

Annenberg/CPB Course Guide

Democracy in America

A 15-part video course for high school civics teachers

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**Produced by The Educational Film Center in association with
George Mason University**

Democracy in America

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| About the Course | 1 |
| Course Components..... | 2 |
| Preparation for First Session | 4 |
| Key Contributors | 4 |
| Unit 1. Citizenship: Making Government Work | 7 |
| Readings..... | 13 |
| Introduction to the Readings; Introduction—Citizenship: Making Government Work; Thucydides, “Pericles’s Funeral Oration” from <i>Peloponnesian War</i> ; Plato, <i>Apology</i> ; Aristotle, <i>Politics</i> ; Machiavelli, <i>Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius</i> | |
| Unit 2. The Constitution: Fixed or Flexible? | 37 |
| Readings..... | 44 |
| Introduction—The Constitution: Fixed or Flexible?; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “History of the Federal Constitution”; The Declaration of Independence (Jefferson’s Draft); The United States Constitution and the Amendments to the U.S. Constitution; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 51” | |
| Unit 3. Federalism: U.S. v. the States | 67 |
| Readings..... | 73 |
| Introduction—Federalism: U.S. v. the States; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “In What Respects the Federal Constitution Is Superior to That of the States”; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 46”; <i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i> ; <i>Dred Scott v. Sandford</i> | |
| Unit 4. Civil Liberties: Safeguarding the Individual | 99 |
| Readings..... | 104 |
| Introduction—Civil Liberties: Safeguarding the Individual; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Effects of the Tyranny of the Majority Upon the National Character of the Americans—The Courtier Spirit in the United States”; Locke, “An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government”; Mill, “On Liberty”; Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” | |

Table of Contents, cont'd.

| | |
|--|-----|
| Unit 5. Civil Rights: Demanding Equality | 125 |
| Readings | 129 |
| Introduction—Civil Rights: Demanding Equality; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “The Idea of Rights in the United States”; DuBois, <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> ; Douglass, <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave</i> ; Gilman, <i>Women and Economics</i> | |
| Unit 6. Legislatures: Laying Down the Law | 149 |
| Readings | 154 |
| Introduction—Legislatures: Laying Down the Law; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Legislative Powers of the Federal Government”; Locke, <i>Legislatures</i> ; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 26”; Beveridge, “Remarks Before the Senate Concerning the U.S. Occupation of the Philippines” | |
| Unit 7. The Modern Presidency: Tools of Power | 171 |
| Readings | 176 |
| Introduction—The Modern Presidency: Tools of Power; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “The Executive Power”; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 69”; Jackson, “On Indian Removal”; Lincoln, The Emancipation Proclamation | |
| Unit 8. Bureaucracy: A Controversial Necessity | 189 |
| Readings | 194 |
| Introduction—Bureaucracy: A Controversial Necessity; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Public Officers Under the Control of the American Democracy”; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 72”; <i>Myers v. U.S.</i> ; <i>Humphrey’s Executor v. U.S.</i> | |
| Unit 9. The Courts: Our Rule of Law | 219 |
| Readings | 225 |
| Introduction—The Courts: Our Rule of Law; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Judicial Power in the United States, and Its Influence on Political Society”; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 78”; <i>Marbury v. Madison</i> ; <i>Cherokee Nation v. Georgia</i> | |

Table of Contents, cont'd.

| | |
|---|-----|
| Unit 10. Understanding Media: The Inside Story | 243 |
| Readings | 249 |
| Introduction—Understanding Media: The Inside Story; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Liberty of the Press in the United States”; Milton, <i>Areopagitica</i> ; Hume, “On the Liberty of the Press”; <i>New York Times v. Sullivan</i> | |
| Unit 11. Public Opinion: Voice of the People | 267 |
| Readings | 273 |
| Introduction—Public Opinion: Voice of the People; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Political Associations in the United States”; Paine, <i>Common Sense</i> ; <i>Federalist Papers</i> : “Federalist No. 10”; Hahn, “Student Views of Democracy: The Good News and Bad News” | |
| Unit 12. Political Parties: Mobilizing Agents | 291 |
| Readings | 298 |
| Introduction—Political Parties: Mobilizing Agents; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “Parties in the United States”; Washington, “Letter to Thomas Jefferson”; Roosevelt, “Bull Moose Speech”; Piroth, “Selecting Presidential Nominees: The Evolution of the Current System and Prospects for Reform” | |
| Unit 13. Elections: The Maintenance of Democracy | 319 |
| Readings | 325 |
| Introduction—Elections: The Maintenance of Democracy; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “How the Principle of Equality Naturally Divides Americans Into a Multitude of Small Private Circles”; Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i> ; Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> ; Douglass, <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave</i> (see Reading in Unit 5) | |
| Unit 14. Interest Groups: Organizing To Influence | 333 |
| Readings | 340 |
| Introduction—Interest Groups: Organizing To Influence; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “That the Americans Combat the Effects of Individualism by Free Institutions” and “Of the Use Which the Americans Make of Public Associations in Civil Life”; “The Whole World’s Temperance Convention Held at Metropolitan Hall in the City of New York”; “An Appeal to the Women of the United States by National Woman Suffrage and Educational Committee”; I.W.W. Song: “Long-Haired Preachers” | |

