

Election and Children: Sensitising Young Learners to Democratic Processes

~ Sujata C



Getting children interested in democracy or anything related to civics in this age of smartphones is a challenging task. General election or parliament election is hence a welcome opportunity to inculcate an awareness of civics and citizenship in young minds. The nation is poll bound and the timing is ripe for hands-on learning to take place. The whole nation transforms into a civics lab during general election. It is like a live project in civics is underway.

Civics is introduced in class 6 in most schools and students begin to learn about governments and administrations and so on. But at times, the subject might become dry and monotonous, so students might lose interest in it. Our task on hand is to arouse curiosity among young learners about the political processes, which will prod them automatically to read their textbooks with more interest. In fact, the idea of civics must be introduced much before class 6 – maybe in standard



3 itself in the form of community science. After all a school is a community that children are exposed to. They are familiar with it and know how it is structured. After school years this community disappears and becomes a part of the memory and photo album. This community feeling that a school offers must be built upon and amplified to bring a sense of belonging and responsibility towards society.



The subject of community science can lay out the bare bone structure of a society. Family is the first community children are exposed to. Here they learn the rules of living in groups as they follow the advices of their parents who head the families. As children grow up, the idea of the community expands to a larger scale. After family and friends, a school is the most significant institution in a child's life. Schools play a critical part in getting students thinking about the society; how and where they fit in. During festivals children participate in activities with their neighbours. They learn to compare different kind of communities; such as a village community with a city community, and identify their positives and negatives. They witness how different kinds of people (police, doctors, firefighters, social activists, etc.) come together in the time of a disaster to control the situation. Thus they learn the dynamics of community living and it becomes a part of their lifelong learning.

Small but significant activities can help children realise that their little contributions can make a difference to the society. That's how the idea of citizenship and social responsibility can sink in into the minds of the young learners. This strengthens the foundation of a democracy.



In our country, general election is held every five years. During election season the centre stage is taken by the common people as political parties try to woo them through their election campaigns. The ruling parties flaunt their achievements, and the opponents highlight the failures of the government with promises to resolve them if they are elected to power. Though people have the ultimate power to decide who will govern our country for the coming five

years, sometimes they get swayed by hollow promises and freebies doled out by some political parties as part of their propaganda. That's why children should be

encouraged to be politically aware so that they can choose their future leaders wisely, and even become leaders themselves.

Recent trends show indifference among voters towards the election process.ⁱ To vote is the constitutional right of every citizen in our country. Children should be taught not to take their freedom and rights for granted. These rights and liberty were hard-earned and achieved after years of struggle. Classes of civics should be linked with history where teachers could talk about the freedom movements against the British, the Independence of India, the formation of our Constitution, and the concepts of democracy and constitutional crisis.



Nowadays, people have easy access to information due to the convergence of traditional and digital media, and children are no exception. But do they know the importance of elections?

Value of democracy: To drive home the value of the freedom enjoyed by the citizens of democratic nations, one must compare the life in countries like India with that in some of the non-democratic nations of the world where freedom of expression is compromised by brutal silencing of dissent. In a monarchy, the king is above everyone. In a democracy the rulers are answerable to the people who have elected them; they are the representatives of the people.

Trending issues of the 2019 general election:

- **Fake news** is one the biggest threats of the upcoming general elections. It gained currency in the 2016 US general elections when it leveraged social



media to falsify facts. *Fake news* was named the word of the year in 2017. One of the tasks of the teachers would be to help students understand the difference between news and fake news, and to identify fake news. Social media helps to spread fake news by making it viral. Even though the government has tightened the

regulations on social media after the US elections, the misinformation being spread through mass media and the muzzling of free press by threatening those who choose to speak and question is a bigger challenge.

- Campaigns through social media:** Social media is the new source of information in the digital era. But how we will use it depends on none but us. Nowadays, it is used to make fake news viral. WhatsApp messages and YouTube videos are the rage now, and trolling is the new game being played out. Since all the top national leaders are on Twitter, it is an open field for all. Dissenting voices are threatened, abused, and even silenced as seen in many cases. It is a sad reflection of the times, especially in a land where a century ago in 1917, Gandhi started the first *Satyagraha* in Champaran. How much of all this can school children grasp? Teachers have to take a call on this by gauging the maturity levels of students.
- Corporatisation of mainstream media:** Freedom of speech is one of the pillars of democracy and when this pillar becomes weak, it signifies that the freedom of the nation is at stake – not from external rulers but the internal forces that control the press and dish out only one sided versions of the news. Information is power and the only weapon in the hand of the citizens. But the moment they are deprived of correct information, they become a puppet in the hands of those who control media and manipulate and brainwash the audience to do their bidding. Debates and discussions are part of any healthy democracy and right information is the foundation of such debates. But the prime time debates on the news channels can teach how not to debate, because they do not follow the ethics of debate and discussion. It is important to sensitise students to the fact that television channels have political backing and are used as propaganda tools by parties. Almost every political party now has a TV channel to air its views. It is only the discerning viewer who will know who is who and will take the messaging with a pinch of salt.



