

Appreciating Democracy: A Lesson Plan for High School Teachers of Civics, Government, and U.S. History

Item E Wrap-up Session The Fundamentals of American Democracy Lesson Plan

Lesson Goal

This 45-minute session provides for clarification and reinforcement of the concepts the students have learned from engaging in the three (or two activities). It also provides an opportunity to extend the lesson.

Lesson Objectives

1. To understand and appreciate a few of the basic practices of democracy:
 - That people have different values, interests and opinions.
 - These differences are often settled by means of deliberation and negotiation, with compromise and a majority vote as key elements.
2. To consider alternative forms of government and assess the pros and cons of several forms of government.

Discussion Guide

The wrap-up session is a teacher-led discussion focusing on two main ideas: what have students learned from the preceding activities and what are the alternatives to democracy? Use the following points and questions as a guide in leading the discussion.

What have students learned?

Ask students what they have learned from the activities and discussion. Here are some of the more important things we would expect them to learn. If they are not mentioned, you should bring them up and see how students respond.

- (1) In a diverse nation people have different values, interest, priorities, and opinions.
- (2) It is not easy to settle differences, even on simple issues in one's personal life.
- (3) It is even more difficult to settle differences in public life, and in Congress or the state legislature, where conflict among ideas and proposals is normal and desirable. Moreover, in Congress and state legislatures, members are not only deciding for themselves, they are also trying to represent constituents--which further complicates matters.

- (4) Legislatures work at settling conflict--mainly by means of deliberation on the substantive merits of different positions, but also by negotiation and compromise. Some differences are more difficult to negotiate and reach a compromise on than are others.
- (5) Decisions are usually arrived at by votes, with a majority prevailing. On a single measure on its way to enactment in a legislature, votes may be taken on the bill itself and on amendments to the bill--in subcommittee, in full committee, and on the floor in both the senate and house.
- (6) All of this helps explain why the legislative process is contentious and slow-moving. Building majorities can be a tough and lengthy process.

What are the alternatives?

One way to explore whether representative democracy--with all of its disagreements and deliberation and negotiation and compromise and vote after vote--works is to look at alternative ways of reaching settlements.

We start with the fact that in this diverse nation (as well as in diverse states and diverse communities) people have different values, interests, priorities, and opinions.

These differences cannot be controlled. In The Federalist No. 10 James Madison recognized the danger of factions in America. By factions, he meant a number of citizens whose interests were adverse to the “permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” What we are suggesting here, however, is that Americans do not agree on what the permanent and aggregate interests of the community are, except at the most general level. In any case, Madison acknowledges that there is no way to cure what he refers to as the “mischiefs of faction”. To remove its causes would require either destroying liberty or giving “every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.” The first remedy is worse than the disease, the second remedy is impracticable, according to Madison.

Assuming, then, that different values, interests, and opinions are natural, the question is what kind of political system would work best at handling such differences. The following are questions that can help guide a discussion of the alternative forms of government based on the students’ experience in the activities.

- (1) Instead of requiring students to agree on a choice of restaurant, would it have been better for the principal to have decided on his/her own? What kind of political system would that type of decision-making fit in with? What are the advantages and disadvantages of an autocratic political system?
- (2) Instead of having nine states come into agreement, what might have happened if only seven states had agreed on the issue of representation? Or six? Might the effort to draft a new constitution have failed? Are there times when an extraordinary majority

- is needed? What actually did happen at the Constitutional Convention and how specifically was the representation issue settled? What do students think of the actual settlement?
- (3) Why shouldn't states submit the budget questions to a vote of eligible voters? Let the people decide. This would be a manifestation of direct democracy, rather than representative democracy whereby people elect legislators whose job it is to represent the interests of their constituents and constituencies. What would be the benefits of direct democracy, with referendums on the budget as well as on other issues? What would be the disadvantages?
- (4) Finally, what system, if any, would students prefer to that of representative democracy, whereby the Congress and state legislatures serve as a mechanism by which disagreements are talked out, worked out, or fought out (with the majority prevailing through its votes)?

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