

*Assessing Electoral Systems:
Opportunities for Political Education and Active Citizenship*

**Lesson Aids for Teaching Electoral Systems
and the work of the
B.C. Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform**

Socials 11 / Civic Studies 11

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Preface

Why teach electoral systems and the work of the B.C. Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform?

One of the most pressing issues facing Canada's democracy is the problem of declining voter turnout. The generation least likely to vote has been, for some time, youth aged 18 – 24. In the last federal election, only approximately 25% of eligible youth in this age group voted. While youth have always voted in smaller numbers than older generations, Elections Canada studies have found that young Canadians are significantly less likely to start voting in their late twenties or thirties than older generations were. (See www.elections.ca for full statistics)

While we might assume that our youth are cynical or disillusioned, Elections Canada's survey of non-voters found that a more common reason for disengagement is lack of political knowledge. Canadian academic Henry Milner has made similar arguments, linking voter turnout with the level of "civic literacy" of the population.

We currently have a great opportunity to engage Social Studies students in a real public policy debate – whether or not to change B.C.'s electoral system. The work of the B.C. Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform is historic in that it is the first time in the world that such authority to recommend changes to an electoral system has been given to randomly chosen average citizens. This is a discussion that is not limited to British Columbia – it seems to be gaining momentum in other provinces and even on the federal scene. By having our students actively involve themselves in the debate, they will not only improve their civic literacy and sense of connection to the political process, they can actually help influence the outcome of this process. While teaching electoral systems sounds complex at first, I have found that students find it engaging and are quite able to understand the complexities of the various systems.

The following lesson aid includes both classroom and extension activities and a Model Citizens' Assembly. The Model Citizens' Assembly is based on a highly successful student assembly that Rockridge Secondary School in West Vancouver held in April, 2004.

If you have any questions in the use of this lesson aids package, please contact Paula Waatainen at Rockridge School. paulaw@sd45.bc.ca or (604) 981 – 1300.

This lesson aids package would not have been possible without the tremendous support of the staff and members of the B.C. Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. Particular thanks to Dr. Ken Carty, Susanna Haas, Marilyn Jacobsen and Catherine Hirbour.

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Electoral Reform Lesson Aids

**Course and Level: Social Studies 11
Civic Studies 11**

Relationship to Prescribed Learning Outcomes:

Social Studies 11

Political Issues I

- Explain Canada's political system and contrast it with other political systems

Skills and Processes I

- Demonstrate the ability to think critically, including the ability to:
 - define an issue or problem
 - develop a hypothesis and supporting arguments
- Develop and express appropriate responses to issues or problems
- Develop, explain and define a position on an issue and explain how to put the ideas into action

Skills and Processes II

- Demonstrate skills associated with active citizenship, including the ability to:
 - collaborate and consult with others
 - respect and promote respect for the contributions of other team members
 - interact confidently

Civic Studies 11

- t.b.a. when PLO is published – Fall 2004

SECTION ONE: CLASSROOM LESSONS

Lesson One

Introducing Students to our Current Electoral System and a few Alternatives

Objectives:

- students will understand the general workings of our current “first past the post” electoral system and its benefits and drawbacks
- students will learn basic frameworks of major alternative electoral systems and their benefits and drawbacks
- students will practice skills in analyzing data from charts and graphs
- students will become more interested in how elections work and the process of doing a “check-up” on our electoral system.

Lesson Duration: approximately 75 to 90 minutes (may be split over 2 classes)

Target classes:

- Socials 11 or Civic Studies 11 classes
- Ideally, classes should have already covered political ideologies, political parties, the parliamentary process and the role of MPs / MLAs in the parliamentary system in Canada.

Materials Needed:

- electoral map of British Columbia (available from www.elections.bc.ca) or electoral map of Canada (www.elections.ca) (Optional)
- election results statistics (photocopied for students or onto overhead film) see Appendix
 - 1996 and 2001 B.C. election results
 - Summary of results by Electoral District and candidate
 - Other elections data from past elections is easily accessible from Elections B.C. and Elections Canada websites.
- sample ballots photocopied for each student
- copies of Student Handout #1 for each student in the class
- Citizens Assembly’ Fact Sheets 1 - 14 as teacher resources for discussion (available on citizens assembly website / appendix)

Introduction:

- Decide whether you are going to focus on the B.C. or federal election statistics. With the work of the Citizens Assembly and the upcoming May 2005 election, the B.C. system is ideal for the 2004 / 2005 school year. In later years, federal statistics or a direct comparison between the federal system and a potential reformed B.C. system would perhaps be more current. The rest of this lesson plan will focus on the starting place of the current B.C. system.
- Begin with a discussion of what constitutes “winning” in an election. How do they think someone wins an election? In our system, it’s the number of contests won as opposed to the number of individual votes won. Dr. Ken Carty uses the analogy of the Stanley Cup. A team wins the Stanley Cup based on the number of games they win, not the number of goals that they score. Our plurality system is like the Stanley Cup. Proportional Representation would be like winning based on total numbers of goals scored.
- Now elicit from students the names of major or minor political parties that run for office in B.C. elections. See Elections B.C. website for a list of registered parties.

