ELECTION

ON ONE OF THE FINAL DAYS of the Constitutional Convention, a woman approached Benjamin Franklin on the steps of Independence Hall and asked him whether we had a monarchy or a republic. "A republic," he famously replied, "if you can keep it."

In a presidential election year, we're reminded more than ever of Ben's admonishment—it's entirely up to us. And as educators, it's up to us to inspire the next generation to get involved in civic life. Luckily, kids learn by doing, which, experts agree, is the only real way to teach citizenship. As Robert Leming, of the Center for Civic Education, puts it, "Civics is not a spectator sport." In that spirit, we've put together a slate of election-year activities that stress action. Enjoy—and come November, don't forget to vote.

GRADES K–2

Suffrage Timeline

Demonstrate how voting rights have expanded since the nation's founding by holding elections in different eras.

THE SETUP: Create a suffrage timeline along the classroom wall (see below), and go over the major events. Explain that African-Americans gained the vote in 1870 but in practice were often barred from the polls until the mid-1960s.

Year: 1787
Eligible Voters: White men, ages 21+

Year: 1870 (15th Amendment)
Eligible Voters: White men; (some) African-American men, 21+

Year: 1920 (19th Amendment)
Eligible Voters: White men and women; (some) African-American men and women, 21+

PHOTOS: ROGER HAGADONE

FEVER

Your students may not be able to vote (this time around!), but these activities will show them what it means to be a good citizen.

BY ERICH STROM

Year: 1965 (Voting Rights Act)
Eligible Voters: Everyone, 21+

Year: 1971
(26th Amendment)
Eligible Voters: Everyone, 18+

Make ballot cards, each listing a potential voter's gender, race, and age. Split gender and race 50-50; a few should be under 21. Include the year the person gained suffrage (write "1870" on some of the cards for African-Americans, and "1965" on others). Give each student a card.

ELECTION DAY: Hold an election in the first era (e.g., 1800). Ask eligible voters to stand up. They then elect a class president from among their ranks. Repeat for subsequent eras. By the end, everyone should be standing (and voting).

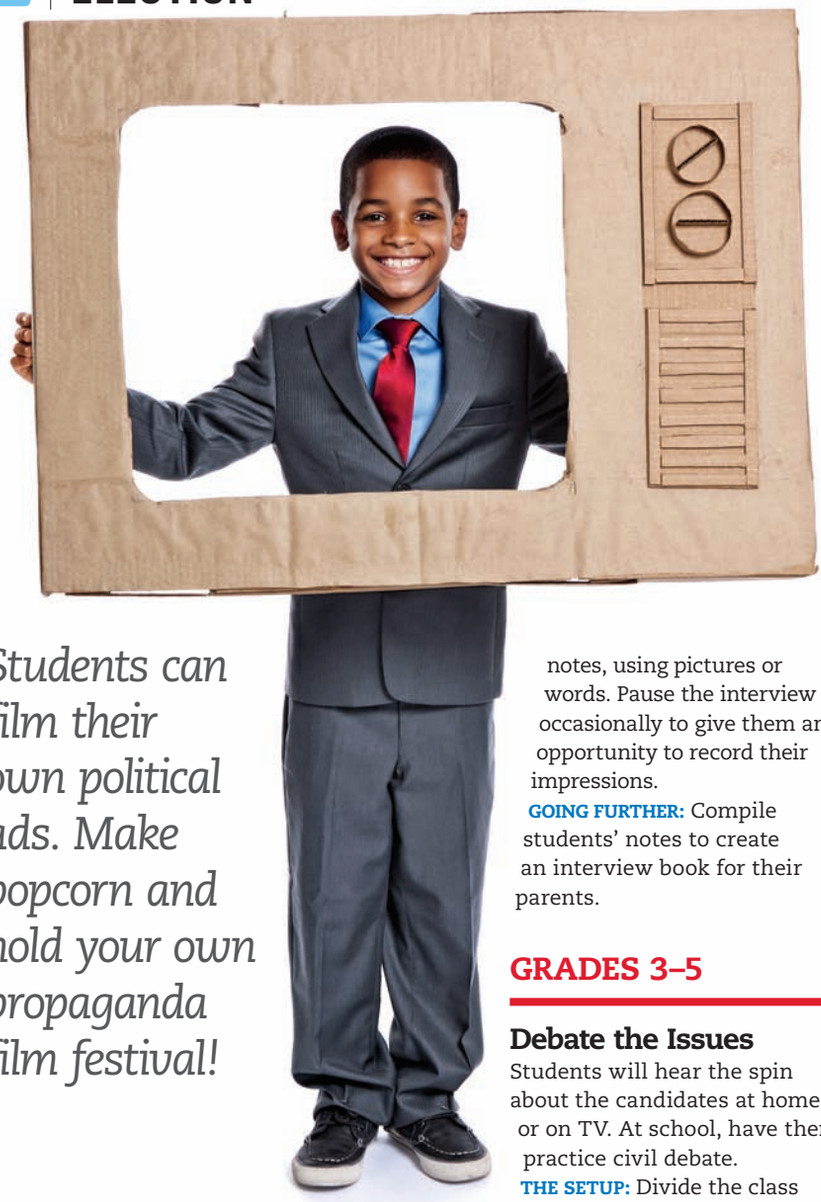
GOING FURTHER: Discuss whether the voting age should be lowered. Why or why not?

