

I. Democracy

Topic: I. Democracy

What the students do: Read about the role of citizens and the function of elections in a democratic society and conduct an interview about voting.

CA History-Social Science Standards: 12.2.4, 12.3.4, 12.6.4

CMS Promising Approaches: 1, 2

Thanks to: [National Student/Parent Mock Election](#)

What Is a Democracy?

“As citizens of this democracy you are the rulers and the ruled, the lawgivers and the law-abiding, the beginning and the end.” —Adlai E. Stevenson (c. 1958)

Overview

This lesson sequence introduces students to the role of citizens and the functions of elections in a democratic society. The readings in the lesson develop understanding of basic concepts such as democracy, constitutional government, consent of the governed. The small group and whole class exercises introduce issues related to why citizens might not participate in elections.

Objectives

As a result of this unit, students should be able to:

- Explain the concepts of “democracy” and “constitutional democracy”;
- Explain the role of citizens in a constitutional democracy;
- Explain the nature and functions of elections in a constitutional democracy; and
- Evaluate, take, and defend positions on the issue of elections in a democratic society.

Materials/Preparation

Handout 1: “What Do We Mean by “Democracy?” —1 per student

Handout 2: “Conducting an Interview” —1 per student

Procedures

- I. Distribute to each student a copy of **Handout 1: What Do We Mean by “Democracy?”**
- II. You may want to post the following vocabulary items on the board: democracy, constitutional democracy, habeas corpus, title of nobility, direct democracy, representative government, initiative, referendum, recall, public agenda. Students should define these terms while they are completing the reading exercise.
- III. After completing their reading, have students work with a study partner to respond to the *What do you think?* questions at the conclusion. Have students share their responses with the class.
- IV. As an out of class assignment, ask students to interview adults or some of their peers. Distribute a copy of **Handout 2: Conducting an Interview** to each student. Encourage students to interview individuals in different age groups and in a variety of occupations. Review with the class tips for conducting an interview. You may want to have students include additional questions in their interviews. When students have completed their

interviews, have them compile their data. You may want the class to work with a math teacher to work out the mathematical calculations. Then have students interpret the meaning of the data. What conclusions can they draw from the information gathered?

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What Do We Mean by “Democracy”?

Literally, “democracy” means “rule of the people.” In the democracies of ancient Greece, where the idea of democracy was born more than 2,400 years ago, citizens gathered together in the outdoors to make decisions about public policy. Although today citizens sometimes gather together to decide certain things, they usually do not make most decisions themselves. Instead, they vote for representatives who make decisions in their name. That is what happens in most elections. Sometimes people mistake “democracy” for the elections that are just part—although an essential part—of every democratic political system. What we call “democracy” is more complicated than people simply coming together to make decisions or to vote in elections.

What Do We Mean by “Constitutional Democracy”?

“Democracy” today really refers to “constitutional democracy.” “Constitutional” democracy means **limited government**, which means that the government only has limited authority to do what it wants. By law, the government has to abide by the Constitution. This is why our government is called a “constitutional democracy.”

What Happens When There Is No Constitutional Government?

To see why this is so important, all you have to do is to look at international events on the evening news or read about foreign countries in newspapers. In many parts of the world there are violent uprisings, even mass killings. In the Middle East and many parts of Africa, Asia, and Central and South America, people are dying every day in political violence. Countless others are locked up for their beliefs by authoritarian governments. Their rights as human beings are ignored.

We should not forget that terrible political violence has also occurred in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of people died in the Civil War; and others died and were jailed during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s. The achievement of Constitutional government is therefore important to everyone.

What Do Constitutions Do?

They **distribute the powers of government** to various branches, including legislative, executive, and judicial branches. That is, a constitution **empowers the government** by setting down rules that allow the branches of government to do certain things. In modern democracies, a constitution also limits the powers of government by forbidding it to do certain things.

What Does the U.S. Constitution Forbid the Government to Do?

The U.S. Constitution is the most important document in the United States. It is what sets America apart from oppressive regimes around the world. Many other countries, such as Ireland, based their own constitutions on the example set by the United States. As our country matured, American citizens voted to “amend” the Constitution in certain areas. For instance, when the Constitution was first drafted, slavery was still legal. Many of the constitutional writers, for example, owned slaves themselves! The first ten amendments to the Constitution are known together as the **Bill of Rights**. The Bill of Rights is a vital safeguard to the individual rights of citizens.

For instance, the 1st Amendment grants Americans “freedom of speech.” This means that we have the right to say whatever we want, even if that includes criticizing the government, without being punished. In some countries people are put to death for daring to speak out against a government regime. The 1st Amendment guarantees that this will never happen in America. Other Amendments protect individuals against unreasonable search and seizure, forced police confessions, civil rights violations by states, and many other actions that infringe upon our rights.

State Constitutions

All states have constitutions that distribute the powers of state and local government and limit the powers of government. State constitutions also have bills of rights that may offer even greater protection than the United States Bill of Rights.

Elections and Accountability of the Government to Citizens

Finally, elections make government accountable to the people who elect its top officials. Accountability makes government responsible. Accountability means that there are consequences for bad policies and improper actions by officials. Someone must monitor what the government is doing and be able to implement changes when government is not behaving satisfactorily. Thus, elections protect our rights. People who do not care about elections are not taking care of their rights. Informed, responsible voting protects people from government abuse of power. This is one reason why everyone should be concerned with elections. The interests of all individuals are at stake.

