Voting in the United Nations
(adapted from ARGWorld Activity C – Association of American Geographers)

Overview

Students use a CD simulation to examine the effects of changing the rules that are used to assign votes in the United Nations General Assembly. Then they try to design a map that can help persuade other people to accept a particular rule for assigned votes. Finally, they try to identify groups of nations that might have similar interests and have a total population of at least 200 million people. In doing so, they explore both the political geography of the world and the attractiveness and readability of a number of different "map vocabularies" for displaying quantitative information.

Learner outcomes and standards

After doing this Activity, a student should be able to:

1) describe how countries are represented in the UN General Assembly and Security Council
   (Standard 18: the spatial organization of human activities);

2) outline a geographical reason why representation in the General Assembly of the United Nations is not equitable, thus making the organization less effective than it could be
   (Standard 13D: examine organizations that transcend national boundaries to assess their impact);

3) list advantages and drawbacks of several different ways of displaying quantitative information on a world map (Standard 1: develop and use different kinds of maps)

4) describe groups of countries that might be similar enough to "share" a United Nations vote under a new system of allocating seats on the Security Council
   (Standard 13: the forces of cooperation and conflict among people).

This Activity fits a unit on world geography or political geography. It also fits units on world history, civics, or political science. The use of proportional symbols makes this Activity a useful lesson in graphical display and interpretation of statistical information – a key Common Core goal.

Resources

Time: ten minutes to illustrate the main point with the CD; up to four or five days if students design their maps to persuade and/or do research on groups of countries

Multimedia units on Voting in the UN, Megacities (scaled-symbol maps), Law of the Sea, Top-12 Lists

Classroom procedures

1) Raise questions about voting in the General Assembly and the Security Council. Part 1 of the multimedia unit can help with this discussion, or you can summarize it in your own way.

2) Hand out the activity sheets, or use the multimedia unit to demonstrate how the geographic pattern of votes might change if the United Nations Charter were amended to use different criteria to assign seats in the General Assembly.

3) If desired, have students do optional Activity 4 - independent investigation and writing.

Alternative introductions

1) Describe a tiny country – Andorra, Nauru, Liechtenstein, Dominica, Grenada, Tuvalu, Monaco, etc.:

> ? Can you imagine an entire country with a population less than [name a nearby city or suburb with fewer than 100,000 people]?

> ? A country that size is entitled to a seat in the General Assembly, the main deliberative body in the United Nations. (What is a deliberative body?)

> ? Is it fair for a country of 100,000 people to have the same voting strength as a country of 100 million, or even one billion??

2) This Activity can also be started by having students look at recent United Nations actions. These range from peacekeeping missions to various programs to distribute food or medical supplies.

3) Another introduction starts by discussing historic reasons why each state has two votes in the U.S. Senate while the number of members in the House of Representatives depends on population. The United Nations tried to devise a similar method of ensuring representation, but the results are not as successful.

Progress check (a non-intrusive way to see whether students are on the right track)

The computer skill involved in this Activity is simple and straightforward – students move their pointers within a triangular decision-device and click in order to select a specific set of percentages; the computer then calculates the number of votes that each world region would get in the General Assembly if the votes were assigned according to that mix of criteria. To make sure students understand what they are doing, ask whether they can set the map to make the votes depend 50-50 on population and wealth [or any other mix of inputs that would be different from what they have on the screen at the moment].

Evaluation

As with many map-making activities, one approach is to post the maps and have students evaluate them in terms of apparent accuracy and effectiveness in getting the message across. Give students a checklist of criteria (or, better, have them devise a checklist in class discussion). Suggested criteria might include:

> color. Symbols should be prominent, countries intermediate, and oceans receding.

> size of symbols. Symbols should be big enough to be distinguishable and yet small enough to (usually) fit within the region the symbol is supposed to describe.

> placement of symbols. The map should be clean and uncluttered, with symbols that clearly represent specific regions without too much overlap or confusion.

> other information. A thematic map should have a legend (to show what is meant by symbols of different size or shape). It might also include a scale of miles, especially if the area may be unfamiliar to some people. Short phrases of text to label key countries and other features can also help communicate the message, but too many labels can interfere with readability of the pattern shown by the scaled symbols.

Concluding the activity

With any "what-if" activity, one can question the results on pragmatic grounds: "what makes you think countries would be willing to go along with this plan?" Discussion of this topic can be interesting – try to get students to see that small countries might be willing to give up their individual votes in order to get a United Nations that has a larger budget and more ability to deal with problems, while poor but populous countries might be willing to yield votes in order to get more financial support from wealthy countries.