Table of Contents, cont'd.

| | |
|---|-----|
| Unit 15. Global Politics: USA and the World | 355 |
| Readings | 364 |
| Introduction—Global Politics: USA and the World; Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i> : “The Present and Probable Future Condition of the Indian Tribes That Inhabit the Territory Possessed by the Union” and “Why Democratic Nations Naturally Desire Peace, and Democratic Armies, War”; The Monroe Doctrine; The Marshall Plan; Twain, “The War Prayer” | |
| Appendix | 385 |
| Classroom Applications (Student Handouts) | 385 |

About the Course

Democracy in America is a unique 15-part course for high school teachers that combines video, print, and Web resources to provide a deeper understanding of the principles and workings of American democracy. By combining compelling video stories of individuals interacting with American government, theoretical discussions of the meaning of democracy, and problem-solving, hands-on exercises, the course gives life to the workings of American democracy.

This course is being offered at a time of great optimism. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the promising successes of new democracies in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and South Africa all point to the triumph of liberal democracy. Still, in the aftermath of these great advances, there is reason for profound concern. Never has the democratic ideal been so ascendant and yet so precarious. Americans still believe that democracy is the worthiest form of government and they take great pride in the U.S. Constitution. Nevertheless, less than half the eligible citizens vote in even presidential elections, and a majority of Americans distrust their government. Disengagement from political and civic life seems to be increasing, particularly among the young. There is a growing consensus that American civic life is in need of serious repair.

At the root of this disinterest is a lack of basic knowledge concerning political affairs on the part of Americans, particularly among the young. This lack of basic knowledge has several consequences. Knowledge of government and civic life is certainly a precondition to participation. It is also clear that those who fail to understand basic democratic norms will not support them. Moreover, the more people know about their government, the more faith they express in the American system. In the final analysis then, the breadth and depth of political knowledge is vital for the survival of our constitutional democracy. What Alexis de Tocqueville called the “habits of the heart, the temperament that informs the democratic ethos” are not inherited. Each generation must pass to the next the knowledge and skills required to sustain a constitutional democracy.

Democracy in America is designed to aid in the repair of American civic life by providing teachers with greater knowledge and skills. The course provides thorough understanding of the theory and practice of American democracy and provides teachers with supplementary information to take back to the classroom. But *Democracy in America* is not simply an advanced description of American government, it is a creation intended to encourage civic engagement by providing teachers with ideas for turning students into active learners.

Throughout the course, the emphasis is placed on the role of individuals in American democracy. While stressing the basic elements of American government, the course works within the larger theme that, in a democracy, individuals matter. Recognizing that democracy is not inevitable, the materials are intended to demonstrate that the workings of a democratic government require an active and engaged citizenry. Moreover, the course demonstrates that citizens can and do make a difference. The videos, for instance, do more than discuss the need for an active citizenry, they feature citizens in action. This guide and the Web site contain a variety of classroom activities designed to interest and engage students. *Democracy in America*, then, is intended to help teachers pass on Tocqueville’s “habits of the heart.”

Course Components

Democracy in America includes 15 half-hour videos (with three stories per video), this guide with readings included, and a Web site (www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy), which contains a downloadable PDF of the guide and reader plus a series of interactive exercises.

The Video Programs

Through 15 half-hour videos, *Democracy in America* takes the teacher through the essentials of American government—ranging from a discussion of the nature of a constitutional democracy to the role of America in the world. The videos feature individuals actively engaged in civic and political life. Viewing the videos gives course participants a direct experience with American government in action. You can watch the video programs on the Annenberg/CPB Channel, tape the programs to watch at a more convenient time, or, if you have access to a high-speed connection, view the video programs online. Go to www.learner.org for the Channel broadcast schedule and Web viewing.

The 15 programs are:

1. Citizenship: Making Government Work: Unit 1 stories introduce the viewer to the nature of government. What purpose does it serve? Additionally, the stories focus on what it means to be an American citizen. What are the obligations of citizenship? What makes a good citizen?

2. The Constitution: Fixed or Flexible?: Our Constitution inspires reverence among many, but there has always been tension over how it should be interpreted. As a blueprint for government, it is also clear that the Constitution creates a government that fractures power and invites frequent struggle between the various institutions of government. Differing views on the death penalty, conflict between Congress and the president, and the long struggle for suffrage illustrate how the Constitution continues to shape the workings of modern American government.

3. Federalism: U.S. v. the States: Using three different disputes over the appropriate locus of power in three different policy areas, Unit 3 illustrates the complexity of the federal structure. Whether the national government or the states should have power over a policy area remains, as these stories demonstrate, an important and enduring debate.

4. Civil Liberties: Safeguarding the Individual: Although we define ourselves as a free people and prize liberty, several other values we hold dearly pose at least potential threats to the exercise of our liberties. Rather than viewing constitutional rights as absolute guarantees, the Supreme Court has, as the stories in this unit demonstrate, attempted to balance the conflicting interests of society.

