**Who Votes and Why Does It Matter?**

Voting is one of the most direct ways that citizens can influence their government, yet in the United States, voter turnout is often lower than in other democracies. Turnout refers to the percentage of eligible voters who actually cast a ballot in an election. Many factors, personal, social, and institutional influence whether someone votes or not.

Presidential elections tend to have higher turnout than midterm or local elections. Factors like age, education, income, and political interest are strong predictors of whether a person votes. Meanwhile, barriers like voter ID laws, registration deadlines, and limited access to polling places can suppress participation. Social pressures, civic norms, and the competitiveness of an election also play a role.

Understanding what drives participation is essential for improving democracy. The system works best when more voices are heard, and when all citizens have equal opportunity to take part.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| Voter Turnout | The percentage of eligible citizens who actually vote in an election. |
| Political Efficacy | A person’s belief that their political actions can influence government. |
| Civic Engagement | Involvement in activities intended to influence public policy or leadership. |
| Voter Suppression | Actions or policies that intentionally or unintentionally reduce voter participation. |
| Motor Voter Law | A 1993 law that allows citizens to register to vote when applying for a driver’s license. |
| Same-Day Registration | A policy allowing eligible citizens to register and vote on the same day. |
| Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) | Campaign efforts aimed at increasing voter participation. |

**Active Learning Exercise: “Why Don’t They Vote?”**

**Orienting Question:**  
What makes people more, or less, likely to vote?

**Objective:**  
Students will explore reasons for varying levels of voter turnout and propose solutions to increase participation.

**Part 1: Profile Analysis (10–15 minutes)**  
Give students fictional voter profiles with different characteristics (e.g., age 22, student, low income, no transportation vs. age 65, retired, high political interest).  
Ask: Who is most likely to vote? Least likely? Why?

**Part 2: Barriers and Solutions Brainstorm (15–20 minutes)**  
As a class or in small groups, list common barriers to voting: registration issues, time, ID laws, apathy, etc.  
Then brainstorm practical solutions: early voting, civic education, public transportation to polls, etc.

**Optional Extension – Local Turnout Research:**  
Have students investigate voter turnout in their county during the last election. Compare turnout by age, race, income, or education if data is available.

**Discussion:**

* What social or institutional changes might increase turnout?
* Should voting be easier, or is non-voting a valid choice?
* What does low turnout say about a democracy?

**Review Questions**

1. What are the most common reasons people give for not voting?
2. How does education level affect the likelihood of voting?
3. What are examples of voter suppression and how do they affect turnout?
4. Why do midterm and local elections often have lower turnout than presidential elections?
5. What reforms could help increase political participation?