

What is Democracy?

Grade Levels: 9-12

Time Commitment: 40 Minutes

Subject(s): U.S. History, Civics/Government

Overview: Students will work in small groups to explore seven primary sources to create their own definition of Democracy. The sources include excerpts from the Magna Carta, the Petition of Right, the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Federalist Papers.

Materials:

- Student Handouts
- Smartboard or Projector (Optional)
- Printer
- Whiteboard/Chalkboard

Opener (10 Minutes):

1. Hand out the Activity Handout (Page 3). Have students individually write down their own definition of democracy on the sheet.
2. When everyone is done with their own definitions, tell the students: The United States is formed on the principles of Democracy.
3. Ask:
 - a. What do you think Democracy means? (Students should share what they originally wrote down).
 - b. What words come to mind when you hear “Democracy”?
4. Write key responses on a board or giant sticky note. Tell students to take notes of responses in their Activity Handout (Page 3).

Activity (15 Minutes)

1. Divide the students into seven different groups.
2. Assign each group one of seven primary sources (Pages 4-10), and provide about five minutes for the groups to read and annotate their assigned primary source.
3. Provide five minutes for the students use their primary source to revise their answer to the opener question (“What does Democracy mean?”) in the Activity Handout (Page 3) and discuss as a group.
4. Students should select one spokesperson to share on behalf of the group during the closer.

Closer (15 Minutes)

1. Call on the spokesperson from each of the seven groups, and ask: “What does Democracy mean according to your assigned document?” Add onto the key answers on the whiteboard.
2. Use the key answers to create a concise definition of Democracy as a class, which the students can reference back to throughout future lessons.
 - a. If this is done with multiple classes, write each definition onto giant sticky notes to post around the room, demonstrating each classes’ own definition of democracy.

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Tips & Tricks for the Activity

- After the class discussion about each document in the closer, if time permits, send the students back into discussion in their small groups to create a clear, concise definition of Democracy. Then, ask students to share and combine this work into a whole class definition.
- If this is done with multiple classes, create a uniform definition that bridges common themes seen throughout the day.

Extension Activity Ideas

- After students give initial thoughts on the definition of Democracy, give students images to trigger more responses. Suggested images include the American Flag, Washington D.C., the Statue of Liberty, a protest, and a ballot box.
- Have students find one more primary source (not one of the seven handed out) that helps further their definition of democracy.

Modified Activity Ideas

- Higher-level students can read the entirety of some of the key documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, rather than the simple excerpts.
- If possible, group students who are new to the country together to read the Declaration of Independence or Bill of Rights as their assigned documents.
 - High school students who attended U.S. elementary and middle schools have likely read these documents previously and could explore new sources.

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Activity Handout

Name: _____

Block: _____

What do you think Democracy means? Reflect and answer in one or two complete sentences in the box below.

What words come to mind when you hear “Democracy?” List at least three in the box below.

My group’s primary source is: _____

According to your primary source, what does democracy mean?

After reading your primary source, rewrite and revise your answer to “What does Democracy mean“ in the box below.

As a class, come up with a definition of democracy. Write that final definition here.

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Primary Source Readings

READING #1: The Magna Carta

“To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay, right or justice...

We will appoint as justices, constables, sheriffs, or bailiffs, only such as know the law of the realm and mean to observe it well...

Moreover, all these aforesaid customs and liberties, the observances of which we have granted in our kingdom as far as pertains to us towards our men, shall be observed by all our kingdom, as well clergy as laymen.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #2: The Petition of Right

“No freeman may be taken or imprisoned or be disseized of his freehold or liberties, or his free customs, or be outlawed or exiled, or in any manner destroyed, but by the lawful judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land... They do therefore humbly pray your most excellent Majesty, that no man hereafter be compelled to make or yield any gift, loan, benevolence, tax, or such like charge, without common consent by act of parliament”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #3: Mayflower Compact

“Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid: And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Officers, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #4: The Declaration of Independence

“All men are created equal... They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights... among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... To secure these Rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #5: The United States Constitution

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...

The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #6: The United States Bill of Rights

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

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Primary Source Readings

READING #7: Thee Federalist Papers

“In order to lay a due foundation for that separate and distinct exercise of the different powers of government, which to a certain extent is admitted on all hands to be essential to the preservation of liberty, it is evident that each department should have a will of its own; and consequently should be so constituted that the members of each should have as little agency as possible in the appointment of the members of the others”

This Lesson Plan was:

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