Source: Kids Voting USA

Grilling a Pol

Children make great interviewers, says Paula Rogovin, a first-grade teacher in New York City and author of the book *Classroom Interviews*. In fact, they never stop asking questions! Take advantage by having your class interview an elected official.

THE SETUP: Ask your students what they already know about elections. Then ask how they know



Students can film their own political ads. Make popcorn and hold your own propaganda film festival!

what they know. Inevitably, someone's aunt is on the local school board or knows an elected official, says Rogovin. Your students are your best source for finding an interviewee. Beforehand, give the class a chance to rehearse. Say, "Tomorrow we'll be interviewing a city councilwoman. Talk to the person next to you about the questions you want to ask our guest about her job and how she got elected."

MAIN EVENT: Remember: The kids should be doing the asking. Occasionally you might translate a question from "first-gradese," or suggest a question for someone who's having trouble formulating one. Students should be taking notes, using pictures or words. Pause the interview occasionally to give them an opportunity to record their impressions.

GOING FURTHER: Compile students' notes to create an interview book for their parents.

GRADES 3–5

Debate the Issues

Students will hear the spin about the candidates at home or on TV. At school, have them practice civil debate.

THE SETUP: Divide the class into three groups—two will represent the candidates and one the moderator. The candidates will research their positions on various topics, such as taxes, health care, and education. The moderators will prepare questions and set the rules for the debate.

THE DEBATE: Students in each group should take turns playing the roles of candidate and moderator. If one speaker gets stuck, he or she can "tag" a teammate to jump in.

GOING FURTHER: Students can participate in a mock election, with voting booths and secret ballots. Don't worry if the results fall along partisan lines—your "independent" moderators have the opportunity to swing the vote!

Recognize the Rhetoric

The art of persuasion goes back to the earliest days of democracy, in ancient Greece. Use election ads to familiarize students with its myriad techniques.

THE SETUP: Review various types of propaganda with the class. Then have students come up with examples of their own.

Type: Glittering generalities
Examples: "Morning in America," "Hope"

Type: Transfer
Example: Associating one thing with another (e.g., a candidate posing next to a flag)

Type: Emotional appeal
Example: "Is your family at risk…?"

Type: Testimonials
Example: Celebrity endorsements

Type: Bandwagon
Example: "Billions and billions served"

Type: Card stacking
Example: Presenting only favorable (or unfavorable) information

Type: Name calling
Example: Using epithets to tarnish a candidate ("liar," "irresponsible")

AD 'EM UP: Screen real campaign commercials, and ask students to identify the techniques each one employs.

