

Electing County Commissioners

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about the role of county commissioners in local government. After identifying the ways counties can elect commissioners, they will work in groups to rank county priorities and develop a political platform for a county commissioner running for election. Finally, the class will explore the local campaign process by participating in a mock county commissioner election.

Grade

10

NC Essential Standards for American History: the Principles, Civics & Economics

- FP.C&G.2.1 - Analyze the structures of national, state and local governments in terms of ways they are organized to maintain order, security, welfare of the public and the protection of citizens (e.g., federalism, the three branches, court system, jurisdictions, judicial process, agencies, etc.)
- FP.C&G.2.2 - Summarize the functions of North Carolina state and local governments within the federal system of government (e.g., local charters, maintain a militia, pass ordinances and laws, collect taxes, supervise elections, maintain highways, types of local governments, etc.).
- FP.C&G.2.7 - Analyze contemporary issues and governmental responses at the local, state, and national levels in terms of how they promote the public interest and/or general welfare (e.g., taxes, immigration, naturalization, civil rights, economic development, annexation, redistricting, zoning, national security, health care, etc.)

Essential Questions

- What is a county commissioner and what duties does a commissioner perform?
- Why are the decisions made by County Commissioners relevant to each of us?
- What is the process for electing county commissioners?
- Why is it important for citizens to participate in the election of their county's commissioners?

Materials

- North Carolina-County Commissioner, reading attached
- County Issues handout, attached
- County Commissioner Ballots, attached

Duration

60-90 minutes

Preparation

As a homework assignment the evening before this activity, have students read the attached *North Carolina-County Commissioner*.

Procedure

County Commissioners in North Carolina

1. As a warm-up—and to review their homework reading—place students in groups of 3 and ask them to write down at least 5 things they know about **county commissioners in local government**. You may want to ask specific questions to initiate their thinking:
 - Why do counties have commissioners?

- What are some responsibilities of county commissioners? How do they differ from city council members?
- How are county commissioners chosen?
- What, if anything, do you know about your county's commissioners?

After students have had enough time to create lists (about 3 minutes) have them share with the class what they came up with. Be sure to correct any misconceptions that might arise and praise thoughtful responses.

2. Explain that **counties** are the oldest form of local government in the United States, and that they were originally created by states to give citizens greater access to government services. (**Article VII** of the **NC Constitution** provides for the **General Assembly** to organize **county governments**.) Because it was so difficult to travel in the 17th and 18th centuries, citizens could not be reasonably expected to go all the way to the state capital every time they needed to conduct official business. For this reason, local governments were established in counties, and **county commissioners** were selected to govern each county.

Today, North Carolina is divided into 100 counties, each of which is governed by a **board of county commissioners**. Up until the Civil War, county commissioners were appointed by the state. Today, however, citizens in each county elect a board of county commissioners, as well as a **sheriff** and a **register of deeds**.

3. Explain to students that the board of county commissioners is essentially responsible for 3 things: setting the county's **tax rate**, adopting the **county budget**, and making local laws (**ordinances**) for the county. (What do the first 2 have in common? Money!) Of course, it is a bit more complicated than it sounds. When deciding on a tax rate and adopting a budget, county commissioners must make decisions about the types of services and the level of services the county will provide to citizens. Counties spend most of their money on education and human services, such as mental health, public health, and social services. Additionally, boards of county commissioners establish county policies by issuing "orders" or "directives," adopting resolutions reflecting the board's prevailing view on an issue, and passing ordinances, or local laws, on a variety of matters like zoning, animal leash laws, and use of county parking lots.
4. Ask students to think about some decisions their own county commissioners might have to make that would affect them directly. Give them a few minutes to share their thoughts. Such issues might include things like funding levels for schools or after school programs, curfew ordinances, construction of a new football field or skateboard park, or rezoning to allow for the development of a new mall. Explain that a county commissioner's position on funding and policy decisions has huge political implications. In fact, the positions that county commissioners assume regarding certain issues are the basis on which citizens decide which commissioners to elect.

Electing County Commissioners

5. Tell students that county commissioners in North Carolina are elected in 1 of 3 types of elections:
 - **At large:** commissioners represent an entire county, and they are elected by all voting citizens in the county;
 - **District:** commissioners represent a district within their county, and they are elected by citizens living within their district;
 - **Mixed:** a mixture of at large and district elections.

