

Doing Your Homework: Ballot Issue Literacy

Constitutional Amendment Voting Activity for Students

Introduction

In Arkansas, 1.7 million people are registered to vote. But voter turnout statistics reveal not everyone casts a vote on statewide ballot issues. This could be because voters might first discover the proposed laws or constitutional amendments when they receive their ballot on Election Day. Others may have heard about an issue on television or in the news, but aren't familiar with all the details or consequences of a law passing or failing.

This activity exposes students to an example of a real ballot issue that was narrowly approved by Missouri voters in 2014 (50.1% to 49.8%). Students will put themselves in the role of a voter who has limited knowledge of a controversial constitutional amendment. They will make a decision on whether to vote YES or N, or to abstain. This is an exercise in discovering the need to do one's research ahead of Election Day using research-based materials and the need for critical thinking.

Objectives

Participants will:

- Learn what a ballot issue is.
- Understand the limitations of information provided to voters on the ballot.
- Discover how opposing sides of an issue can make the same issue appear different depending on their priorities.
- Understand the need to search for neutral information about a proposed ballot issue.

Main Teaching Points

- The election ballot provides limited information about the potential consequences of a ballot issue passing or failing.
- Research helps voters make an informed decision on ballot issues.

Lesson Materials

- Missouri ballot example
- Vote Yes for Amendment 1 video
- Vote No for Amendment 1 video
- Pens for voting
- Computer to play videos
- Internet access
- Examples of past Arkansas ballot issue fact sheets

Vote Yes for Amendment 1 video can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn-nuJBRN1c>

Vote No for Amendment 1 video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0YhKv_Tv88

The videos are 32 and 31 seconds respectively.

Suggestions for Teaching

- Make copies of Missouri ballot example so each participant has his or her own ballot.

- Ensure ahead of time you have a working internet connection and can play the YouTube videos to reduce technical difficulties and lost activity time.
- Have YouTube videos cued up and ready to play before starting activity.
- After the exercise is completed, distribute examples of past Arkansas ballot issue fact sheets.

1. Introducing Ballot Issues

Start by asking students to raise their hand if they know what a constitutional amendment is. Ask a student who raised a hand to define his/her understanding of a ballot issue.

Explain how a constitutional amendment is a change to the Arkansas constitution, or fundamental rules that the state operates under, initiated by state legislators or voters.

Discuss how legislators have the authority to refer three constitutional amendments each election cycle to voters to approve or disapprove.

Discuss how voters have the right to propose constitutional amendments or new state laws to voters on the statewide ballot. These issues only appear on the ballot if supporters are successful in gathering a certain number of signatures from registered voters. Refer to the voter guide for information on how many voter signatures are needed.

2. The Role of the Public Policy Center

Explain how the Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service researches each ballot issue and publishes a voter guide on the statewide issues to help voters make an informed decision on Election Day. Reinforce that these are neutral reviews that don't take a side and don't tell people how they should vote.

Explain how campaigns can define the issue differently depending on their views, and how someone who has not done their own research or critical review of the issue can be misinformed about the potential consequences of a ballot issue passing or failing.

Missouri Right to Farm Activity

- Distribute Missouri Right to Farm example ballot and pens to each student. Read the example ballot aloud to students.
- Ask one or two students to explain what they think the ballot issue asks of them.
- Explain that the ballot title is all a voter sees on Election Day. Then ask students to raise their hand if they know how they want to vote on the issue.
- Explain how if the voter hasn't done his/her research, they may be confused about the issue if they relied only on what they saw on television. Play the two videos back-to-back (Say Yes to Amendment 1 and Say No to Amendment 1) that aired ahead of the 2014 Missouri election.
- Ask one or two students to explain what they think the ballot issue means if it passes/fails and if their understanding had changed based on the commercials.
- Have students vote. Ask one or two students how they voted and why.
- Distribute copies of past Extension ballot fact sheets. Tell students they are available online and at county offices ahead of each election. Encourage them to read the fact sheets at a later date.

Prepared by Kristin Higgins, Public Policy Center Program Associate. September 2015; Updated 2020.

Sample Ballot – Missouri Amendment 1 of 2014

Constitutional Amendment No. 1

Shall the Missouri Constitution be amended to ensure that the right of Missouri citizens to engage in agricultural production and ranching practices shall not be infringed?

The potential costs or savings to governmental entities are unknown, but likely limited unless the resolution leads to increased litigation costs and/or the loss of federal funding.

Yes

No

Constitutional Amendment No. 1

Shall the Missouri Constitution be amended to ensure that the right of Missouri citizens to engage in agricultural production and ranching practices shall not be infringed?

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Yes

No

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Yes

No