Encouraging Students to Participate in the Political Process

C. Frederick Risinger

It was the election of 1972, the first election year where all 18- to 21-year-olds could vote. The Vietnam War provided the rationale and impetus for the 26th Amendment—with the slogan, “Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote.” It was a great year to be teaching U.S. government to high school seniors, many of who would be 18 by Election Day.

I drove down to Wheaton, Illinois, the county seat, and was sworn in as a “deputy voting registrar.” I took a big box of voting registration materials back with me. For the next several weeks, I set up a table in the cafeteria/study hall a couple of days each week and registered voters. Most were students, but I registered teachers, cooks, custodians, and secretaries, too. By the time the registration period ended for that year, I had registered more than 300 new voters. (As I recall, I got paid a quarter for every completed registration.) On election night, Rich Canova, my team-teaching mate, had an all-night election party in the cafeteria for any students who wanted to bring a sleeping bag. We had television sets throughout the room; we ordered dozens of pizzas and cases of pop. The students had already made their election predictions for national and key state races throughout the nation. They knew the issues and the candidates and were enthusiastic throughout the early evening hours. Richard Nixon’s pummeling of George McGovern took away the suspense, but it was a great evening.

Just about 50 percent of the 18- to 24-year-olds voted in that election. That figure has declined every election year (with the exception of 1992) since that time. The turnout as a percentage of all eligible voters in 1992 and 1996 was lower than any year since 1824 and 1924—only 49 percent in 1996. But, among young (18 to 24) voters, the participation rate was even more dismal—only 37 percent in 1992 and 29 percent in 1996. Since these statistics are derived from self-reporting, many experts think the voting data are even lower— the National Association of Secretaries of State has reported that the 18 to 24 voting participation rate in the 2000 election was only 23 percent.

How can a participatory democracy survive when its citizens won’t participate? Research by the Pew Charitable Trusts suggests that young Americans feel ignored by candidates, have lost faith in the political system, and believe that it makes no difference what party or person is in power. For an excellent set of resources and research data on participation in the civic process and voting by young people, go to www.youthvote.org/news/aug03/081103-series pew.htm. And, it’s not just voting behavior that is a concern; it’s the broader role of citizen that is being rejected by young people.

One Pew report begins with this sobering statement: “When they are needed more than ever, young Americans are disconnecting from public life at an alarming pace.”

Yet, when we look at the NCSS website, the first sentence in our statement of purpose is “Social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. The mission of National Council for the Social Studies is to provide leadership, service, and support for all social studies educators.” Let’s face it, fellow citizenship educators—if the teacher accountability folks look at our goal of preparing students for “the duties of citizenship” and examine the statistics on voting behavior and attitudes toward government—we would be placed in the “Failed Profession” category.

I honestly don’t know what to do about this very real and very serious dilemma. There are literally dozens of programs like those at the Pew Charitable Trusts, the “Rock the Vote” effort, and organizations such as the Center for Civic Education and the Youth Vote Coalition that provide information, research studies, superb lesson plans, and student activities designed to increase civic involvement of young Americans. Yet, the voting percentage continues to decline and the estrangement of young people from their government increases.

While I may not know what to do, I do know that a feeling of political efficacy and willingness to participate in civic activities and vote doesn’t begin at age 15 or 16. If we are to change attitudes, build understanding of why civic engagement is important, and encourage political participation, we have to begin in the primary grades and make these goals the foundation of what we do in social studies programs.

It can be done, I believe … maybe through one teacher at a time—“The Power of One”—to use the theme for the 2003 NCSS Annual Conference in Chicago. Two years ago, I watched a first-year teacher, Jeff McGown, in Martinsville, Indiana, teach social studies to his first grade students. He had student taught in Australia where each class picks a “totem” or symbolic animal to be their mascot. Jeff took his students through a three-day process of nominating an animal (such as a bear, wolf, or eagle) for the class symbol. Groups of students worked on a campaign statement for their nominee, presented their arguments to the class, and a ballot with pictures of the animals was handed out. Students carefully marked their ballots and dropped them into a realistic ballot box. A team of students representing each of the animals tallied the results. I can’t even remember what animal was elected. I just know that I watched six-year-olds learning the “knowledge, intellectual skills,
and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy.”

