

Unit 1

Citizenship: Making Government Work

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, you will be able to:

- Explain why learning about government is important.
- Define the basic elements of government, politics, and democracy for your students.
- Describe the difficult and ongoing problem of balancing freedom and public order.
- Introduce the idea of public influence on policy decisions.
- Discuss what it means to be a citizen of the United States, including a discussion of the responsibilities of citizenship.

Topic Overview

This session covers the basic elements of government, politics, and democracy. A grounding in these issues will give you a solid foundation to enhance your teaching of civics. More important, approaching civic education by emphasizing this balance illustrates why civic education is important. The emphasis on balancing rights and responsibilities demonstrates that government is important to all of us. Since all of us will be governed, what matters is how this balance is struck and how those of us in a democratic society can assure the proper balance.

Governments provide several basic **public goods**, which are things that all citizens enjoy by virtue of being part of a political community. A primary public good is the maintenance of **public order**. Governments are formed to protect the life and property of their citizens. Without government, people suffer lawlessness and chaos. Recent examples of total lawlessness in a given country include Somalia in 1992 and Haiti in 1994. At times even crime-ridden areas of our own country are considered lawless.

To enjoy the benefits of public order, citizens must surrender some of their freedoms to ensure order and the rule of law for everyone. In the United States, the Constitution affirms our commitment to the rule of law. The **Constitution** is a fundamental charter of government that seeks to balance public order with basic individual rights and freedoms. It outlines the basic powers of government, and stipulates the limits of those powers. The first ten amendments to the Constitution, also known as the **Bill of Rights**, list basic freedoms and rights that citizens enjoy and that cannot be taken away by government or other citizens.

Topic Overview, cont'd.

Politics, or the activities aimed at influencing or controlling government, can be found in all governments. Since **representative democracy** (also called **republican democracy**) seeks to embody the will of the people, political activities are particularly essential. As the authors of the Constitution (especially Madison) understood, opinions among the public are and will be divided. Thus, political conflict will always be a part of representative democracy. By design, such conflict can occur in numerous institutions and points in the policy-making process, including among the three branches of government, between the House and Senate, between the national and state governments, and among the citizens themselves. Working through this inherent conflict to arrive at a solution requires debate, deliberation, and compromise.

Representative democracy requires participatory citizens. **Legal citizenship** in the United States is for most people a birthright, as anyone born in the U.S. is considered a citizen. People can legally apply for and gain their citizenship after immigrating to the U.S., which is a process called **naturalization**. Legal citizenship is not, however, sufficient to maintain a representative government. Because representative governments derive their authority from the **consent of the governed**, such governments need actively engaged citizens who are knowledgeable about their government and involved in the nation's public and civic life. Once we clarify that citizens have both rights and responsibilities in representative democracies, it is a more accurate idea to think of government as "us," not "them."

Pre-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

Before viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

- What did Pericles say about the openness of Athens? How is that relevant to modern American society?
- How did Machiavelli describe a republic? Is America a republic, according to Machiavelli's definition?
- Tocqueville wrote that, "If there is a country in the world where the doctrine of sovereignty of people can be fairly appreciated, where it can be studied in its application to the affairs of society, and where its dangers and its advantages may be judged, that country is America." What are these dangers and advantages?
- Is democracy inevitable?

Watch the Video (30 minutes) and Discuss (30 minutes)

The video includes three segments. If you are watching on videocassette, watch each segment and then pause to discuss it, using the questions below. If you are watching a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel, watch the complete video and then discuss.

1. Law and Order: Fighting Crime in New York City

The presence of police in our community can reassure us or it can trigger anxiety. Whatever our feelings, most of us probably agree that law enforcement is essential to a democracy. This story examines the security challenges and changed police tactics that arose in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on New York City.

Discussion Questions

- Does increased security engender feelings of increased safety or does it increase the fears that people have?
- How aggressive should law enforcement officers be in pursuing criminals?
- To paraphrase James Madison, is there a point at which the cure for crime is worse than the disease?

Watch the Video and Discuss, cont'd.

2. A Community of Differences: Citizens Decide the Future of Riverside Park

Politics is not just about politicians, elections, and political parties. It is any activity aimed at influencing government and public policy. Thus, politics is indispensable to any government that is responsive to the will of the people. But in order to exercise their right to participate, the people must show up and speak out. This story is about how some citizens in New York City influenced a public decision about their local park.

