

Lesson Plan: California's Death Penalty Debate

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Featured resources

[The Lowdown: Death Penalty Debate](#)

[Map: America's Death Penalty Divide](#)

[KQED Election Guide: State Propositions](#)

Opening quick write prompt:

Are you in favor of capital punishment (a.k.a. the death penalty), do you oppose it, or are you undecided? Give at least two reasons to support your answer. What are two questions you have about the death penalty?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.



A lethal injection room at San Quentin Prison. Completed in 2010, it's never been used. (Wikipedia)

Objectives

- Students will analyze [Proposition 62](#) and [Proposition 66](#) in the context of ongoing death penalty debates in California.
- Students will evaluate the arguments for and against the death penalty in California and nationally and reflect on their own views of capital punishment.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

When, if ever, is the death penalty justified? What arguments do people make in support of or against the death penalty?

California has a long, complex history with the death penalty. This election is a perfect example: there are two competing initiatives on the ballot in November. Proposition 62 bans the death penalty and replaces it with life in prison without parole. Proposition 66 calls for keeping the death penalty in place but shortening the appeals process, thereby forcing courts to process death penalty cases faster. In the unlikelihood that both propositions pass, the one with the most “yes” votes will become law.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Accountable (adj.)	Responsible for, expected to justify actions or decisions.
Bipartisan (adj.)	Representing or including members from two parties or factions.
Deter (v.)	To stop or prevent.
Mandatory (adj.)	Required, compulsory.
Retroactive (adj.)	Taking effect in the present, but extending in scope to past conditions

Activity

- As a class, watch [Should California Kill Its Death Penalty?](#) (Note: the video contains non-explicit references to the murders of a child and two teenagers along with emotional appeals by victims' families on both sides of the issue. There are no graphic images or references.)
- **Before watching:** Reinforce class norms around respectful discussion. Ask volunteers to share their response to the quick write prompt to gauge class opinions on the death penalty. Encourage students to read their written responses rather than debating at this point in class. For more on discussing controversial topics, check out the [Classroom Debate Toolkit](#) from PBS.
- **While watching:** Ask the students to listen for the reasons for and against the death penalty. Stop the video at least three times to make sure students understand the pro and con arguments. Make a class list of the reasons listed in the video in favor of and against the death penalty. Consider using [EdPuzzle](#), a platform that allows educators to insert questions directly into videos. For more support using video in your classroom, check out [this post](#).
- **After watching:** Individually or in small groups, students read about Propositions 62 and 66 found in the [KQED Election Guide](#). They can also reference the maps in [this post](#). After reading each proposition description, ask students to decide for themselves which death penalty measure they would vote for and why. Remind them only one can become law, so it doesn't make much sense to

vote yes on both. Even if students are working in groups to support each other's' reading and understanding, they should make an individual decision about how they'd vote.

Discussion questions

- Why do you think the death penalty continues to appear on the ballot in California elections? Cite evidence from the video and the readings to support your claims.
- Do you think the general public should vote on this issue (as Californians will in November) or should we let the state legislature and courts decide?
- Who is funding Proposition 62? Who is funding Proposition 66? What does this tell you?
- If you could vote, would you vote for either Proposition 62 or 66? Why?

Circle chats, small-group discussions and *think-pair-share* provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension activities

Writing prompt: Write an editorial for your local newspaper, favorite news blog or podcast in favor of either Proposition 62 or Proposition 66. Be sure to cite at least three reasons that support your position. Only one of your reasons can involve an emotional appeal or pathos.

Pro vs. Con Venn diagram: Using an interactive tool like [this one](#), create a Venn diagram that shows what supporters of Propositions 62 and 66 have in common as well as how their views differ.

A national platform for your students' voices: Students make their voices heard on issues they care about by participating in [Letters to the Next President 2.0](#). Teachers must sign up and get a group code that students can use to upload letters. For more resources and examples, also see [KQED's student video project](#), My Backyard Campaign.

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence