

Virtue In Action

Rights and Responsibilities

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



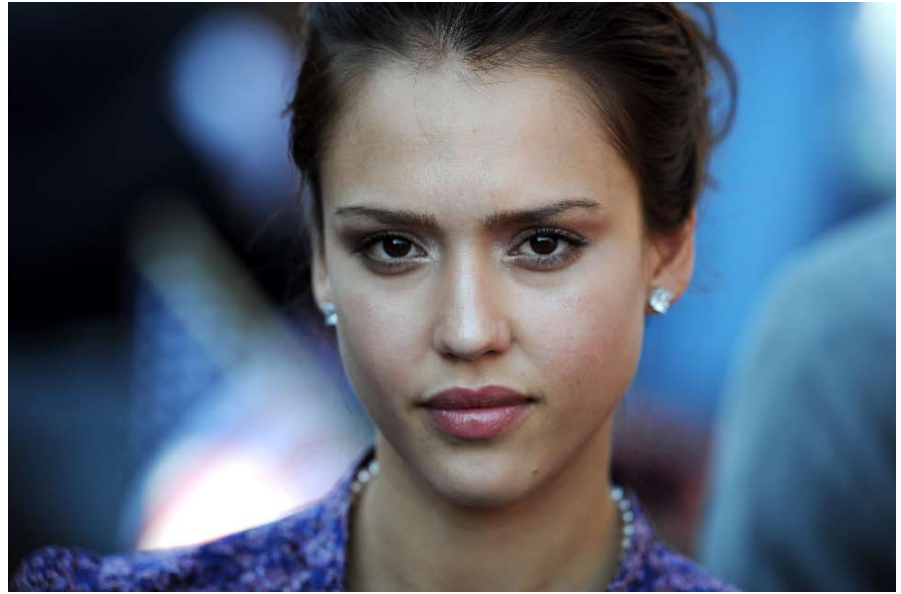
It inspired rapper Bow Wow walking and busing his way through 15 cities in America.

It moved "Spider Man" star Tobey Maguire to lend his voice to a national campaign.

It motivated starlet Jessica Alba to appear gagged in a public service announcement.

What is the "it" that has these music and Hollywood stars so fired up?

VOTING.



It inspired rapper Bow Wow (above) walking and busing his way through 15 cities in America. It moved “Spider Man” star Tobey Maguire to lend his voice to a national campaign. It motivated starlet Jessica Alba (above) to appear gagged in a public service announcement. Newscom photos



GETTING INVOLVED. Actor Tobey Maguire speaks before the US presidential nominees participate in the “ServiceNation Presidential Candidates Forum” at Columbia University in New York, September 11, 2008. REUTERS

What is the “it” that has these music and Hollywood stars so fired up? Voting.

Many in Hollywood, music, sports and even our local communities are working to encourage people, particularly young ones, to vote in the Nov. 4 general election. This event to name our next president, vice president and many other elected officials occurs during a critical point in our history: the economy is weak, U.S. soldiers are overseas fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and concerns about the state of healthcare for all Americans are important issues for all of us.

This presidential race is also historic because it pits Sen. Barack Obama, the first black presidential candidate, and his vice presidential candidate Sen. Joseph Biden against Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain and the first Republican female vice presidential candidate Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. Record voter turnout is expected.

The right to vote is possibly the most important right granted to us as American citizens. In many other nations, the right to vote either doesn’t exist, or is severely restricted or manipulated by the government in power. Most of us reading this lesson are probably still below the minimum voting age of 18; however, now is the time, especially with such an important election to consider how we will

approach voting. Will we view it casually as something we may or may not do without much effort? Or, does the right to vote carry with it any **responsibilities**?

History of Voting

To address these questions, let's first explore the origins of our right to vote. America was founded by men and women who were pursuing individual freedoms. British colonists, living in the 13 colonies of North America, began to **chafe** under the rules of a **monarchy** dictating to them from across the ocean. The idea of freedom and individual rights began to take hold, and in 1775 the colonies fought a war of independence in order to break completely from British rule. In 1776, the colonists, now known as Americans, sent to the King of England a **Declaration of Independence**.

The Declaration of Independence didn't simply tell the King of England of our demands for freedom; it also laid out the principles of why citizens have the right to determine their own government. The Declaration of Independence stated "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, **deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed**". Here the founders of our nation **announced** the core principle that is the foundation of our right to vote today – that the people of a nation have the right to determine their government and its powers. Thousands of revolutionary soldiers died to establish these rights in our war of independence, and throughout our history, hundreds of thousands of American soldiers have died to maintain these rights and to promote these rights for other nations.

Unfortunately, the right to vote, although revolutionary at the time of our nation's founding, did not extend to all Americans. At first white male landowners benefited the most from newfound freedoms, leaving out blacks, women, the poor and even those under 21 years of age.

