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LESSON 3

VOTERS AND ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Voter turnout in the United States influences the outcomes of elections. Politicians spend a great deal of time and energy trying to get their supporters to the polls. But why should this be a problem? Why don't all eligible voters vote? Economists who have studied this question believe that the answer has to do with the benefits and costs of voting. One sort of cost—opportunity cost—is especially helpful in explaining why some people choose not to vote.

LESSON DESCRIPTION

Students identify costs associated with voting. Then they make predictions about who might be more likely to vote based on their understanding of opportunity costs.

CONCEPTS

- Benefit
- Elections
- Opportunity cost

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

1. List the costs and benefits of voting in an election.
2. Weigh costs and benefits to predict whether a person is likely to vote.

CONTENT STANDARDS

Economics (CEE Standards)

- Costs of government policies sometimes exceed benefits. This may occur because of incentives facing voters, government officials, and government employees, because of actions by special interest groups that can impose costs on the general public, or because social goals other than economic efficiency are being pursued. (Standard 17)

Civics and Government (NSCG Standards, 9-12)

- Students should be able evaluate, take, and defend positions about the roles of political parties, campaigns, and elections in American politics. (Standard III. E. 4)
- Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions about the means that citizens should use to monitor and influence the formation and implementation of public policy. (Standard V. E. 3)

TIME REQUIRED

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- A transparency of Visuals 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5

PROCEDURE

1. Begin by noting that in a democracy, voting is an important civic right. Ask: Did everyone who was eligible to vote in the last presidential election actually vote? (*The answer is no, not everyone voted.*) If the right to vote is so important, why do some people choose not to vote? (*Answers will vary. Some answers may involve costs associated with voting, even if the students do not use that term.*) After some discussion of the students' answers, explain that the purpose of this lesson is to explore reasons why eligible voters do not always vote.
2. Tell the students that there are costs associated with voting. Ask:
 - What might these costs be?
(*The students might mention transportation costs, the cost of child care, the cost of time taken away from work etc. Explain that these costs might be called dollar costs. Dollar costs might deter some people from voting. But*

other costs also may be important.)

- Apart from dollars spent, what other costs might people have to pay in order to vote? Hint: Think about how people might spend their time on election day if they decided not to vote.

(People who do not take time to vote would have more time for working, shopping, recreation, etc.)

3. By reference to the students' answers, explain the concept of *opportunity cost*. The opportunity cost of doing something (voting, for example) is the highest-valued alternative a person gives up in choosing to do that particular something. A person whose most highly valued alternative is working (or at least the pay from work) would say that his or her opportunity cost of voting is lost time at work. Somebody else might identify sleeping as the most highly valued alternative; for that person, the opportunity cost of voting would be lost sleep. Emphasize the subjective nature of opportunity costs. The opportunity cost of voting will vary from person to person, and decisions about whether to vote or not will differ accordingly.
4. To summarize issues of costs related to voting, display Visual 3.1 and discuss it with the students. The Visual refers initially to Amendment 24 to the U.S. Constitution, which states that no dollar costs (in the form of poll taxes, for example) may be attached to voting in a federal election. The Visual then identifies other costs that voters may incur. Note that most of these costs—the opportunity costs of voting—involve the time it takes to register, learn about the candidates, and get to and from the polls. A hair stylist or cab driver, for example, might lose money for every hour spent away from work; for that person, the opportunity cost of voting might be lost income.
5. These examples may strike the students as somewhat hypothetical. Are prospective voters in fact influenced by considerations of opportunity cost? How could we find out? To pursue the question, display Visual 3.2 and discuss its contents. The Visual shows results of a Census Bureau survey of actual reasons people gave for not voting in the 2004 national election. The list is presented in reverse order, based on the responses of all registered voters. The final column lists the separate percentage responses of individuals aged 18-24. Ask the students if there are any differences between the overall registration percentages and those for the younger population. *(Younger people were less likely to be ill, but less likely to know why they didn't vote and more likely to be busy. Younger people also tended to be out of town, perhaps at college, where they were not registered to vote.)* In reviewing the list, note that many of the items reflect judgments about increased costs of voting or decreased benefits from voting.
6. Still, despite the difficulties, many people do vote. Explore this point. Ask: why would any citizen vote when there are opportunity costs attached to voting and when it seems unlikely that any individual's vote will change the outcome of an election? *(Answers will vary. Some students may mention a civic duty to vote; others may think it important to express support for certain candidates.)*
7. Comment on these answers: They illustrate what some people have called "the paradox of voting." The paradox is that many people vote even when their votes are not likely to change the outcome of an election. (For more information, see the *expressive voting* entry in *The Encyclopedia of Public Choice* [electronic resource] / Dordrecht ; Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, c2004.) To prompt further discussion of this paradox, display and discuss Visual 3.3.
8. Given the subjective nature of opportunity costs, we would expect to find variation in