Further, explain that the purpose of district elections is to move the electoral process closer to proportional representation.

6. Tell students that they are about to participate in a mock county commissioner election. The class represents a county, and they will be electing 2 new county commissioners to represent their interests on

the board of county commissioners. This will require students to think about the issues they feel are important and select a commissioner who they believe will do the best job of representing their interests.

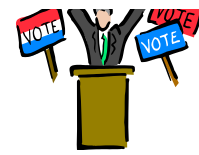
7. Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. Either assign roles or allow groups to self-select their roles within the group. The roles include:
 - **Commissioner Candidate:** The candidate is responsible for developing the group's platform and writing the "speech" with the help of the campaign manager. The candidate will present the 2-3 minute speech to the class based on the group's decisions regarding issues facing the county and will answer post-speech questions with the assistance of the Campaign Manager.
 - **Campaign Manager(s):** The campaign manager will be responsible for making sure the group stays focused, cohesive, and works in a timely manner. Additionally, the campaign manager will assist in developing the group's platform, writing the candidate's speech, and answering any post-speech clarification questions.
 - **Campaign Art Designer(s):** The campaign art designer is responsible for developing the candidate's slogan and campaign posters/fliers/jingles/etc. Artistic creativity in this role is important and encouraged. Additionally, the campaign art designer(s) will be responsible for developing the group's platform.
8. Tell students that in their groups they will have approximately 25 minutes to:
 - Read over the attached "County Issues" sheet
 - Rank the issues in order of importance to them as a group
 - Deliberate on a "**platform**" (a list of the principles which a political candidate supports in order to appeal to the public for the purpose of being voted into office); For the purposes of this activity, each candidate must choose a primary issue (which issue is most important to them) and a secondary issue
 - Write and practice a speech
 - Create visuals (or other artistic expressions) for promoting their candidate.
9. Tell students that after 25 minutes of preparation the candidates from each group will have 2-3 minutes to present their "stump-speech," which explains their platform (the issue(s) the group felt most strongly needed to be addressed by the board of county commissioners and why). After students have heard all speeches, they will elect 2 candidates to the board of commissioners.
10. Before students begin their work, tell them the issues on the "County Issues" sheet can be addressed in many ways. Encourage students to be creative in thinking of tactics to address the issues in their speeches. Finally, remind students of group work expectations and allow them to begin.
11. Actively monitor the classroom to ensure students stay on track and assist groups as needed. After 25 minutes, have students return to their seats and go over expected audience member expectations (remind them to be respectful of others as they present, to listen to the candidate rather than working on their own presentation, etc.) Either call on volunteers to go first, or select candidates to present. While a candidate is presenting, the rest of the group should be holding up their candidate's signs or otherwise participating by sharing their slogans or jingles on behalf of the candidate. The remainder of class should take notes on the information they hear presented by each candidate/team (remind students this is the information they will use to determine who to vote for.) After each 2-3 minute presentation, give the class 1-2 minutes to ask any follow-up or clarification questions they might have. Although the questions will be directed at the candidate, the other group members may also participate in answering.
10. After all candidates have had an opportunity to present their platforms, hold an election in which each student writes the name of the 2 candidates they wish to have elected to the board of county commissioners on the "ballot" provided. Remind students that they should vote for the candidate whose views/platform aligned most closely with their own. While you tally the votes, ask students to write a paragraph explaining

why they chose the candidates they voted for. Once you have tallied the votes, announce the winners and congratulate them (and everyone else) on a job well done.

11. Debrief by having a discussion where students have an opportunity to share their thoughts on why they voted for the candidates they did. (You can address the issue of a “popularity contest” since in reality that is often how candidates are elected into office.) Prompt students to think more broadly about the issues they had to deliberate on. Ask:
- In your groups, how did you work together to rank the issues? Were there issues not on the sheet that arose? If so, what were they?
 - Was there any disagreement in deciding which issues were more important than others? Do you think our commissioners have similar disagreements? Explain. If you had a disagreement, how did you press through it to develop your platform? Do you think this is similar to the process our county commissioners go through? Explain.
 - Do you think these are issues that actually affect counties? (Yes!) Which of these issues, or other issues not represented, are currently most important to our county? How might our county commissioners impact these issues?
 - You saw the term “budget constraint” often, yet you probably did not talk about it much in your speech. Why might that have been the case?
 - Why don’t candidates talk about raising taxes to provide better services, even if they know they will have to once they are elected?
 - Do you have confidence that the candidates you elected will make good on their promises? Why or why not?
 - Why is it important for citizens of a county to participate in the election of their county commissioners?
 - In what ways do your county commissioners directly impact you?
 - Even though we now understand what a great impact our commissioners have on us, many North Carolinians do not participate in local elections. On average in past elections only 10% of citizens have vote in their local elections! Why do you think there is such low voter turnout? What can we do to counteract such voter apathy?