- **Issues before voters:** What are the issues that exist before the voters prior to the election? Encourage children to look back at the last five years and list the issues that the government must be answerable for. Ask your class which



issue matters the most to them and what will they vote for if given a chance - development, women's safety, farmers' distress, climate change, jobs, etc.

- **Technology in elections:** The 2014 elections were completely electronic and used electronic voting machines (EVMs) and VVPATs. The idea of electronic voting machine was introduced to save on the printing cost of crores of ballot papers. It prevents rigging and saves time of counting the votes. All this was fine but it came to be known that EVMs are not totally tamper proof. Hence an additional security measure, Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) was introduced which enables the EVM to generate a slip with the symbol of the vote cast.

- **NOTA (None of the Above):** NOTA gives voters the right to reject all the candidates fielded in their constituency. The 2014 Indian general elections polled 1.1% NOTA votes which accounted for over 6,000,000 voters. Will this number go down or up in the next elections? It will perhaps depend on the kind of candidates fielded by the political parties.
- **Political Biopics:** Silver screen is the new tool in the arsenal of leaders when it comes to wooing the mass. Indian elections are nothing short of a Bollywood epic and the silver screen alone has the capacity to have a larger than life impact on viewers. The trend of making inspiring films based on stories of celebrities and sportsmen has taken a political turn with film-makers making biopics on leaders. *Thackeray* (on Bal Thackeray, the founder and former chief of Shiv Sena), *The Accidental Prime Minister* (on former prime minister Manmohan Singh), *Yatra* (on Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh), and *NTR Kathanayakudu* and *NTR Mahanayakudu* (on N. T. Rama Rao, former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh) are some of the films released so far. More are in the pipeline: one on Rahul Gandhi – *My Name Is RaGa* and another on the

present prime minister titled *PM Narendra Modi*. While parties may not openly admit to the use of films as a propaganda tool, since the timing of releasing these films is coinciding with elections, the real intent is quite clear. However, whether they will influence the voters or not is something that remains to be seen. The Election Commission has recently taken a bold step by stalling the release of the biopics before the elections.

The world is at a matured stage of the information age making this an exciting time to be a citizen of a democracy. As teachers, we must remember democracy itself is a fragile idea and needs protection. It is up to us how we groom our students for the task of shielding it.

Sujata C is a writer and editor with more than thirty years of experience. She writes on children, environment, society as well as technology. She has also been a copywriter with an advertising agency for almost fifteen years.

ⁱ <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/how-does-india-vote-short-reading-list>

Lesson Plan: Election and Children

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Teachers may choose from the following activities for the students as per their levels.

1. Ask students to **find out how many eligible voters are in India and how many of them actually vote**, from the data available online.
2. **Stage a mock TV debate** among students. Divide them into groups of four or five and give them different roles (anchor, political analyst, representative of political parties, etc.).
3. **Identify institutions that work for civil society** and guide students to prepare a report on their activities.
4. **Ask children to write an essay** about what they comes to their mind when they think of the term, *democracy*. Help them **find out the roots of the word, democracy and the country of its origin**.
5. Conduct a **quiz on the theme of democracy** in class.