voting, with some people more likely to vote than others. Ask the students to speculate about this. Who tends to vote more? Who tends to vote less?

9. After some discussion of the students' responses, display Visual 3.4, which identifies various characteristics of voters. Note that the comparisons may not include all groups. Go over each comparison group in Visual 3.4 by asking the students which category of voters in each row was most likely to vote in the 2004 general election. Students don't need to guess the exact percentage for each category of voter, but they should attempt to identify which category of each comparison group was most likely to vote. The percentage-wise answers are found below in italics. In the discussion, challenge the students to think of reasons for the differences indicated, reminding them of the concept of opportunity cost. Many examples can be explained by the opportunity cost of voting. For example, lower-income voters may be workers who are paid at an hourly rate, and they may not be able to get away from work to vote without losing a significant amount of pay. Unemployed people may be worried more about finding work than voting, so they may view the costs of taking time to vote as too high. Homeowners are more settled than others and so are more likely to know how and where to register and vote; this familiarity with the setting reduces their opportunity cost of time needed to vote. Retirees also may have a lower opportunity cost regarding time, and so may be more likely to vote. Other examples may be explained by the benefits received. One example of a benefit is the sense of satisfaction some people find in meeting their civic duty to vote, which might explain why veterans tend to vote more than non-veterans. Other examples may be more difficult to understand, but even in these cases students often can propose interesting explanations.

Answers, in percentage of voting-age citizens:
Women (65.4); Men (62.1)
White (65.4); Black (60.0); Asian (44.1)
Native Born (64.5);
Naturalized Citizen (53.7)
Married (70.7); Never Married (52.0)
Divorced (58.4); Separated (47.5)
High Income (Over \$100,000, 81.3);
Low Income (Less than \$20,000, 48.3)
Employed (65.9); Unemployed (51.4)
Bachelor's Degree (77.5);
High School Degree (56.4)
Minnesotan (79.2); Floridian (64.3);
Hawaiian (50.8)
Veteran (73.5); Nonveteran (62.6)
Homeowner (68.7); Renter (48.3)
Old (age 65 to 74, 73.3);
Young (18 to 24 years old, 46.7)

Source: Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004," publication P20-556. A version of this publication is produced for each federal election. The results of the 2008 election will be available in 2010.

10. Ask the students which groups of voters they would specifically try to attract if they were running for office. *(They should note that prospective voters who are more likely to turn out at the polls may have greater sway in forming the politicians' policies.)*
11. Ask the students what they think candidates for office might do to lower the opportunity cost of voting for their supporters? *(Offering transportation to the polls is one common proposal, especially for areas with large populations of elderly, retired voters. Offering help with absentee balloting also lowers the opportunity cost for voters who can't make it to the polls.)*
12. Display Visual 3.5. Note that many citizens fail to vote. Ask the students if they plan to register and vote when they turn 18. Remind them of the potential opportunity costs and ask what they think the benefits of voting will be for them.

CLOSURE

Review the following points with the students.

- Despite the fact that any one vote is unlikely to change the result of an election, many people voluntarily absorb the opportunity cost of voting.
- While opportunity cost is important in understanding why some people do not vote, many people vote despite the opportunity cost in order to gain the benefits—the sense of satisfaction that comes with meeting a civic obligation, for example, or with participating in an effort to affect change—that they associate with voting.