With the pressures of standardized testing and other federal and state mandates for the curriculum, trying to find time to emphasize civic participation and engagement has become more difficult. However, every social studies teacher I talk with seems committed to the NCSS mission statement and wants to find ways to meet those goals. Here are some Internet websites that can provide help.

Some include research studies and position papers that teachers will find interesting and that secondary students can use for written reports or group activities. Others include lesson plans and student activities appropriate for various grade levels. Most include links to other useful sites.

Maybe the estrangement from government and civic participation is so endemic and pervasive in U.S. society that there is no way to reverse the trend. But, I just can't accept giving up. The primary reason I became a social studies teacher and teacher educator is imbedded in those words of the NCSS mission statement. That's our job.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement)
[www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

Supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, CIRCLE includes a wealth of research information and practical recommendations for teachers and community leaders. Although CIRCLE is primarily a research group, the projects it supports “have practical implications for those who work to increase young people’s engagement in politics and civic life.”

Youth Vote Coalition
[www.youthvote.org](http://www.youthvote.org)

This is a coalition of organizations such as La Raza, the American Federation of Teachers, the CloseUp Foundation, and Project Vote that works to increase the political involvement of young Americans. (Interestingly, NCSS is not listed as part of the coalition.) One of their current projects is “Smackdown Your Vote,” sponsored by, of all groups, the World Wrestling Federation effort. They claim to have registered 150,000 new voters in fall 2000 … and their slogan for this year is “A Million More in 2004!” Smackdown Your Vote has its own website [www.ywvote.com](http://www.ywvote.com). It’s not operating right now, but they promise to have activities and information for teachers and students.

Kids Voting USA
[www.kidsvotingusa.org](http://www.kidsvotingusa.org)

According to their mission statement, “Kids Voting USA fosters an informed, participating electorate by educating and actively engaging young people and their families in voting and other elements of effective civic engagement.” Participating teachers and students visit official polling places on Election Day and there are some outstanding lesson plans and activities designed by teachers for students in all K-12 grades. This is one of my favorite sites on the issue of civic participation.

Democracy in Action: Race for the White House, 2004
[www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.htm](http://www.gwu.edu/~action/P2004.htm)

This is an excellent website for teachers and students in the middle and high school grades. It covers everything about the presidential race, has links to every candidate’s website, and examines media coverage of candidates and issues. It would be great for individual student reports or group assignments.

The PBS Kids Democracy Project
[www.pbs.org/democracy/kids/](http://www.pbs.org/democracy/kids/)

Another superb site, this one features online activities for grades three through six in social studies, language arts, and math. Activities include “How does government affect me?” “Inside the Voting Booth,” and “President for a Day.”

Center for Civic Education
[www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

CCE is one of the leading advocates for civic education, not only in the U.S., but also around the world. Most social studies teachers are familiar with their programs such as “We, the People” and “Project Citizen.” They have lesson plans, activities, and, of course, developed “CIVITAS, A Framework for Civic Education.”

As I mentioned, most of the websites above have links to other useful groups and organizations. They include the Rock the Vote organization [www.rockthevote.org](http://www.rockthevote.org), the Center for Democracy and Citizenship [www.publicwork.org/home.html](http://www.publicwork.org/home.html), and YouthNoise (www.youthnoise.com/home), a site with online chat rooms for students to discuss civic action in their school and community. The resources are there. The need is urgent. Let’s work hard to do what we can to meet the goals of the NCSS mission statement.

C. Frederick Risinger is director of professional development and directs the Master of Arts in Teaching Social Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. He also admits to spending far too much time surfing on the Web.