Discussion Questions

- Is disagreement inevitable in American society?
- Is there a better way (better than politics) to resolve disagreements?
- How can people be motivated to participate in governmental affairs?

3. Civic Pride: The Story of Frank Audia

There are three ways to become an American citizen: To be born in the United States, to be born to an American citizen, or through naturalization. U.S. citizenship provides freedoms, protections, and opportunities undreamed of in most places around the world. But free government also hinges on citizens who not only understand the freedoms and benefits of citizenship, but the responsibilities as well.

Discussion Questions

- What does it mean to be an American citizen?
- What is a good citizen?

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

1. Core Values of American Democracy (15 minutes)

As citizens with a common political culture, Americans share certain core values including freedom, equality, justice, private property, and individual achievement. At the same time, many Americans disagree over the substance and extent of these values when they are applied to real situations. Such disagreements often inform our common political debates over policy at the national, state, and local levels. Use this list to examine your beliefs about the substance of the core values we hold as citizens of the United States. Can you think of other shared values to add to the list? Discuss.

Freedom. The value of freedom (or liberty) is central to our nation's fundamental charters including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Freedom can be broken down into two dimensions. **Negative freedom** means freedom from the interference of others including government and other citizens. Advocates of classic free-market liberalism emphasize this dimension of freedom. As John Stuart Mill contended, you should be free to pursue your own interests and pleasures as long as they don't harm others. **Positive freedom** is the freedom to reach your full potential, and to "be all you can be," to borrow a phrase from an old army advertisement. Advocates of strong community values (e.g., communitarians) emphasize this dimension of freedom. In a republican form of government that is based on law and order neither dimension of freedom can be given full scope. Instead, citizens give up their claims to absolute freedom in order to gain other values such as security and rule of law. But the dividing lines between freedom and order are constantly being reconsidered and redrawn.

Equality. Like freedom, the value of equality is ranked very high among Americans. The Declaration of Independence declares that "all men are created equal" in that they possess certain inalienable rights that governments or their fellow citizens cannot take away. At the same time, the concept of equality doesn't appear in the U.S. Constitution until the Fourteenth Amendment, which asserts that all citizens, including former slaves, enjoy "equal protection of the laws." While most Americans profess their allegiance to the principle of equality, the application of this principle to real disputes over public policy has been, and remains, controversial. Equality has several dimensions: **Political equality** refers to the equal right of all citizens to vote, to run for elected office, and to participate in other ways. While Americans have an equal right to participate,

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

some would argue that existing inequalities in wealth, status, and educational attainment undercut the value of political equality in practice. A related value to political equality is **equality of opportunity**, which refers to the equal access all citizens have to the public goods provided by government, and to the potential avenues of social and economic advancement. Some people liken equality of opportunity to the opportunity all citizens have to participate in the race toward achievement. However, others argue that social inequalities in society undercut the fairness of the race, and thus undermine the concept of equal opportunity. Many advocates of **equality of outcome** contend that government policies should seek to redistribute wealth and status in society to ensure real equality. Some people who emphasize equality of outcome have advocated affirmative action in school admissions or in awarding public sector projects.

Justice. Like freedom and equality, the principle of justice has several dimensions. Some people consider justice a **system of law dedicated to moral ends**. But the question remains: Whose moral ends? For example, do we support capital punishment because we believe that a person who takes a life should always lose his own (i.e., “an eye for an eye”)? Or do we reject this notion because certain inequalities in society based on wealth might skew the application of the death penalty toward those who can’t afford good legal representation? Other people emphasize **procedural justice**, which emphasizes set trial procedures and controlled legal battles that are fought by trained lawyers who represent their clients. This notion of justice utilizes an adversarial system of legal inquiry that is not designed to determine ultimate truth, but only a “winner” in a legal fight guided by legal procedures and precedents. Finally, many people apply their own sense of **gut level fairness** that often disregards basic moral systems or procedures. Although they can’t provide a formal rationale for their position on an issue, they know when something seems fair or unfair to them.

Private Property. The principle of private property has always enjoyed protected status in American history. The right to be secure in one’s own property is asserted in several places in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. At the same time, private property has not ever been absolutely protected in American history. The practice of taxation in effect represents a taking of some personal property for public purposes. So is the practice of seizing someone’s private property when it is even remotely connected to their illegal activities (the so-called “zero tolerance” policy). The value of private property often conflicts with other values, such as equality and freedom. For example, someone who grows up in poverty may have less opportunity to attend elite educational institutions than someone who grew up rich, while those who do attend elite educational institutions may have more opportunities to gain wealth throughout their lifetime.