Culminating Activities

- Using your county’s website as a source, have students research their own board of county commissioners. Make sure they are able to answer the following questions:
 - How many commissioners make up the board of commissioners in your county?
 - Who are your commissioners?
 - How are the commissioners on your board elected—at large? By district? A mixture?
 - When does your board of county commissioners meet?
 - What are some major issues that were recently decided on in your county?
- Have students write a debriefing essay in which they answer these questions.
- Show the short, 4 minute video about counties and the services they provide at http://www.welcometoyourcounty.org/content/nc_county_government_video.shtm



You're Running for County Commissioner!

Decide who will play what role in your group:

_____ **Candidate:** The candidate will assist in developing the group's platform and assist in writing the speech. The candidate will then deliver the 2-3 minute speech to the class.

_____ **Campaign Manager:** The campaign manager will be responsible for making sure the group stays focused, cohesive, and works in a timely manner. Additionally, the campaign manager will assist in developing the group's platform, assist in writing the candidate's speech, and assist in answering any post-speech clarification questions.

_____ **Campaign Art Designer:** The campaign art designer is responsible for developing the candidate's slogan and campaign posters/fliers/jingles/etc. Artistic creativity in this role is important and encouraged. Additionally, the campaign art designer(s) is responsible for assisting with developing the group's platform and answering post-speech clarification questions.

You and your team must take the following steps to ensure your candidate is going to be elected to your county's board of county commissioners:

- Read over the "County Issues" below
- Discuss and rank the issues as a group; place a 1 beside what you feel is the most important issue to voters, 2 beside the second most important, and so on.
- Deliberate on a **platform** (a list of the principles which a political candidate supports in order to appeal to the public for the purpose of being voted into office). For the purposes of this activity, your group must choose a primary issue (which issue is most important) and a secondary issue (the issue of second most importance). These will be the issues you center your campaign around.
- Write and practice a **speech** that discusses why you will make a good county commissioner and address how you will improve these two issues if you are elected.
- Create **visuals** (or other artistic expressions) for promoting your candidate.
- Your candidate will present your group's speech to the remainder of class, after which classmates can ask questions of your group (the campaign manager and art designer can assist in answering the questions). Be prepared to think on your feet!
- After all candidates have delivered their speeches and been questioned, the class will vote on two county commissioners to elect to office. Good luck!

County Issues

Education

County commissioners determine how much funding to allocate to schools (only teacher salaries are provided through state funding; all other funding is determined locally). School boards then determine how to allocate these funds.

The county has recently experienced a downward trend in End of Course test scores in virtually every discipline. Teachers and parents alike believe this trend is due, at least in part, to county funding originally earmarked for education being spent on other public services in the past years. In order for the county to continue receiving additional funding from the state for educational expenses, and for teachers (who are currently paid less than the state average) to receive pay bonuses, this trend must be reversed.

Public Safety

The county is responsible for providing public safety to county citizens. The sheriff is elected separately from the commissioners, but the commissioners allocate funding to the sheriff's office.

Public safety issues are on the rise in the county. In the past 2 years, violent crime has increased by 10 percent, and reported robberies and vandalism have nearly doubled. Many citizens do not feel safe outside of their homes at night. Some attribute the increase in crime to the increase in gang activity in the area. Some also believe that a curfew on youths under the age of 18 might curtail the increase in crime. One of the incumbent commissioners went so far as to say that she believed minors should not be allowed out after 9:00pm unless accompanied by an adult. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that public safety efforts need to be stepped up, and that doing so would require a significant shift in budget priorities.

Growth and Development

County commissioners make decisions that affect the growth and development within the county. Often, this is a very contentious issue: to build or not to build?