ASSESSMENT**Multiple-Choice Questions**

1. Sue is paid an hourly wage of \$10. She punches a time clock every day. Sam is paid an annual salary of \$140,000 a year. He is allowed to take off two hours a day for lunch. For Sam and Sue, it will take two hours to vote. Sam votes on his lunch break, while Sue takes off work two hours early to get to the polls. What can be said about the costs and benefits of voting for these two citizens?
 - A. Sue values voting more than Sam.
 - B. Sam values voting more than Sue.
 - C. Sue's opportunity cost in terms of lost wages is higher than Sam's.**
 - D. Sam's opportunity cost in terms of lost wages is higher than Sue's.
2. Which is not an opportunity cost of voting in a U.S. federal election?
 - A. A fee charged for voting**
 - B. Wages lost while voting
 - C. Time taken to learn about the candidates and their positions on issues
 - D. Gasoline used to drive to the polls

Constructed-Response Questions

1. Have the students write a short essay supporting or opposing one of the following propositions:
 - A. The United States government should pay people to vote in order to increase voter participation.
 - B. The United States government should institute mandatory voting as is currently the policy in Australia, where failure to show up to vote can result in penalties (typically a fine of \$20).
 - C. The United States government should conduct an advertising campaign to encourage young people to vote.

(The students should indicate, in responding to any of the propositions above, how the costs and benefits of voting are changed by the proposal in question.)

VISUAL 3.1

THE COSTS OF VOTING

1. *Dollar costs.* No dollar costs may be imposed by fees or taxation.

Amendment 24 to the U.S. Constitution rules out dollar costs:

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.

2. *Other costs.* While the Constitution prohibits monetary charges, this does not mean that voting is entirely without costs. Voters will incur *opportunity costs*. The opportunity cost of voting is what a voter gives up in choosing to vote. Here are some of the possible opportunity costs:

- Time taken to register.
- Time to find a voting location, or to vote via absentee ballot.
- Time taken to vote, which may also mean lost wages for voters who miss work; or babysitting or transportation costs.
- Time needed to investigate candidates and issues.

VISUAL 3.2

TOP TEN REASONS REGISTERED VOTERS GAVE FOR NOT VOTING IN 2004

	<u>All</u>	<u>18-24</u>
10. Transportation Problems	2.1%	1.9%
9. Inconvenient Polling Place	3.0%	2.5%
8. Forgot	3.4%	6.1%
7. Registration Problems	6.8%	8.2%
6. Don't Know or Refused to Answer	8.5%	15.2%
5. Out of Town	9.0%	12.8%
4. Didn't Like the Candidates	9.9%	6.4%
3. Not Interested	10.7%	10.0%
2. Illness or Disability	15.4%	2.8%
1. Too Busy	19.9%	23.2%

In 2004, citizens aged 18 to 24 made up 12.6% of the voting-age population, but only 9.3% of voters.

Source: Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004*, publication P20-556.

VISUAL 3.3

WHY DO PEOPLE VOTE?

- When the election is likely to be close and a person’s vote may change the election result:
 - People may vote to support a particular politician.
 - People may vote to remove incumbents (“Throw the rascals out”).
- When the election is not likely to be close and a person’s vote is not likely to change the election result:
 - People may believe it is their civic duty to vote.
 - People may vote to voice their opinions regardless of the likely outcome.
 - People may vote in order to feel that they are a part of winning team.

VISUAL 3.4

WHO VOTES MORE?

Of all citizens, who voted most, percentage-wise, in the 2004 presidential election?

Men	or	Women		
White	or	Black	or	Asian
Naturalized Citizen	or	Native Born		
Married	or	Never Married		
Separated	or	Divorced		
Low Income	or	High Income		
Employed	or	Unemployed		
High School Degree	or	Bachelor's Degree		
Minnesotan	or	Floridian	or	Hawaiian
Veteran	or	Nonveteran		
Renter	or	Homeowner		
Young	or	Old		

Source: Census Bureau, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004*, publication P20-556.

VISUAL 3.5

REPORTING VOTING, 1980-2004

Year	Voters as a Percent of the U.S. Citizen Voting-Age Population
1980	64.0
1984	64.9
1988	62.2
1992	67.7
1996	58.4
2000	59.5
2004	63.8

Source: Census Bureau, www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html, Historical Time Series Table A-1.