freeholder came before the sheriff, his name was called out and he was asked to name the candidate for whom he was voting. The freeholder stated his choice out loud. The clerk for that candidate wrote down the voter's name in his candidate's column. It was easy to see throughout the day which candidate was ahead by looking over the clerk's shoulder.

Present-Day Presidential Election Process

1. Presidential elections are always held on the first Tuesday of November in every year divisible by the number 4 (such as 1996, 2000, 2004.)
2. Voters register to vote before Election Day. The only requirements to be a voter are to be a resident of the town where one is voting and be at least 18 years of age.
3. On Election Day voters go to a poll close to their home.
4. Trained volunteer poll workers work at the polls on Election Day.
5. Voters sign their name in the voter registration book indicating that they are voting that day at that polling place.
6. A poll worker then gives the voter a ballot to take to a private carrel or booth where the voter selects the candidate of their choice silently and privately.
7. Candidates may come to the polling place to cast their vote but they may not campaign at the polling place.

Elections Then and Now

Information from Images	18th-Century	Present-Day
Information from Handouts	18th-Century	Present-Day