You can find the presidential candidates' ads on their official YouTube channels, "mittromney" and "barack obamadotcom." Also, check out the livingroomcandidate.org's rich historical collection, including classics like Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy" ad—a great example of the emotional appeal.

GOING FURTHER: Students can film their own political ads. Make popcorn and hold your own propaganda film festival!

Sources: Kids Voting USA and iCivics

GRADES 6–8

A Piece of Our Minds

Have your class write a letter to an elected official, demanding action on an issue they care about, recommends Shira Eve Epstein, an assistant professor of education at the City College of New York who specializes in civics education. It's a powerful way to illustrate that elected officials are there to listen to—and serve—the people.

THE SETUP: How best to choose an issue? Go with what's already firing your students up, says Epstein. She recalls a class that was captivated by a front-page celebrity domestic-violence incident. That could become a crusade on behalf of local battered women's shelters.

GET INFORMED: Bring in an expert, Epstein suggests. An advocate from a local anti-domestic-violence group, for example, could shed light on existing needs and point the class to relevant data and resources. An insider can also help the class figure out which elected official to write to.

GET WRITING: The class could draft a single letter or work in small groups or individually, says Epstein. Provide them with a basic outline:

- Introduce yourselves and your issue of concern
- Propose a plan of action
- Present research and personal experiences
- Conclude and close

GOING FURTHER: Keep tabs on the official's response, and write follow-up letters, as necessary.

Congress at Work

Convene the class as a congressional committee to draft a law that solves a local or national problem. Deliberation on the pros and cons of various policy options can get kids past their initial assumptions and put them in other people's shoes, says Epstein. "That's an important critical thinking skill in general."

THE SETUP: Explain that Congress drafts laws in committees (visit house.gov/committees for a full list, and to learn more about how they operate). Find an authentic issue your class wants to tackle (see "A Piece of Our Minds" for pointers), and schedule a working session of the appropriate House committee.

RESEARCH: Guide students toward coverage in the national press and to relevant policy groups. Also, the National Issues Forum (nifi.org) has compiled material on scores of issues designed to stimulate deliberation.

DELIBERATE: Students should talk through the pros and cons of various legislative possibilities. See which ideas are gaining the most support. Then hammer out a compromise bill that's acceptable to a majority of the committee. End with a vote. If the bill passes, tell the class that it will then proceed to the entire House for further deliberation (and compromise)!

GOING FURTHER: The Center for Civic Education's Project Citizen can help your class put its policy solutions to work in the real world. □

ONLINE RESOURCES

- ✔ **The Center for Civic Education** offers a range of resources, lesson plans, and curricular materials through its various programs, including We the People (focusing on the Constitution), Project Citizen (which encourages student involvement in public policy), and Citizens, Not Spectators (designed to increase voter participation). *civiced.org*
- ✔ **iCivics,** founded by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to bolster civic education and engagement, has put together an online library chock-full of free lesson plans on government and the Constitution for teachers and civics games for students. *icivics.org*
- ✔ **Kids Voting USA** organizes authentic mock elections for students across the country. Its website has a resources page for the 2012 presidential election and free K–12 classroom activities covering four themes: Elections and Voting, Democracy and the People, Informed Citizen, and Civic Engagement. *kidsvotingusa.org*
- ✔ **Scholastic's Election 2012** website features updates on all the election news from the Kids Press Corps, an "election central" resources section, maps, games, videos, and more. *magazines.scholastic.com/election-2012*
- ✔ **Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids,** a project of the federal Government Printing Office, is tailored for teachers, parents, and students from grades K–12. It has age-appropriate online lessons, links, and games on topics ranging from the branches of government and elections to citizenship and the legislative process. *bensguide.gpo.gov*
- ✔ **The Learning Network** blog offers teaching ideas, resources, lesson plans, and links to relevant background material from *The New York Times* and beyond. *learning.blogs.nytimes.com*