5. Civil Rights: Demanding Equality: Civil rights, the equal treatment of people, would seem axiomatic in a nation that cherishes the promise of the Declaration of Independence. Yet equality has, as the stories show, often been honored in the abstract and denied in reality.

6. Legislatures: Laying Down the Law: This unit emphasizes the representative roles played by American legislators. Although legislatures are the primary mechanisms of popular sovereignty in the United States, they are often criticized as ineffective. The stories in this unit explore the complex conception of representation and the often contradictory expectations placed on legislators.

7. The Modern Presidency: Tools of Power: Although the presidency offers a range of formal powers, modern presidents grapple with the inherent limitations of the office and often have difficulty fulfilling public expectations. The three stories in this unit illustrate the ways in which modern presidents attempt to exercise and even expand their formal authority.

8. Bureaucracy: A Controversial Necessity: Criticisms of governmental bureaucracy are easy to find and while this unit does not ignore the problems inherent in bureaucratic organizations, the video stories provide illustrations that promote critical thinking, not jingoistic responses. The stories provide examples of bureaucratic activities and asks the viewer to evaluate the performance.

Course Components, cont'd.

9. The Courts: Our Rule of Law: Central to American democracy is a commitment to the rule of law, but that commitment places a great deal of power in the hands of judges. In this unit, the stories illustrate the complexity of the U.S. judicial systems and questions how much power courts should have. The stories also raise the issue of what constitutes an independent judiciary.

10. Understanding Media: The Inside Story: A free press is, as this unit's video demonstrates, essential to a democracy. Nevertheless, the important mediating role played by the media requires an informed, media-savvy public. The stories presented here describe how news is defined by the media and explains why public officials and journalists are highly interdependent.

11. Public Opinion: Voice of the People: What role should public opinion play in American politics? How do we identify public opinion? Each of the stories in this program raise these questions by focusing on a public official or political leader confronted with the problem of determining public opinion.

12. Political Parties: Mobilizing Agents: Although often maligned, political parties play a vital role in connecting the American public and political decision-makers. How the parties serve as a mechanism for recruiting leaders is examined here in a case study of a young political leader. The stories in this unit also demonstrate the ways in which political parties develop particular policies and organize decision-making bodies.

13. Elections: The Maintenance of Democracy: Do elections really matter? If so, why do so many Americans fail to vote? Using two different elections, the video illustrates the workings of political campaigns and their efforts to mobilize voters. A third story focuses on efforts to encourage young people to exercise their right to vote.

14. Interest Groups: Organizing To Influence: Interest groups, sometimes referred to as special interests, are often portrayed as the province of the rich and powerful. As the case studies presented here demonstrate, however, there are groups organized to represent most interests. Moreover, the tactics and strategies used by groups are as various as the interests they represent.

15. Global Politics: USA and the World: With the end of the Cold War and the dramatic increase of global interaction, American foreign policy has entered a period of transition. These case studies explore the use of the American military for non-combat duties and the utilization of trade policy as a foreign policy tool. One story also illustrates the relationship between nations and one of the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play an increasingly important role in the world.

The Guide and Reader

This guide provides in-depth discussions and analysis of the issues raised by the videos. Integrated into this guide are classic readings that expand on the subject of each unit. This guide and reader includes:

- A list of learning objectives for each unit
- Previewing activities for each unit
- Post-viewing activities for each unit
- Activities that can be used in the classroom (student handouts for these activities are provided in the Appendix)
- A list of Web-based resources for further exploration

The Course Web Site

The entire course guide and reader is also available as a downloadable PDF on the *Democracy in America* Web site. The Web site also includes interactive, critical thinking activities for each unit.

Visit the course Web site at:

www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy

Preparation for First Session

Homework

Read the following Readings from Unit 1 to prepare for next week's session.

- Introduction to the Readings
- Introduction—Citizenship: Making Government Work
- Thucydides, "Pericles's Funeral Oration" from *Peloponnesian War*
- Plato, *Apology*
- Aristotle, *Politics*
- Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*

Read Unit 1's Topic Overview.

Key Contributors

Course Developers

The Educational Film Center: The Educational Film Center (EFC) has for more than 30 years been responsible for the successful management of over 300 media projects, including over 600 television productions, interactive multimedia, and Web design. Key to the success of EFC's projects has been the commitment to a collaboratively close working relationship between production and academic personnel.

George Mason University: The chair and faculty of the Department of Public and International Affairs, George Mason University and a number of outstanding scholars and educators with specific experience in civic education were brought together for *Democracy in America*.

Carney Interactive: Carney Interactive is EFC's Web design collaborator, led by its creative director, John Low, who was trained at EFC. Since its inception in 1994, Carney has designed, built, and managed the development of over 150 custom eLearning products. These include innovative web-based and CD-ROM training applications, educational programs designed with multiple language capability, Web site design, and touch-screen kiosk systems.

Carney Interactive's client list includes AOL/Time Warner, Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting), Arthur Andersen, Drexel University, FAA, FBI, GE, Goldman Sachs, Lucent, NASA, NATO, New York Institute of Finance, US Treasury Dept., U.S. Marine Corp, VIPdesk.com, WorldCom, and Xerox.

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