In subsequent decades, these groups fought hard for, and won, voting rights. In 1870, black men earned the right to vote, though they were discouraged from doing so until the 1960s during the civil rights movement. Women earned the right to choose the country's leadership much later, specifically earning **suffrage** in 1920, with Native Americans following in that privilege some four years later.



Republican Presidential Nominee Sen. John McCain (AZ) (L) and Democratic Presidential Nominee Sen. Barack Obama (IL) participate in the second presidential debate in Nashville, Tennessee, on October 7, 2008. UPI photo

Even the poor – no matter what race or gender—found it difficult to vote during America's early history. In fact, it wasn't until 1964 that a **high poll tax** was lifted, enabling those outside the middle and wealthy class to have a voice. The most recent group to gain voting privileges were young adults, who benefited in the early '70s when the voting age was dropped to allow 18-year-olds into the voting booth.

It may seem jarring that even after such hard struggles, not everyone who is eligible to vote does. During the 2004 election, only 64% of eligible Americans voted, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In a way, this is a sad commentary on how little some citizens value our right to vote. However, is it better for citizens to *not* vote if they don't even care enough to even make the effort?

Rights and Responsibilities

The founders of our nation believed that with rights came **responsibilities**. What are these responsibilities?

In voting, do we have a duty to examine only our own interests and needs, or do we also have a duty to examine the needs and interests of others within our nation and throughout the world?

For example, let's say that you do not come from a poor background, but you are interested in the welfare of those in this country and throughout the world who are poor. You may choose to evaluate which candidate presents the

best policies for helping the most people to climb out of poverty. Of course the best way to lessen poverty is to have a strong economy in general, so economic policy in regards to taxes and government regulation is also important.

As students, we are especially affected by the policies that state and local officials adopt in regards to education. Hopefully, voters who are no longer in school and don't even have children in school will still consider the needs of students and the importance of education for our country.

Another consideration is the candidates' views on international issues, such as combating terrorism, the promoting of freedom, the environment and humanitarian crises – such as the genocide in Darfur. Do we have a responsibility to consider these issues when voting?

Many voters also focus on moral issues such as abortion, gay marriage, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia. These are issues where candidates often have very different positions, and in recent elections have been decisive factors in determining the winner.

In order to be a **responsible** voter, we should decide which issues are important to us and learn about these issues. Then, comes the hard part: researching the candidates' actual stance on such issues and determining which candidate best reflects our priorities and beliefs. This can be difficult with so many competing ads and media spin misrepresenting the realities of issues, and the other candidate's record and positions.

With the rise of the Internet, there are many options that allow us to access

information on issues and candidates, but again much information on the Internet is misleading, biased or simply false. This is where **wisdom** is important – the ability to discern what is true.

In this media environment, being a wise voter means reading and watching news and analysis on the issues from a variety of sources, and to know the bias of these sources. This approach gives us the ability to learn multiple perspectives on the same issue and to then determine which side or policy stance we want to support. Another way to learn more about the candidates is to watch the remaining presidential debate. After the debate it may be interesting to go to a **bipartisan** site called factcheck.org that reviews the accuracy of statements that the candidates made during the debate, accuracy of their ads, statements to the media, and also presents the facts based on actual analysis. Of course a good reflection of a candidate's views and priorities is their actual voting record.

We have seen that the right to vote is a powerful gift granted to us through the sacrifice and heroism of our nation's founders, soldiers and activists who have fought to establish, expand and protect this right. Even though most of us reading this lesson are not yet old enough to vote, it is good to begin considering the responsibilities associated with this right. Soon we will be the ones determining our nation's leaders and policies. To prepare for this, we can now begin considering what issues are important to us and what policies we think would best address these issues. Finally, we can begin to assess how to widely use the many sources of information available to us in discerning which candidates we want to support and are deserving of our vote.

Vocabulary

Annunciated: to announce or proclaim

Chafe: to irritate, to annoy

Citizenship: the status of a citizen with respect to his duties, rights, and privileges; and having the desire to make his state/country a better place

Discern: to come to know or recognize mentally; to recognize or identify as separate and distinct

Monarchy: A form of government where one person reigns over a state or territory, usually for life and by hereditary right such as a king or queen

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable, pursuing excellence

Suffrage: the right to vote

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, understanding or common sense and insight; the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

Declaration of Independence: the public act by which the Second Continental Congress, on July 4, 1776, declared the Colonies to be free and independent of England.