Citizens of the county are also split on whether to keep with the status quo and hinder new development in the area or to open up the county for development of all kinds. One developer recently expressed interest in building a new shopping mall on top of one of the county's most used parks. Another developer has shown interest in building a maximum security prison in the county. Both developers argue that such growth would ultimately increase the tax base of the county, freeing up money for new and improved public services. These projects would also create hundreds of new jobs for county residents.

Environment

Related to growth and development are a myriad of environmental issues. County commissioners decide how to dispose of trash, whether or not to have recycling programs, and what kinds of public vehicles (buses, police cars, fire trucks, etc.) are purchased, among many other things.

Because of budgetary constraints, the county had to do away with its recycling program 2 years ago. Since then, the amount of garbage making its way to the landfill has increased dramatically. Citizens have also started to notice a lot more litter in the streets, in parks, and even in their yards. Some commissioners recently expressed interest in building a new landfill.

Additionally, the county has not upgraded its fleet and transit vehicles in years. Most vehicles, many of which are SUVs, are running on regular fuels and contributing unnecessarily to the county's carbon footprint. One local scientist believes that if this trend continues for the next decade, it will be unhealthy for children to play outside.

Social Services

The entire nation is currently experiencing a health crisis, and the effects are being felt throughout the county. Currently, the county health department provides free and low-cost health insurance for families with children, pregnant women, and disabled adults, as well as free checkups for local school sports teams. Additionally, the social services department runs a homeless shelter and a successful "back-to-work" program for citizens who have had difficulty making ends meet. Budgetary constraints this election year may force the social services department to cut some or all of these services. Some citizens fear that doing so may mean a significantly unhealthier county with an increase in homelessness.

Notes:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

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COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

COUNTY COMMISSIONER BALLOT

Candidate 1:

Candidate 2:

vote.

North Carolina

County Commissioner-your local legislators

County Commissioners- DID YOU KNOW?

North Carolina is divided into 100 counties, each of which is governed by a board of county commissioners. Residents elect individual county commissioners to represent them on the boards. Five commissioners make up the typical board, but some boards have as few as three commissioners, and others have as many as 11. In some counties, commissioners are elected at-large and represent an entire county. In other counties, commissioners are elected by district and represent that district within their county. Some counties elect both at-large and district-level county commissioners. Most county commissioners are elected to four-year terms. Most boards elect their chair, but in some counties, citizens elect the chair of the board. Boards must meet at least once per month, keep record of what takes place and make those available to the public.

Boards of county commissioners are responsible for setting their county's property tax rate and adopting the county budget each year. When adopting a budget, county commissioners make decisions about the level of services that their county will provide to its citizens. Counties spend most of their money on education and human services, such as mental health, public health, and social services. Boards of county commissioners establish county policies by issuing orders or directives, adopting resolutions reflecting the board's prevailing view on an issue, and passing ordinances, or local laws, on matters as varied as zoning, animal leash laws and use of county parking lots. Boards also have the authority to focus on policy and hire a professional county manager or administrator to oversee the day-to-day operations of county government.

★ County governments were originally created by the state to give citizens greater access to government services. Because it was so difficult to travel in the 17th and 18th centuries, citizens could not reasonably be expected to come to the state capital every time they needed to conduct official business.

★ When North Carolina joined with the other colonies and declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776, 35 county governments existed in the state, concentrated near the coast. As the population increased and the citizens began migrating westward, counties increased in number and decreased in size, so that citizens would have easier access to government services. By 1800, the state had 65 counties. In 1900, 97 counties. Avery, the newest county, formed in 1911.

HELP WANTED COUNTY COMMISSIONER

He or she must be:

- ★ 21 years old
- ★ Reside in the county or district that he or she seeks to represent

Think more!

★ All North Carolinians live in a county and are, therefore, represented by a county commissioner. Using your county's website as a resource, research your board of county commissioners. Who are your commissioners? Are they elected at-large or county-wide or by district? When does your board of commissioners meet? Check news reports and online sources to identify candidates for county commissioner on this year's ballot.

★ County services include public education, public health, mental health, social services, and public safety. Search your local newspaper for stories that refer to services provided by the county. If you were a candidate for county commissioner, which of the services would you talk about in your campaign speeches? Conduct research, write and deliver a speech.