Our current system: First Past the Post (Plurality)

1. Show electoral map of B.C. and briefly explain that the province has 79 single member constituencies that each send an M.L.A. to the legislature in Victoria.
2. Have students look at related sample ballot and elicit from them the method currently used for filling out the ballot. Students should then “vote” on their ballots with an X next to one name on the ballot.
3. Distribute the provincial election results from 1996 to 2001 and the summary of electoral results by party.
4. Have students work independently or in groups to use the data to complete questions on Student Handout #1. These questions will require students to analyze the data and to begin to make judgements about the benefits and drawbacks of the current system.
5. Discuss the answers with the students. What are their initial reactions to the election results that they analyzed? Can they identify reasons that many British Columbians and other Canadians have called for reform of the system?
6. Fill in the benefits and drawbacks section together. Begin by eliciting from students what they have inferred from reading the data. Fill in other factors using Citizens’ Assembly fact sheets or your own reading as a guide.

Majority Systems

1. Explain the basic premise of the majority system – that a local candidate needs more than 50% of the vote to be elected in a constituency
2. Take students through an example of how a simple alternative vote system works. Explain that British Columbia used the AV system briefly in the early 1950s. Use overheads (or board / powerpoint) to take students through this scenario. There are four candidates running for office in riding X. Use names of the students in the class or popular actors or musicians as candidate names.

Andersen, Stefan
Filsoof, Kiana
Lee, Chris
O’Leary, Kate

Have students fill out appropriate sample ballot, indicating preferences 1,2,3,4 on the ballot

1. Show students the results of the first count:

Andersen, Stefan	14,000
Filsoof, Kiana	6,200
Lee, Chris	3,800
O’Leary, Kate	10,000

Total ballots cast 34,000

How many votes are needed to win?

(17,001)

Did anyone win? (No)

Who do you expect to win?

What happens now?

(lowest person is dropped off ballot and those particular ballots are re-examined. The second choices of Chris Lee’s voters are now re-distributed)

3. Results of 2nd Count – now show these to students

Andersen, Stefan	14,000 (+200) =	14,200
Filsoof, Kiana	6,200 (+520) =	6,720

O’Leary, Kate 10,000 (+3080) = **13,080**

Did anyone win? No
Who do you expect to win?

What happens now? (Kiana Filsoof is dropped off and her ballots are re-examined for second choices)

4. Results of 3rd count

Andersen, Stefan 14,200 (+2,000) = **16,200**

O’Leary, Kate 13,080 (+4,720) = **17,800**

Did anyone win? (Yes, Kate O’Leary)
Who would have won if this were a plurality, first past the post system?
(Stefan Andersen)

Now take students through the benefits and drawbacks. Begin by eliciting and then fill in extra points from fact sheets.

*** Do you have a big screen and the technology to show a clip from a website in the classroom? If so, you can show students a neat animated simulation of plurality and majority ballots on an Australian website. (It also does PR, but a more complicated version than party list.)** <http://www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash/htm>

3. Proportional Representation

1. Explain the basic premise of this system – that voters cast a ballot for a political party as opposed to a local representative. In the purest form of this model, a voter will choose only a party on their election ballot. The proportion of popular vote received by the party will translate into the proportion of seats granted to that party.

Who will sit in parliament as elected representatives? There are a few different models for this decision, based on different electoral systems around the world. One of the most common and most straight forward models is the party list system. Parties publish a list of candidates in priority order. If a party wins 10 seats through this system, the first 10 names on the list will be elected. In this way, the party can prioritize its top officials or can build a list that is gender balanced or has other built in features. **If desired, see other models for proportional representation electoral systems in “fact sheets”.**

(There are many variations of proportional representation systems, including PR by single transferable vote. (S.T.V.) PR by STV is used in a number of the world’s democracies, but is a little too complex to discuss with students in the

time available. If the Citizens Assembly recommends such a system, a discussion of it should be included in your lesson. See Fact Sheets for description.)