What Kinds of Democracies Are There?

As we saw above, democracy first began in ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks had a **direct democracy**. What this means is that citizens participated directly in the government, rather than through representatives. This led to problems, however, because emotion could be aroused by orators who appealed to human passions. Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian, describes in his writings how decisions of direct democracy led to the downfall of Athens, the center of Greek political life.

The American Founders read about the problems of ancient democracies and believed that representative government could be more stable. James Madison said that Congress could “refine and enlarge” the people’s voice and moderate emotions through the deliberations of representative bodies.

What Are Some Forms of Direct Democracy in American Life?

Despite the fact that our form of government is representative democracy, direct democracy does exist in certain forms. The oldest and most famous form of direct democracy in American life is the **New England Town Meeting**, which originated long before the American Revolution. There are still town meetings in New England today. There are many other forms of direct democracy in American life. Classrooms sometimes take votes. Members of associations and organizations vote in person on many matters, relying on well-known parliamentary rules (usually “Roberts Rules of Order”) to maintain fair procedures. What would be the consequences if your city, town or

community were governed by a Town Meeting rather than its present form? Would the direct democracy of the Town Meeting work in your community? Why or why not?

Initiative, Referendum, and Recall Elections

Initiative, referendum, and recall elections are also elements of direct democracy, requiring responsible citizens to be informed about the issues which may directly affect them and their communities. “Initiatives” are proposals that become law if passed by voters at certain elections. Referendums are laws passed by state legislatures that are submitted to the electorate to pass or strike down. And “recall” elections ask the voters if a public official should be removed from office. These are all weighty decisions that in many states are made directly by voters. Initiatives in a number of states, such as in California, act to change a state’s constitution. Initiatives can therefore potentially have a powerful effect on state and local government policy. For example, Proposition 13 a California initiative passed in the 1970s, which limited real estate taxes on homes to 1% of its value, had an enormous effect not only on California but in other states, as demands to lower property taxes spread to many parts of the nation.

What Is the Public Agenda?

The public agenda is the set of problems or questions that have come to public attention. It affects everyone, whether or not they choose to participate in elections. The public agenda consists of the issues for local, state or national legislatures to decide. Examples of items on the public agenda might include campaign finance reform, the threat of war, tax policy, welfare policy, environmental issues, and so forth. The public at large does not itself set the public agenda but reacts to items on the agenda set in this way; the public as such is not organized to act collectively. In the form of public opinion polls the public does have a role in setting the public agenda. Even here, however, the public’s role is often to react to issues that leaders bring before it.

Individuals can help set the public agenda by joining interest groups or other private associations of civil society as well as political parties, making presentations at public meetings, writing letters to the media and public officials, and helping to write, produce, or distribute literature on one or more proposed public issues.

The Electoral Process and Issues of the Public Agenda

One of the most important reasons to have elections is to decide the issues that are on the public agenda. The outcome of elections are expressions of the popular will. A purpose of the electoral process is therefore to air arguments on all sides of issues of the public agenda. Ideally, by exposure to the best arguments on the principal issues of the public agenda, the public can make a better judgment about public policy issues and learn the positions of candidates on them.

What Do You Think?

1. How can elections help protect the rights of citizens to, e.g., freely express their political ideas?
2. In what ways, other than participating in elections, do citizens help prevent the abuse of power by government officials?
3. In what ways, other than participating in elections, do citizens in a democracy express their consent of the governed?

4. Some people argue that “democracy is not a spectator sport.” Do you agree or disagree with this view? Why?
5. What interests might motivate private citizens to care about influencing the public agenda or public policy?
6. What are some examples of direct democracy in your community?
7. Work with a partner to create a class bulletin board that illustrates why citizens should participate in local, state, and national elections.

Conducting an Interview

Do people think having the right to vote is important?

In the United States we select our leaders by allowing citizens to vote. When you turn 18 years of age you have the right to vote in local, state, and national elections. Your right to vote is protected by the United States Constitution and the laws of the national government. Your state constitution and the laws of your state also protect your right to vote. Under our system of government, the states have the responsibility to conduct elections.

Have you ever thought about why voting is such an important right of citizens? One way to find out why voting is an important right is to ask people what they think. You and your classmates will be talking to other students in your school and to adults in your family and community to find out what they think.

You will be asked to interview several people and to write down their answers. When your class finishes gathering this information, you will compile the answers to see what people in your community think. Remember, when you conduct an interview with someone, you should first introduce yourself. Tell the person what your class is studying. Ask the person if he or she would be willing to answer your questions.

Here are some questions you might ask people. You and your classmates may want to add other questions to this lists.

Name of person _____
Occupation _____

1. Do you usually vote in local, state, or national elections? Yes ___ No ___
2. If the answer to #1 is Yes: What are some reasons why you decided to vote?
3. If the answer to #1 is No: What are some reasons why you decided not to vote?
4. What do you think is the purpose of having elections in our country?
5. Would you favor having a law that requires all citizens to go to the polls on Election Day? (Explain why, or why not.)

(Teachers may wish to adapt the interview format to the needs of the class. For students interviewing non-English-speaking parents, for example, the wording might read: "Why do you want to live in America? In America we have a democracy based on a Constitution that limits what government can do. What do you think might happen if we did not have a Constitution?")