

Voting in the United Nations - What is "Fair"?

The United Nation General Assembly has 193 members. Each country gets one vote. This seems unfair, because half of the countries have populations less than New York City. That adds up to nearly 100 votes for a group of countries that have a total population of less than either China or India, which get only one vote each.

Open the multimedia unit called Voting in the UN in the Teaching Geography CD.

- _____ 1. Map 1A just puts numbers on a simple basemap of the world. Each number shows how many countries are in a specific world region (regions defined at www.prb.org). Write how many votes South America now has in the UN General Assembly.
- _____ 2. Move your pointer across the triangle at the top of the screen. This triangle allows you to set the percentages of General Assembly votes that depend on population, wealth, and number of countries. Move your pointer so that 100 percent of the votes depend on population. Click to see the results. How many votes does South America have with this approach?
3. Move your pointer over the color-selection bar, and click to see different backgrounds. Which background color do you think makes the map easiest to read? Why?
- _____ 4. Move your pointer over the triangle and click to assign 100 percent of the votes according to wealth (total Gross National Product). Which world region has the most votes with this system?
- _____ 5. Move your pointer so that population, wealth, and number of countries have roughly equal influence on the number of votes (about 33 percent for each). How many votes would East Asia (China, Japan, Korea) get with this system?
- _____ 6. Move your pointer over the triangle and try to adjust the numbers so that North America and East Asia get the same number of votes. What percentage of the voting did you base on population?
7. Try to adjust the numbers so that Africa has the same total number of votes as Europe. (You can roll your pointer over the "Last Click" button at any time to see the numbers that were entered the last time you clicked.) What percentages did you set ?
Number of Countries _____ Population _____ Gross National Product _____

Number maps like this are easy to make, but you have to read the results one region at a time. To make geographic patterns easier to see, cartographers (map makers) have invented some map "languages" that do a better job of attracting attention. The rest of the CD unit allows you to explore some of these map languages. Which one do you like best, and why?

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Project 1: An illustrated speech about Voting in the UN General Assembly

Imagine that you were an analyst from one of the following countries:

Bangladesh (large but poor), Belgium (small and rich), Benin (small and poor),
or Brazil (large and moderately wealthy). Choose one and write its name here _____.

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Use the tools in this unit to make a map that shows the pattern of voting that you think would be fair from the perspective of this country. When you find a combination you like, you might copy the information by hand to a basemap. Alternatively, use PRNT SCRNI to copy your map to the computer clipboard; then open your favorite word processor or drawing program and import your map.

If your teacher suggests, you can do more research on your country in an atlas, almanac, or on-line at www.prn.org or www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/

Make a map or other illustration for a political speech to convince people to support what you think is the best way of assigning votes in the UN General Assembly.

Project 2: Coalitions for votes on the UN Security Council

The Security Council in the United Nations has 15 members. Five are "permanent" members:

Britain China France Russia United States

The other ten members are elected for two-year terms. As a result of these rules, India often is not on the Security Council (though it is the second largest country in the world, with more than a billion people). In some years, whole continents might not be represented.

Some people have suggested that the United Nations would work better if each major part of the world had at least one vote on the Security Council every year.

One suggestion is to give one vote to each country with more than a certain number of people. Here are the top 10 countries (million people). Circle which ones you think should get votes :

China 1400 India 1300 United States 315 Indonesia 250 Brazil 195
Pakistan 180 Nigeria 170 Bangladesh 155 Russia 145 Japan 130

Let's say you picked 170 million as your base. Any group of countries with a total population of more than 170 million could form a group and claim a seat on the Security Council. For example, France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands could form a group to claim a seat.

Try to form groups of countries that total more than your population minimum and have similar interests. For example, countries that have a common language, similar economies, or trade treaties would be more likely to vote alike.

By contrast, countries that have dissimilar climates, had conflicts in the past, or are separated by great distances might be less interested in forming a group and "sharing" a vote on the Security Council. You can find data from an almanac, atlas, or source such as www.prb.org,

Mark each group with a distinctive color or other symbols on a map. Then write a paragraph to explain why you think the countries that you put in that group are similar.