Most countries have built in a minimum “threshold” that parties have to reach before getting any seats. That threshold can range from 2% to 5% generally.

2. Have students cast a vote on the sample ballot provided.
3. Now have students go back to their student worksheets and to the 1996 and 2001 election results. Have them calculate the approximate number of seats that each party would have won, keeping in mind a 3% threshold.
4. Work through the benefits and drawbacks again.

5. Mixed System

Explain briefly that it is very common these days for countries to adopt systems that are mixed.

Briefly explain the popular “Mixed Member Proportional” (MMP) system. Again, there are many specific models used around the world. (See Fact Sheets for models)

One model of the M.M.P. electoral system would see voters filling out 2 ballots – one for a local representative and one for a party. Roughly half of the seats in a legislature are assigned to local representatives, elected through plurality or majority voting. The other half are assigned to parties based on the general concept of proportional representation.

Show students the sample ballot for an MMP system.

If time permits, you can take students through different models of mixed electoral systems.

Lesson Two – What system do you want?

Objectives:

1. Students will review and strengthen their understanding of electoral systems.
2. Students will work co-operatively to address a specific problem (should we reform our electoral system and if so what model should we embrace?)
3. Students will formulate a solution to the problem or issue and will develop and articulate arguments in favour of their solution.

Duration: 45 to 60 minutes

Introduction:

Introduce the work of the Citizens' Assembly either verbally or by having student read a description of its mandate.

Main Lesson:

1. Have students work independently to fill out Student Handout #2 “What do you want your electoral system to do?” This worksheet will prod students to begin to attach personal values to different aspects of electoral systems and to prioritize what issues are personally most important to them.
2. Break into small groups to do the following:
 - a. Briefly discuss student responses and priorities. Groups should be instructed to go around the circle having each student contribute their comments.
 - b. As a group, fill out “Group Response Sheet” which asks students to try to attach their values to specific electoral systems and their benefits and drawbacks.
 - c. Debrief as a large group if time permits
3. Each student should then work silently for five minutes to articulate what electoral system best suits what they are personally looking for, and what system would be best for the province. They should write down something like the following:

Type of system:

Arguments to support this system:

2nd choice alternative:

4. Consensus building activity

Now instruct students to get up and move around the class looking for like-minded students. The object is to build as much consensus as possible within large groups – without individuals giving up aspects of an electoral system that are fundamentally important to them.

This may seem a little chaotic (or quiet?) at first. Hopefully after a minute or two, students will begin to find each other and form larger and larger groups consolidated around a particular system.

Alternative – If this type of activity seems too potentially divisive (or noisy!), try the following. Collect individual reflections from students and use them to divide the students into small groups that reflect a diversity of opinion as opposed to like-mindedness. Challenge the students to work from this position of divergent viewpoints to find common ground. Small groups can then report out their results.

5. Conclusion

- Have consolidated groups write down their proposal(s) to submit to you.
- Debrief

Lesson Two (alternative)

To be used December 2004 – May 2005 if the B.C. Citizens' Assembly recommends a change to the B.C. electoral system, resulting in a referendum on May 17, 2005

Lesson

1. Introduce work of Citizens' Assembly
2. Student handout #2 filled out individually
3. Distribute a summary of the recommendation of the Citizens' Assembly to change our system to another model. Review proposed system as a group
4. Divide class into small groups. Have groups go through each opinion of a system on the worksheet to figure out whether it is best reflected in current or proposed systems.
5. Students should individually reflect on whether current or proposed system best suits their stated priorities.
6. Class Debate
 - Divide class in half. Allow students several minutes to prepare to debate – one side supporting the current system and the other side supporting the proposed system.
 - Chair debate, alternating arguments from one side of class to the other
7. Evaluation
 - Assign participation marks for debate and / or class discussion
 - Assign a take home short essay arguing one system or the other. Alternatively, go to lesson 3.

Lesson Three – Make your Voice Heard

Objectives:

1. Increase student sense of political efficacy, or sense that they can have an influence on the political system.
2. Improve student awareness of methods available to communicate their policy ideas.
3. Students will improve skills in making a written argument.

Introduction: Why does youth participation matter?

