

LESSON 3

WHAT ARE THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF VOTING?

INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s and 1980s, voter turnout in the U.S. presidential elections was lower than in the previous two decades. Overall U.S. voter turnout rates are lower than those of most other democracies; for example, in Belgium, 94% and in Australia, 90% of eligible voters participate in national elections. Cost/benefit analysis provides a way to explain these trends and identify policies to bring about higher voter turnout rates.

CONCEPTS

Cost/Benefit Analysis
Rational Behavior
Political Participation

OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Identify trends in voter turnout in U.S. Presidential elections since 1952

- ◆ Use cost/benefit analysis to explain voter turnout rates and to develop plans for increasing voter turnout

LESSON DESCRIPTION

Students examine voter participation rates in the United States since 1952. Cost/benefit analysis is introduced to help explain voter participation rates. Students identify ways to reduce the costs of voting and increase the benefits of voting to increase the overall voter participation rate.

TIME REQUIRED

One class period

MATERIALS

- ★ Activity/Visual 1, “Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections 1952–1992”
- ★ Activity 1, “Voter Participation in the 1992 Presidential Election”

PROCEDURE

1. Show Activity/Visual 1, “Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1952–1992.” Ask students to examine the graph and make observations about voter participation in the 1950s and 1960s as compared to the 1970s and 1980s. Ask students to explain why they think participation rates declined. Why do they think the participation rate rose in 1992?

2. Explain that voter participation rates can be analyzed by using cost/benefit analysis.

3. Have students brainstorm the costs of voting. These might include meeting residency requirements, registering to vote, gathering information about candidates and issues, finding and going to the polls, taking time off from work, getting up early to vote before going to work, and hiring a baby sitter.

4. Have students brainstorm some of the benefits received from voting. These might include participating in the maintenance of the political system, complying with the norms of good citizenship, fulfilling moral obligations, helping ensure the election of a candidate or political party whose ideas you support.

5. Have students speculate on the relationship between costs and benefits of voting and voter turnout rates. Point out that when costs go up and/or perceived benefits go down, participation rates fall. If the costs of voting exceed the benefits of voting, then one could conclude that not voting is indeed rational behavior.

6. Have students continue the cost/benefit analysis by looking at ways to increase voter participation. Explain that the Voter Registration Act of 1992, “The Motor Voter Act,” reduced some of the costs of voting by making registration easier and more convenient. Should this result in higher or lower participation rates?

7. Have students brainstorm other ways of reducing the costs of voting and decide if any of these should be adopted. These might include:

- a. Election Day registration
- b. Lifetime registration

- c. Evening and Saturday registration hours
 - d. Making election day a holiday or moving it to Saturday or Sunday
 - e. Longer voting hours
 - f. Electronic voting sites
 - g. Absentee voting options for all voters
 - h. Free transportation to the polls
8. Have students brainstorm increasing the benefits of voting. One example was MTV's "Rock the Vote" promotion campaign during the 1992 presidential election. Other examples might include:
- a. Compulsory voting laws (used in Australia, Belgium, Italy, Argentina, Costa Rica, Greece, Singapore, and Venezuela)
 - b. Paying people to vote
 - c. Entering voters in a lottery for prizes if they vote
 - d. Strengthening political parties and voters' identification with parties
 - e. Bipartisan get-out-the-vote campaigns
 - f. Developing more positive attitude toward politics and voting in high school government classes
 - g. Encouraging more effective special interest group campaigns to encourage voter turnout

