

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Voting

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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The word democracy comes from Greek and means, roughly, people power. In a democracy, the citizens have a voice in how the government is run. Sometimes, this takes the form of direct democracy. That's when citizens vote on actual decisions. In the US, examples of direct democracy include ballot measures or propositions. For instance, a local election might include a measure that asks citizens if they support the city investing in a new bike path. If the majority of votes support the proposition, it passes. If not, it fails. More often, elections in the US are examples of representative democracy. That's when citizens don't vote on decisions directly but instead, choose a candidate they want to make decisions in accordance with their beliefs. Midterm elections are a good example of representative democracy at work. The midterms occur every four years at the midpoint of the president's term in office and determine who will fill many of the seats in the United States Congress. That's the branch of government that makes federal laws.

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In the US, voting is a right. That means a citizen who meets the requirements is allowed to vote by law. Voting is also considered a civic responsibility or good citizenship. That's because voting helps democracy function better. To understand why, imagine that 20 students are eligible to vote for class president. 12 prefer Candidate A, and 8 prefer Candidate B. You might expect Candidate A to win with 60% of the vote (12 out of 20). But what happens if six voters who support Candidate A decide not to vote? They might think Candidate A will win without them and decide to sit out. Then Candidate B will actually end up winning with 57% (8 out of 14). And what happens if six students who support Candidate B decide not to vote? They might think their votes won't matter since their candidate is not favored to win. Then Candidate A will end up winning by almost 86% (12 out of 14). It will seem like Candidate A had much more support from their classmates if people choose to be silent.

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In an election, turnout is the percent of people who actually cast a ballot. Compared to other democratic countries, the US as a whole typically has low turnout. Turnout varies across different groups within the US, too. Generation X and younger generations, like Millennials, are the majority of eligible voters in the US. However, in 2014, they cast 21 million fewer votes than older generations did. Typically, new voters (ages 18-21) have the lowest turnout of any age group.

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At the founding of the country, only White landowning men were granted suffrage. When Andrew Jackson promoted what was then called universal suffrage, it meant voting rights for all White men with no land-ownership requirement. The list below includes major legislation that expanded voting rights in the US and how these changes came about.

**1869:** The 15th Amendment granted all men the right to vote regardless of race or previous servitude. That meant Black men, including former enslaved people, were allowed to vote for the first time. This first major expansion to voting rights was passed during the Reconstruction Era after the Civil War. However, discriminatory state laws and violence kept many eligible Black voters from registering and voting in many southern states for almost another century.

**1920:** The 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote, ending the Women's Suffrage Movement's decades-long fight for voting rights.

**1965:** The Voting Rights Act banned literacy tests and other obstacles that had prevented eligible Black Americans from voting. It also required some states to have federal pre-approval before making changes to voting processes. This act was signed after civil rights groups and activists came to Selma, Alabama, and organized a series of marches.

**1971:** The 26th Amendment lowered the minimum voting age from 21 to 18. This was the last major expansion of voting rights. It came after protesters drew attention to the draft for the Vietnam War, which was sending men to war for a country where they were too young to vote.

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Today, Americans are eligible to vote if they are at least 18 years old, US citizens, state residents, and in 48 states not currently in prison or on parole for a felony. In 49 states, eligible voters must register to vote. North Dakota is the only state that does not require this. The exact rules for how and when to register vary by state. Some states offer same-day registration, but many have registration deadlines ahead of Election Day. Some states have voter ID laws. These require voters to have official identification to register, receive a ballot or vote. If you're eligible to vote or will be soon, be sure you know how and when to register and what you'll need to vote in your state.

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Civic responsibility includes registering to vote and voting. But just filling out a ballot is not enough; it's important to be an informed voter. In any election, there can be many issues to consider. Being an informed voter starts with knowing which issues you care most about.

What do you want your candidate to do about those issues? Being informed involves researching the candidates and finding out what their stances are on those issues. You can learn about their platforms, read articles about them, and check out their official websites.

There's a lot of information out there! Remember to look out for bias and fact-check your sources. Watching debates allows you to hear directly from candidates as they talk about their ideas and visions. Once you have formed your opinion, make sure you have a plan for Election Day. How and when will you vote? Help others get excited to vote, too!

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