- show statistics of declining overall and youth voter turnout in federal elections
- elicit student ideas of why youth voter turnout is low (approximately 25% of 18 – 24 year olds vote)
- one institutional problem seems to be that many youth aren't even on the voters list. A recent Elections B.C. study found that only 40% of youth voters are on the federal voters list at election time and only 21% of youth are on the Elections B.C. list.
www.elections.bc.ca/rpt/qualityaudit/pdf
- elicit ideas why youth participation is valuable

Lesson: Communicating preferences for electoral reform

1. Elicit student ideas of how they could communicate their electoral system preferences
 - Until October, 2004 – submit their opinion to www.citizensassembly.bc.ca
 - Dec 2004 – May 2005 – participate in any public debate forum happening at that time in response to Citizens' Assembly Report and potential referendum
 - letters to editor
 - write to Elections Canada or Elections B.C.
 - news release to local paper
 - post to on-line media bulletin boards
 - start a blog (ie. www.thetyee.ca/BC+Blogs)
2. Large or small group discussion – do they have any other ideas for improving youth voter turnout and strategies for specifically addressing the institutional problem of youth exclusion from the voters list?
 - brainstorm ideas
 - to whom would they recommend these ideas or how could they put these ideas into practice?

Evaluation: Communicating Ideas

Based on this brainstorming, now you can allow students to plan either an individual written assignment or a group or individual active citizenship assignment as a summative activity. The topic of this assignment could be electoral systems and/or youth voter participation. Hopefully many of the students can come up with their own ideas. Here are a few that they might consider.

Written: Submission to Citizens' Assembly of B.C.

- Letter to the editor of a local or major paper
- Essay (not ideal if it doesn't go anywhere....)
- Article for school or community paper
- Letter to Elections Canada
- Letter to MLA / MP

Active Citizenship:

- Create video to send to Elections Canada or Elections B.C. on importance of voting
- Plan learning experience for the school such as a forum, all candidates meeting, election expo etc.
- Participate in any campaigning that might be happening in the spring of 2005 if the report of the Citizens Assembly results in a referendum for May 17, 2005.
- Contact a local radio station and produce a Public Service Announcement

SECTION TWO

School Wide or District Wide Citizens' Assembly

Brief Description:

This activity is both a simulation and an opportunity for active citizenship. A group of grade 11 (and/or grade 12) students will come together for a morning of intensive study of electoral systems with the goal of producing a proposal for electoral reform by the end of the session. This activity models, on a basic level, the work of the Citizens Assembly of B.C.

Time Required:

- a few weeks for planning
- approximately 3.5 hours to run the assembly

Preparation for the event:

1. Invite other teachers in your school and / or district to participate and help plan the event. Rockridge Secondary's assembly in April, 2004, involved all Social Studies 11, History 12 and Geography 12 classes in the school.
2. Book your school library, theatre or other space for the plenary sessions. Plan spaces for breakout discussion sessions. (Rockridge School made use of the library and nearby conference rooms.) Inform staff of the date, as students will need to be missing class time.
3. Consider inviting a member of the Citizens Assembly or your local M.L.A. to speak at the student assembly.
4. Decide how much preparation students will have to do before the assembly. In the model listed below, students have arrived with little understanding of electoral systems. If you do more preparatory work across all participating classes, you can reduce the importance and length of the opening lecture session.
5. Choose facilitators for discussion groups and chairs for large group discussion.
6. Create your assembly. (See discussion below) Once you have a list of participating students, divide students into effective discussion groups with a mix of leaders and quieter students.
7. Prepare nametags for students with coloured dots to indicate which discussion group they will be assigned to.
8. Prepare and distribute permission slips for students to miss classes.
9. Photocopy a series of student handouts for each participant. Handouts should include copies of sample ballots, Fact Sheet #7 and #13, "British Columbia's Electoral System", and, if desired, note sheets from the Rockridge powerpoint presentation by Dr. Ken Carty.
10. Prepare packages of materials for each group discussion facilitator including chart paper and markers, photocopied report overhead and pens, masking tape etc.
11. Prepare a schedule which best fits your daily timetable. See sample timetable below.

Sample timetable – Citizens’ Assembly

- 8:30 – 8:40 Students arrive / find nametags / pick up schedules, handouts etc.
- 8:40 – 9:30 Opening comments and introductions. General lecture on major families of electoral systems. Use guidelines from classroom lesson one to describe major systems.
- 9:30 - 9:45 Refreshment break
- 9:45 – 11:00 Small group sessions.
- 11:00 – 11:15 Refreshment break
- 11:15 – 11:30 Group reports on overhead
- 11:30 – 12:00 Consensus building – voting on components of a proposal.

Creating your assembly from a large body of students:

Rockridge Secondary’s assembly consisted of just under sixty students from grades 11 and 12. Sixty seems to be the maximum number of students for this sort of simulation. (Although the B.C. Citizens Assembly has 160 members!)