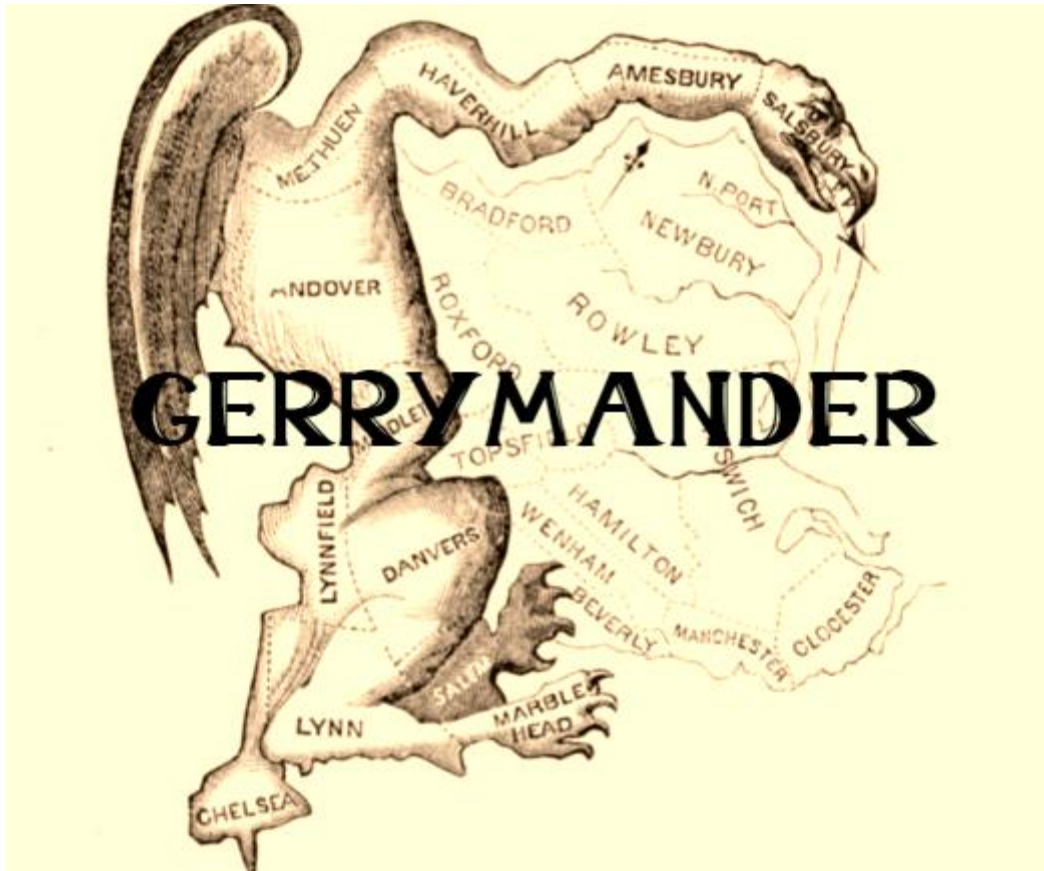
6. Encourage students to research online and prepare a report on **how fake news influenced the US 2016 elections**.



7. Help students to **gather old political cartoons and slogans**, and ask them to make a presentation with them.
8. Ask students to **create an illustration** depicting the stark difference of democracy with monarchy and dictatorship.
9. Encourage students to **watch different news satires** aired online and in electronic media.
10. Encourage students to talk to people like the watchman, gardener, school bus driver, canteen and housekeeping staff of the school, etc., and **gather their opinions on political parties and leaders**.
11. Ask students to make **posters on the theme of corruption free politics** and display in the class.

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Gerrymander (used both as verb and noun)



Pronunciation: /'dʒɛrɪˌmændə/

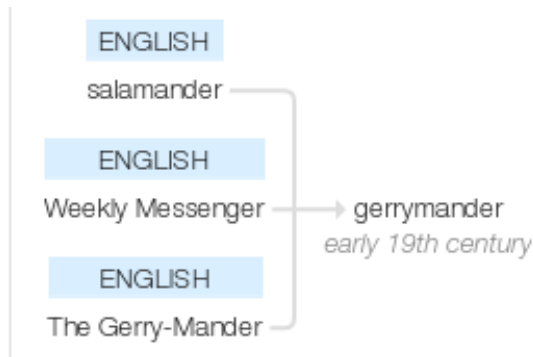
Meaning:

1. **As verb:** Manipulate the boundaries of (an electoral constituency) so as to favour one party or class
2. **As noun:** An instance of gerrymandering

Origin and additional information: Early 19th century: from the name of Governor Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts + salamander, from the supposed similarity between a salamander and the shape of a new voting district on a map drawn when he was in office (1812), the creation of which was felt to favour his party; the map (with claws, wings, and fangs added) was published in the **Boston Weekly Messenger**, with the title *The Gerry-Mander*. The word is sometimes erroneously spelt in British English as “jerrymander”.



The map published in Boston Weekly Messenger



Use over time for: gerrymander



Word section: One of the first recorded usages of *Gerrymander* can be found on the May 23, 1812 edition of *The Columbian Centinel*, a former Boston newspaper:

The sensibility of the good people of Massachusetts is...awakened to this 'Gerrymander'.

The word was used repeatedly that year and the following in papers like Boston Weekly Messenger, Salem Gazette, New York Post, Boston Gazette, Massachusetts Spy, etc., and gradually became popular due to its larger political connotation. Two more derivatives of the word are *gerrymandered* (adjective) and *gerrymanderer* (noun).

Usage:

1. They attempted also to Gerrymander the State for the choice of Representatives to Congress.
(Source: New Work Post, December 28, 1812)
2. He gerrymandered electoral districts in order to control the results and sought to regulate the press.
(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gerrymander>)
3. Umno continues to benefit from a gerrymander that favours rural Malay seats on peninsular Malaya as well as Sabah and Sarawak in northern Borneo.
(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gerrymander>)

Contents sources majorly from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.