Poll tax: a tax of a fixed amount per person and payable as a requirement for the right to vote

Demeanor: conduct; behavior

Electoral: of, or relating to election

Bipartisan: of, consisting of, or supported by members of two parties, especially two major political parties

WWW.VIRTUEINACTION.ORG

COPYRIGHT OCTOBER, 2008 CURRENT LINKS IN EDUCATION

1126 DARTMOUTH RD. FLOSSMOOR, IL 60422

Phone: 708.922.1075 • Email: virtueinaction@mac.com

Virtue In Action

Rights and Responsibilities

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

Virtues Highlighted

Citizenship , Responsibility , Wisdom

Lesson Goals

- Help students to appreciate the value of our right to vote
- Present an introduction to the history of the establishment of the right to vote and its expansion.
- Develop within students an awareness and acceptance that with rights come responsibilities
- Help students understand the virtues of citizenship, responsibility and wisdom, and to see specifically how these apply to elections
- Encourage students to formulate their own views on what issues, values and public policy objectives are important for them individually, for our nation and for the global community
- Develop within students the desire to learn about candidates' views on important issues
- Facilitate the practicing of meaningful and respectful debate / discussions on public policy issues
- Develop an awareness that ads and much information in the Internet is biased and even misleading, and as future voters we must be wise in discerning the truth behind the issues and candidates' positions

Virtue In Action

Connecting Virtues to Our World

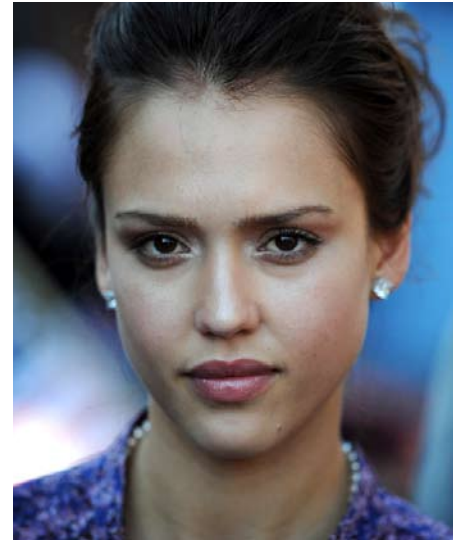
www.virtueinaction.org
 Current Links in Education
 1126 Dartmouth Rd.
 Flossmoor, IL 60422
 708 922 1075
 virtueinaction@mac.com



Cover photo illustration by Donna Gentile Creative, Source: Newscom

Discussion Questions:

1. Explain how Americans gained the right to vote that we today enjoy. Name one group that was excluded from this right and explain when they obtained it.
2. Do you think as Americans that we value our right to vote? Explain what leads you to your conclusion.
3. As American citizens, do you think the rights we enjoy also carry with them responsibilities? If yes, what are our responsibilities with respect to voting?
4. Let's write on the board the issues that we think are important for this presidential election.
 Now, let's determine through a showing of hands, what we think as a class are the three most important issues.
 What are the two candidates' positions on each of these issues?
5. Do you think we can trust campaign ads or the media to present us with accurate information on important issues and candidates' positions on those issues?
 What do you think are some good approaches in attempting to discern the truth behind issues and candidates' positions?
6. Do celebrity endorsements of candidates or drives to get people to vote affect you? If so, how? Do you think stars should use their influence this way?
7. What ways do you think those who are too young to vote can get involved in this year's election? Name ways you would be willing to get involved, or are involved.



Journal Writing Options:

1. Write about the issue that you think is most important for this year's presidential election and your reasons why.
2. Write about what being an American citizen means to you.

Extended Learning Activities:

1. Have students watch two presidential ads for Senators Obama and McCain, and then rate how fair they think the ad was on a scale of 1 to 10. Lead a discussion on whether they find these ads helpful or harmful to the electoral process. Then, instruct students to read about each candidate and the issues over the next several days. Organize the class into groups and ask each to formulate what they think is their own fair, two-minute ad. After each group's ad, ask the rest of the class to evaluate the ad's effectiveness in communicating a message, presenting the truth and whether it was unnecessarily negative in tone.
2. Ask the students to break into groups and pick a group that was initially disenfranchised. Have each group deliver a presentation on the history of the movement that gained the disenfranchised group the right to vote. Have them

explain whether this struggle inspires them to want to exercise their right to vote.

3. Have students watch a portion of one of the presidential or vice presidential debates in class (approximately 20 minutes or so) and then ask them to review the truth of each candidate's statements using factcheck.org. Lead a discussion on how finding out how true or false statements were affects their opinions of candidates or elections in general.

Internet Resources:

CNN Student News One-Sheet: The Right to Vote: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/studentnews/02/04/one.sheet.right.to.vote/index.html>

Sen. Barack Obama (Democrat) Campaign Web Site: Barackobama.com

Sen. John McCain (Republican): johnmccain.com

Facts about candidate statements and policy: Factcheck.org

WWW.VIRTUEINACTION.ORG

COPYRIGHT OCTOBER, 2008 CURRENT LINKS IN EDUCATION

1126 DARTMOUTH RD. FLOSSMOOR, IL 60422

Phone: 708.922.1075 • Email: virtueinaction@mac.com