Becoming an Informed Voter

Purpose of the Lesson: This lesson focuses on every voter’s need to be fully informed about all political races and questions prior to casting a vote on Election Day. Students will develop an understanding of the key concepts and vocabulary needed to responsibly cast their vote by analyzing a sample election ballot.

Lesson Objectives: After completing this lesson, students will be able to

1. define key terms and concepts included on the sample election ballot;
2. read and interpret the sample election ballot; and
3. understand why becoming an informed voter is necessary.

Suggested Time: 2 class periods

Materials (all provided)

1. Sample Ballot (PDF; file found at http://www.miamidade.gov/elections/)
2. Voter Information Guide (PDF; file found at http://www.miamidade.gov/elections/)
3. Voter Vocabulary (Teacher Resource)
4. Questions Regarding the Sample Ballot
5. Questions Regarding the Sample Ballot (Teacher’s Edition)
6. Scavenger Hunt
7. Scavenger Hunt (Teacher’s Edition)

Description of Activities:

The Day Before Beginning the Lesson:

The day before beginning the following lesson, distribute copies of the Sample Ballot. Ask students to review the ballot and to develop a series of questions they have about the ballot. Also ask students to list any vocabulary that needs defining and explanation.

Day #1

1. On Day #1, assign students to groups of 4-5 to discuss the Sample Ballot. Using the list of questions developed by the students about the ballot and the attached list of questions, have students review the Sample Ballot and answer as many questions as possible.

2. Following the group exercise, review the questions on the attachment with the class and clarify any unanswered questions. Spend additional time on the following concepts:

   ✓ Third Party candidates
   ✓ Merit retention
   ✓ Constitutional Amendments
   ✓ Bond referendum

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✓ Charter Amendments

3. Conclude by discussing the following:

What have you learned from studying the Sample Ballot that may help you become a more educated voter?

Day #2

1. Finish any discussion remaining from Day #1.

2. Have students work in pairs to complete the attached Sample Ballot Scavenger Hunt.

Assessment Strategy: Assess group work from Day #1; assess the results of the Scavenger Hunt assignment.

Suggested Link: Miami-Dade County Elections Office
http://www.miamidade.gov/elections/

Source: Portions of this lesson were adapted from “Citizens, Not Spectators,” a series of lesson plans developed by the Center for Civic Education (http://new.civiced.org/cns-teachers/lesson-plans).
**Voter Vocabulary**

- **Absentee ballot**  An election ballot, usually returned by mail, for a voter who cannot be present at the polls.
- **Abstain**  To refuse to exercise the right to vote.
- **Amendment**  A change to the U.S. Constitution or the constitution of a state. Voters must approve any changes to a constitution.
- **Ballot**  A device used to cast votes in an election.
- **Bond**  Bonds are loans sought by municipalities and government agencies, including school districts, to fund projects. The decision on whether to seek a bond (a loan) for projects is voted on by citizens in a bond referendum.
- **Citizen**  A person who is a legal member of a nation, country, or other organized, self-governing political community, such as any of the fifty U.S. states.
- **Democracy**  A form of government in which power is held by the people. The people exercise their power either directly or through elected representatives.
- **Direct democracy**  A form of government in which the people themselves meet and make the laws that they decide are needed.
- **Independent voter**  A person who chooses to register to vote with no party affiliation (NPA). This choice is made on a registration to vote card. The decision to register as an independent voter does not register a voter with any third party, although these third parties are often referred to as independent parties. In some states, registered independent voters cannot participate in primary elections.
- **Initiative**  A proposed law that voters can place on the ballot in some states. If the initiative is passed, it will become a law or constitutional amendment.
- **Majority**  More than half.
- **Majority rule**  A principle of democracy that the greater number of citizens in any political unit should select officials and determine policies. Majority rule is one of the most important principles of democracy, but is not always practiced in societies that value consensus.
- **Merit Retention**  Merit retention is a system of deciding whether State Supreme Court Justices or judges should continue to serve or be replaced.
- **Municipal Charter and Amendments**  A municipal corporation is the legal term for a local governing body, including cities, counties, towns, villages, and boroughs. Municipal incorporation occurs when such municipalities become self-governing entities.
under the laws of the state or in which they are located. Often, this event is marked by the award or declaration of a municipal charter. Changes to the municipal charters are called amendments.

**Minority rights** The principle of a constitutional democracy that government elected by a majority must respect the basic right of minorities.

**Polling place** A location where voters go to vote. A city or town may have multiple polling sites based on home addresses for voters.

**Poll worker** A citizen who takes an oath to carry out a specific duty at an election polling site.

**Proposition** Potential legislation that voters in some states can place on the ballot. If a Proposition passes, it will become a law or constitutional amendment.

**Referendum** A measure approved by legislative body that it places on a ballot for approval by voters. Referendums approved by the voters become law.

**Register** To officially sign up as a qualified voter.

**Straw Ballot** A straw poll or straw vote is a vote with nonbinding results.
Questions Regarding the Sample Ballot

1. On November 6, 2012, who may legally vote in the election?

2. Why is the ballot only called a Sample Ballot?

3. Why does the ballot include 12 different sets of candidates for President/Vice President?

4. Different Congressional Districts are listed. Will all of these candidates appear on every ballot?

5. Where do the Congressional candidates serve? Where do the State Representative serve?

6. What is merit retention for Supreme Court Justices and judges? What does a “yes” or “no” vote mean on the ballot when voting on the Justices of the Supreme Court?

7. Where do members of the Board of County Commissioners serve?

8. What are State Constitutional Amendments?

9. How many Constitutional Amendments are being proposed for Florida’s Constitution?

10. What is a bond referendum? What entity is proposing a bond referendum for $1.2 billion? What will the money be used for if the bond referendum is passed by the voters?