Option A – Modelling the Citizens’ Assembly of B.C. process (class reps)

- Explain the work of the Citizens’ Assembly of B.C. and the school model assembly to each participating class. See handouts...
- Distribute slips of paper to each student (Appendix F) and have them secretly indicate whether or not they will agree to participate.
- Take in forms and pull out “yes” responses. Divide into 2 piles for male and female students. Draw 1 (or 2 or more?) names from each pile. These individuals will be class representatives at the assembly.
- This process most closely models the “real” process and will result in a gender balance and a reasonable cross section of students without involving anyone against their will. It may mean, however, that strong, interested students are left out.
- At Rockridge we began with this model and then allowed a handful of particularly keen extra students to participate as well.

Option B – Volunteers

- Open the assembly to any interested students from participating classes (to your maximum capacity)

Option C - Full Participation by classes

- An assembly involving a few full socials classes would allow everyone in those classes this learning opportunity.
- This would be more difficult and unwieldy, however, in terms of the number or size of discussion groups and closing debates.
- Some students may have little interest in missing other classes for this sort of discussion.

Teaching electoral reform to the Model Citizens' Assembly (Opening Session)

Option A: Stand Alone Assembly

- This is the option that requires the most expertise by organizing teachers, but the least preparatory work for students.
- Students can arrive at the assembly with little or no understanding of electoral systems.
- The opening plenary will act as a lecture session on the major families of electoral systems plus their benefits and drawbacks. The teacher presenting the lecture will take students through the current “first past the post” plurality system and the major other families of electoral systems. Use classroom lesson one or Dr. Carty’s powerpoint notes as a guide to format for the lecture. Fact sheet #7 might provide a useful summary.

Option B: Summative Activity

- An alternative to the “stand alone” simulation described above is an assembly made up of students who have already studied electoral systems and reform options in class or through individual assignments.
- In this case, you begin with a much shortened opening session – perhaps just a brief review, before moving into breakout groups.

Group Breakout Sessions

- Students should be divided into breakout groups of approximately 10 students
- A facilitator will lead students through the process of considering what concepts they value in an electoral system and how those values relate to the different electoral systems. A recorder should be appointed to keep note of major points on poster paper and to fill out the overhead report form.

- Facilitators can be teachers or particularly confident or capable students who have done work to prepare to facilitate. Alternatively, you can consider inviting community members to the school who might be helpful (post-secondary political science students etc.)
- Facilitators might begin by having each student fill out a copy of “Student Worksheet #2.
- They could then have students briefly comment on the priorities that they identified.
- The facilitator can then lead the group through the different options for electoral systems by discussing the following questions:
 - a. **Which systems are more democratic? Why?**
 - b. **Which system(s) would produce a Legislative Assembly most reflective of diversity in society? Why?**
 - c. **How important is local representation? Why?**
 - d. **Which system would provide the “best government”? Why?**
 - e. **Which system would be the best for improving voter turnout, particularly for youth?**
 - f. **What other ideas do you have for promoting youth involvement?**

The facilitator can then ask group members to suggest an electoral system for B.C., with a rationale. Whichever option results in the best consensus should then be recorded on overhead film. Any specific proposals for engaging young adults in the political / democratic process should also be recorded.

The group should then choose one student to report out to the large group session.

Plenary Session – Large Group

- This plenary session is an opportunity for students to report out from small groups and to attempt to find consensus across the large group.
- The session will open with representatives from each group briefly explaining their group’s proposal and its rationale, using the overhead as a visual tool. A recorder should keep track of the group proposals on chart paper.
- Open discussion – the chair can then open the floor for 5 minutes or so for general comments or arguments.
- During this time the chair will have to look carefully at proposals put forward by different groups.... Is there a clear division between two major families of electoral systems? Is

there a stronger movement in one direction? Is it all over the place?

- If there is consensus beginning in one or two directions, the chair can identify the trend(s) and can begin to pull out the issues for voting.
 - I.e. If one trend is toward proportional representation, begin by noting a potential trend and calling for discussion on whether the system should have some degree of p.r. or not.
 - If p.r is agreed to, deal next with whether it should be pure or as part of a mixed system, or whether or not a minimum threshold should be used.

Suggestions for discussion and voting:

- jot down a specific question. “Should there be local representatives” and announce you are opening the floor on that issue.
- Ask people wanting to argue “yes” to raise their right hands and those wanting to argue “no” to raise their left hands. Alternate positions.
- Cut off debate when you feel key arguments have been made sufficiently on both sides.
- Call for a vote – all in favour, all against.

If consensus building seems too challenging to chair or too hard to come by, you can choose to end by having students speak in a more general discussion in favour or against proposals made by the groups and then have them vote with ballots.