Individual Achievement. In his famous book, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: “The first thing that strikes a traveler to the U.S. is the innumerable multitude of those who seek to emerge from their original condition.... No Americans are devoid of a yearning desire to rise. All are constantly seeking to acquire property, power, and reputation.” Even as far back as the 1830s, when Tocqueville briefly visited the U.S., Americans were driven by a strong sense of personal achievement that still prevails today. Despite the advantages that may accrue to those born into families of wealth and influence, most Americans believe that through hard work and perhaps a little luck they can achieve success, however they choose to define it. America is one of the few countries where someone who grew up poor can aspire to become president of the United States, chairman of a large corporation, or a high-ranking officer in the armed forces, among many possible positions of prominence. Yet some people argue that if achievement is stressed too much in our public policies, it might undermine other values such as equality of opportunity. Others, however, caution that if equality is pursued too much, the freedom to achieve one’s own potential would be undercut.

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

2. Can You Pass the U.S. Citizenship Exam? (15 minutes)

Immigrants who want to become U.S. citizens must pass an exam to show that they understand the basic principles of U.S. history and government. The exam's purpose is to ensure that new citizens have the necessary knowledge about U.S. government and history to become good citizens. Could you pass the test? Below are 20 sample questions taken from the naturalization exam. Applicants must answer 12 out of 20 questions correctly. (Correct answers are provided at the end of the test.) How did you score? Are the questions useful predictors of good citizenship? What other ways might the U.S. screen applicants for citizenship? Does knowledge alone make for a good citizen?

1. What do the stripes on the flag mean?
2. What country did we fight during the Revolutionary War?
3. What is the basic belief of the Declaration of Independence?
4. Who elects the president of the United States?
5. How many terms can a president serve?
6. What is the highest court in the United States?
7. Who signs bills into law?
8. Who was the president during the Civil War?
9. How many Supreme Court Justices are there?
10. What is the Supreme Law of the United States?
11. What is the Bill of Rights?
12. How many senators are there in Congress?
13. How many representatives are there in Congress?
14. How many times may a congressman be re-elected?
15. Who has the power to declare war?
16. How many changes, or amendments, are there to the Constitution?
17. Which countries were our enemies during World War II?
18. Why did the Pilgrims come to America?
19. Who wrote the Star Spangled Banner?
20. What is the minimum voting age in the United States?

Answers

1. The first 13 states; 2. England; 3. All men are created equal; 4. The Electoral College; 5. 2 terms; 6. The Supreme Court; 7. The President; 8. Abraham Lincoln; 9. 12; 10. The Constitution; 11. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution; 12. 100; 13. 435; 14. There is no limit; 15. Congress; 16. 27; 17. Germany, Italy, and Japan; 18. For religious freedom; 19. Francis Scott Key; 20. 18 years old.

Homework

Read the following Readings from Unit 2 to prepare for next week's session.

- Introduction—The Constitution: Fixed or Flexible?
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: "History of the Federal Constitution"
- The Declaration of Independence (Jefferson's Draft)
- The United States Constitution and the Amendments to the U.S. Constitution
- *Federalist Papers*: "Federalist No. 51"

Read next week's Topic Overview.

Critical Thinking Activity: Go to the course Web site and try the Critical Thinking Activity for Unit 1. This is a good activity to use with your students, too.

www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy

Classroom Applications

You may want to have your students do the post-viewing activities: Core Values of American Democracy and Can You Pass the U.S. Citizenship Exam? They are provided for you as blackline masters in the Appendix.

Web-Based Resources

<http://www.immigration.gov>—The Web site of **the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services** provides information on laws, regulations, and interpretations controlling immigration and the work of the immigration-related bureaus of the Department of Homeland Security. You can learn how immigration laws are made and developed and explore agency and judicial interpretations of those laws. You can also find handbooks and guides used by immigration officers in performing their mission as well as guides created to help applicants through the immigration process.

<http://www.usdoj.gov>—**The U.S. Department of Justice** Web site provides a wide range of reports, updates, and learning resources involving the maintenance of law and order. New Web site components include materials on fighting terrorism, balancing security and civil liberties, and a kid's page containing learning exercises.

<http://www.census.gov>—**The Census Bureau** Web site includes a wealth of information about Americans' attitudes and demographics. The site also includes links for teachers to learning materials for classroom use.