11. What are Charter Amendments and what government entity has amendments on the ballot?
Questions Regarding the Sample Ballot – Teacher’s Guide

1. **On November 6, 2012, who may legally vote in the election?** (To vote, you must be 18 years of age or older, a citizen of the U.S., and registered.)

2. **Why is the ballot called a Sample Ballot?** (Ballots are customized to include contests, amendments, questions, etc. for specific counties cities, towns, etc.)

3. **Why does the ballot include 12 different sets of candidates for President/Vice President?** (In addition to the Democratic and Republican nominees, other Third Party candidates are listed. This is also true in the Senatorial election.)

4. **Different Congressional Districts are listed. Will all of these candidates appear on every ballot?** (No, ballots will be customized by District.)

5. **Where do the Congressional candidates serve? Where do the State Representative serve?** (Congressional candidates serve in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.; State Representatives serve in the State Legislature in Tallahassee.)

6. **What is merit retention for Supreme Court Justices and judges? What does a “yes” or “no” vote mean on the ballot when voting on the Justices of the Supreme Court?** (Merit retention is a system of deciding whether State Supreme Court Justices or judges should continue to serve or be replaced. A “yes” vote means the Justice/judge should be retained (continue to serve). A “no” vote means they should be replaced.)

7. **Where do members of the Board of County Commissioners serve?** (County Commissioners serve on the Miami-Dade County Commission.)

8. **What are State Constitutional Amendments?** (A Constitutional Amendment is a proposed change to the Constitution of the State of Florida. Voters must approve any changes to a Constitution.)

9. **How many Constitutional Amendments are being proposed for Florida’s Constitution?** (12)

10. **What is a bond referendum? What entity is proposing a bond referendum for $1.2 billion? What will the money be used for if the bond referendum is passed by the voters?** (Bonds are loans sought by municipalities and government agencies, including school districts, to fund projects. The decision on whether to seek a bond (a loan) for projects is voted on by citizens in a bond referendum. Miami-Dade County Public Schools is seeking a bond to for modernization and construction of public school facilities, including upgrades to technology.)

11. **What are Charter Amendments and what government entity has amendments on the ballot?** (A municipal corporation is the legal term for a local governing body, including cities, counties, towns, villages, and boroughs. Municipal incorporation occurs when such municipalities become self-governing entities under the laws of the state or in which they are located. Often, this event is marked by the award or declaration of a municipal charter. Changes to the municipal charters are called amendments. The Miami-Dade County Commission is responsible for the proposed charter amendments on the ballot.)
Sample Ballot Scavenger Hunt

Directions: Using the Sample Elections Ballot, find the answers to as many of the questions below as possible.

1. Who is the presidential nominee for the Green Party?
2. How many languages is the Sample Ballot translated into?
3. What political party does the nominee for State Representative, District 111, represent?
4. When voting for the Charter Amendments, what voting choices do you have?
5. How many candidates are running for Representative in Congress in District 26?
6. What dollar amount is being sought for approval by the School Board in the bond referendum? What will the money be used for if the bond referendum passes?
7. What three Florida Supreme Court Justices are being considered for merit retention?
8. What question is being considered in the non-binding straw ballot on funding improved animal services programs?
9. Who is the Republican nominee for United States Senator? Who is the Democratic nominee for United States Senator?
10. What are the differences between the proposed Constitutional Amendments and the County Questions on the ballot?
11. Who is running against Barbara Watson for State Representative in District 107?
12. What is the number of the proposed Constitutional Amendment that address State Courts? Religious freedom?
13. How many Constitutional Amendments are being proposed to the State’s Constitution?
14. What two candidates are running for the office of Board of County Commissioners in District 5?
15. Judge Angel A. Cortinas is seeking to be retained as a judge in which court?
Sample Ballot Scavenger Hunt – Teacher’s Edition

1. Who is the presidential nominee for the Green Party? Jill Stein

2. How many languages is the Sample Ballot translated into? Three – English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole

3. What political party does the nominee for State Representative, District 111, represent? Republican

4. When voting for the Charter Amendments, what voting choices do you have? Yes or No

5. How many candidates are running for Representative in Congress for District 26? 4

6. What dollar amount is being sought for approval by the School Board in the bond referendum? What will the money be used for if the bond referendum passes? $1.2 billion; to modernize and construct school facilities throughout the district, including improving educational technology.

7. What three Florida Supreme Court Justices are being considered for merit retention? Justices R. Fred Lewis, Barbara Pariente, and Peggy Quince.

8. What question is being considered in the non-binding straw ballot on funding improved animal services programs? Should funding be used to decrease the killing of adoptable cats and dogs, reducing stray cat populations, and funding free and low-cost spay/neuter programs.

9. Who is the Republican nominee for United States Senator? Who is the Democratic nominee for United States Senator? Connie Mack – Republican and Bill Nelson – Democrat

10. What are the differences between the proposed Constitutional Amendments and the County Questions on the ballot? Constitutional Amendments will change Florida’s Constitution and impact the entire state. The County Questions will only impact Miami-Dade.

11. Who is running against Barbara Watson for State Representative in District 107? She is unopposed.

12. What is the number of the proposed Constitutional Amendment that addresses State Courts? Religious freedom? 5 and 8

13. How many Constitutional Amendments are being proposed to the State’s Constitution? 12

14. What two candidates are running for the office of Board of County Commissioners in District 5? Bruno A. Barreiro and Luis Garcia

15. Judge Angel A. Cortinas is seeking to be retained as a judge in which court? Third District Court of Appeals