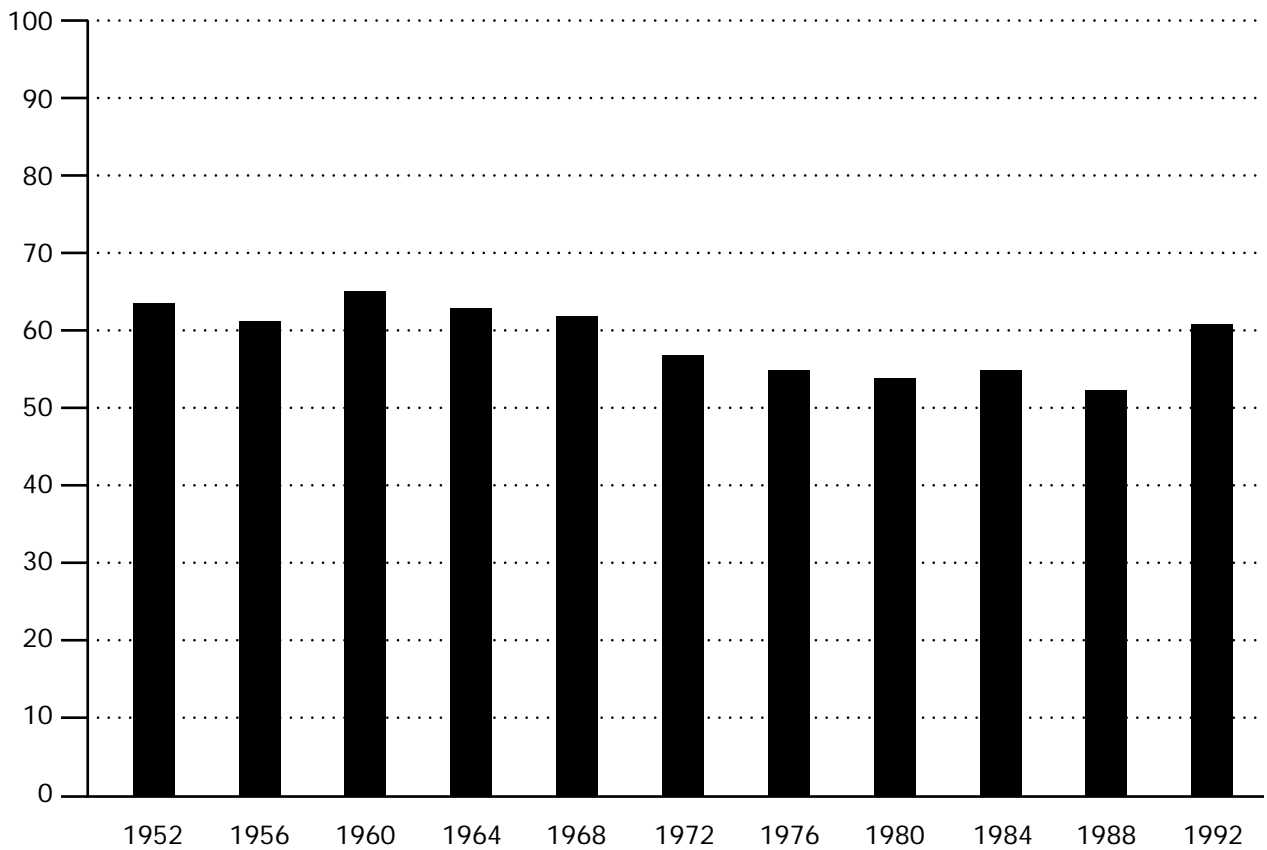
Have students discuss the appropriateness of these approaches to increasing the benefits of voting; for example, would a "get-out-the vote" campaign be desirable if large numbers of uninformed voters go to the polls? Ask them to decide which, if any, should be carried out. Have students discuss whether lower voter turnout rates really are a problem. Should any actions be taken to increase benefits, or reduce the costs, of voting to insure higher voter participation rates?

CLOSURE

Distribute Activity 1, "Voter Participation in the 1992 Presidential Election." Have students identify participation rates for some of the categories. Ask students to explain differences in voter participation using cost/benefit analysis. For example, why might voters with four or more years of higher education perceive either higher benefits or lower costs than those with lesser education. Why might Hispanic voters' costs be higher or benefits be lower than other voters?

ACTIVITY/VISUAL 1
**TURNOUT IN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS
(1952-1992)**

(percent of registered voters who voted)



Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

ACTIVITY 1
**VOTER PARTICIPATION IN THE
 1992 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

Name _____

	Voting Age Population (million)	Percentage Reporting They Registered	Percentage Reporting They Voted
TOTAL	185.7	68.2	61.3
18-20 yrs. old	9.7	48.3	38.5
21-24 yrs. old	14.6	55.3	45.7
25-34 yrs. old	41.6	60.6	53.2
35-44 yrs. old	39.7	69.2	63.6
45-64 yrs. old	49.1	75.3	70.0
65-over	30.8	78.0	70.1
Male	88.6	66.9	60.02
Female	97.1	69.3	62.3
White	157.8	70.1	63.6
Black	21.0	63.9	54.0
Hispanic	14.7	32.9	28.9
Northeast	38.3	67.0	61.2
Midwest	44.1	74.6	67.2
South	63.7	67.2	59.0
West	39.3	63.6	58.5
8 years school or less	15.4	43.9	35.1
1-3 yrs. H.S.	21.0	50.4	41.2
4 yrs. H.S.	65.3	64.9	57.5
1-3 yrs. Univ.	46.7	75.4	68.7
4 yrs. Univ or more	37.4	84.8	81.0

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States.*