Frequently asked questions about the UN: a sample dialog

Student: "Why would anyone consider giving more votes to richer countries?"

Mistaken response: "Well, I agree; it's like allowing people to buy votes with campaign contributions. Maybe you should just use different combinations of the other two variables." This will avoid the issue for the moment, but it violates the spirit of a "what-if" simulation, which is to explore the consequences of decisions before making them. It might be better to redirect the question into an exploration of consequences.

Redirection: "I don't know, but the fact is that some people have seriously proposed that the UN will never be able to work properly if the countries that pay the bills feel that their opinions are outvoted by much smaller countries. That's the strength of this activity, as I see it – we can use the electronic lab to explore the consequences of different decisions about how to allocate votes. So let's just try a few "what-if" tests. For example, what would happen if we base the votes 80% on population and 20% on wealth? Who might want that kind of formula?"

Student: "The big countries are likely to have both a lot of people and more wealth than smaller countries, so they probably would do better."

Teacher: "That's a good hypothesis – why don't you set that with your pointer and see what happens?"

Other questions

Why should we limit the exploration to just three variables?

What other variables would you want to consider? Some people have proposed basing votes on some kind of index of freedom – their point is that some governments should not be described as really representing their people. The question is, who would define the index and how would it be implemented?

Why should the formula be changed at all? Doesn't the Security Council provide an adequate forum for the larger countries?

True, but it also has problems, as described on Response Sheet 4. Having students explore different ways of allocating seats on the Security Council is probably a better way of helping them learn about the characteristics of countries, but it is a lot harder than manipulating the maps in the electronic lab. The first two Response Sheets, therefore, are basically a way of getting enough interest to explore the options in the next two.

Why does the CD have so many map options?

Some teachers in our focus groups really liked the fact that this political-geography lesson can also be turned into a lesson on making maps in order to persuade. If that is not your intent for a particular class on a particular day, feel free to use just one or two map types, and ignore the others!

What about people who want to "get the US out of the UN and get the UN out of the US"?

The irony is that this opinion is often based on precisely the same reason that led people to propose changing the UN Charter, namely that the present system of one-vote-per-country allows an organized group of very small countries to offset the votes of the countries that pay more than 99% of the costs of running the UN. Having students explore other ways of allocating votes can sometimes stimulate them to think beyond the slogans and to see what might be done to make the UN more effective. At the very least, it might get them thinking about how to represent people more fairly.

Voting in the United Nations
Glossary of key terms

basemap: a simple map that shows basic place information (land, roads, water, etc.); people can add other information to a basemap to tell a story

cumulative-symbol map: map on which the number of symbols represents something; also called a *repetitive-symbol map* (see Part 1 of the CD unit on Urban Gardens)

General Assembly: the main parliamentary body of the United Nations; every member nation in the UN has representation in the General Assembly

Gross National Product: a measure of wealth in a country; the total value of all goods and services produced by the people in a country; PPP-GNP is GNP adjusted for the purchasing power of the country's currency and the cost of living there

peacekeeping mission: one of the main tasks of the United Nations is to send troops to maintain order and separate groups of people who are engaged in wars or other military actions (see the CD unit on Top-12 lists)

PPP-GNP: purchasing-power parity gross national product; GNP adjusted for the purchasing power of the country's currency and the cost of living there

qualitative: information that cannot be counted; e.g., the life story of a worker in Indonesia

quantitative: information that can be counted; e.g., the number of votes in the Assembly

region: a term that geographers use to refer to areas that have something in common; an area that has similar climate, land use, culture, etc., or is connected in some way

scaled-symbol map / proportional-symbol map / graduated-symbol map: a type of map in which the size of symbols are varied to represent a quantity of something (see CD units on Megacities (scaled point symbols) or Trade (scaled line symbols))

Security Council: a branch of the United Nations consisting of five permanent members (China, France, Russia, The United Kingdom, and the United States) and ten other members placed on a rotating basis

UN Charter: the document that lays the basis for government in the United Nations; the "constitution" of the UN

United Nations: an international organization formed after World War II to replace the League of Nations; the United Nations is now considered the most important international governmental organization

United Nations Population Division: a part of the United Nations that organizes and funds research and work on population growth

variable-thickness cartogram: a type of map that **indicates** amount by varying the apparent thickness or height of the symbols; this type of map may also be called a *graduated-height cartogram* or an *area-prism map*.

veto: negative vote that cancels an action by the Security Council; the Charter gives veto power to each of the five permanent members of the Council