

Democracy in America - Rights, Responsibilities and a Call to Unity

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students:

- appreciate the rights we have as Americans to participate in the political process and in elections
- understand our civil duty and responsibilities as Americans to participate in the political and election process
- learn about and appreciate the struggles and progress that America has experienced to give every citizen the right to cast a vote, and have a voice in governing our country.
- come together in unity and solidarity regardless of political leanings to work towards a better future
- understand the value of Americans having different political and public policy beliefs, being tolerant of those with different views, and understand how tolerance is an expression of respect for others
- feel compelled to take action to improve our country

Primary Virtues / Character Traits

Citizenship: the duties, rights, and privileges corresponding to a person being citizen of a state or nation; the desire to make his state / country a better place

Duty: something that one is expected or required to do according to one's own standards, moral or legal obligation, especially as it relates to one's status as a citizen and / or member of various communities.

Respect for Others: showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by "the golden rule": do unto others as you would want done unto you

Tolerance: realizing and appreciating that everyone has a right to different beliefs and opinions—as long as those beliefs and opinions do not cause harm to others.

Secondary Virtues / Character Traits

Fairness: playing by the rules; taking turns and sharing, being open-minded and listening to others; not taking advantage of others; not blaming others carelessly

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and/or talent.

Solidarity: unity from a shared common purpose and / or interest; active loyalty within a group; mutual support within a group; being present with others

Leader Introduction

The election of 2020 gives us an opportunity to consider the role of government and politics in our lives, the values of our political system, and our rights and responsibilities as citizens. Since the founding of our country, a central American value has been freedom. Before the birth of our country, almost all nations were ruled by kings, queens and the wealthy. The common man had no say on who ran their country or how. The founding of America was in direct opposition to that. The Declaration of Independence, the document that declared America free from Britain, states that, “all men are created equal,” and that kings do not have the right to rule over everyone else. America fought and won the war of independence against England to help its people be seen as equal in the eyes of their creator and those that govern them. However, at first America fell short of this goal with only white landowners having the right to vote. America is not a story of being perfect at our birth, nor perfect now, but our nation is a story of uneven and consistent improvement towards greater rights, opportunities and responsibilities to all of our people.

The way our nation improves is through our participation in the political process. The most obvious way we can do this is to learn about the issues and to vote in elections for the candidates we believe reflect and will advance the values and policies we think are most important. However, we don't have to wait to get involved until we are old enough to vote. Right now, we can be involved by learning about the issues important to us and for our nation as a whole, and even participate in elections by volunteering to help candidates we support and sending emails to already elected government officials to let them know our views on the issues. Elected officials do track how people in their districts think about certain issues and your emails can make a difference.

In this lesson we'll start with a short video that outlines the history of voting rights in America and then take a look at examples from the 2020 election of people living out their values and helping others to participate in the 2020 election.

Lesson Video on the History of Voting Rights in America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9VdyPbbzII>

Leader Introduction for rides to the polls:

Now that we know the history of voting rights in America let's take a look at this year's election. An estimated 67% of registered voters showed up to cast a vote this year. Although not as high as we would like, that's higher than any election in the past 100 years!

This record breaking turnout is in part due to the generosity of people across our nation taking action at the local level to help people get to the polls and vote. Let's watch one inspiring example of this..

Ride to the polls video:

Start from :30

<https://www.wcnc.com/article/news/politics/elections/charlotte-organization-giving-free-rides-to-the-polls-through-election-day/275-75960847-5b28-42c9-9629-37cad5982c48>

Leader Summary for rides to the polls:

In addition to Roll to the Polls, many other individual citizens and groups stepped up to encourage people to vote. One amazing story is Allie Young, a member of the Navajo Native American tribe in Arizona, who organized “Ride to the Polls” to get her fellow Native Americans to vote. Many members of this community do not have cars and often the nearest polling location is far from their homes so Allie offered **rides on horseback** to help people vote on election day.

Discussion Question Options on Voting Rights and “Roll to the Polls”

(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses or bullet points if needed)

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions - included within the online lesson as a separate document.

1. Who can vote today?
(All American citizens registered to vote over the age of 18)
2. How has the citizens' right to vote changed over the years?
(America's founding only white men who owned land were allowed to vote.
1870 black men were permitted to vote, but state Jim Crow laws still interfered
1920 women were allowed to vote
1924 Native Americans could vote
1960's Voting Rights Act prohibited states from interfering with the people's right to vote, ex: no more polling taxes or literacy tests
1971 voting age lowered to 18)

How did the right to vote change and become more inclusive?

(Americans participated in the political process such as electing Andrew Jackson who ended the requirement of land ownership. The Civil War and 15th amendment that gave blacks the right to vote. The womens' suffrage movement and the civil rights campaigns of the 1940s through 1960s. These movements all involved protests and convincing people who could vote to support political candidates who would support change)

3. Perez, one of the drivers from “Rolls to the Polls” initiative said, “Whatever happens with the election... I feel like I'm doing my part... to help the community, to make sure people exercise the right to vote. Some people take it for granted, but we're the greatest country on Earth, [because] we have the ability to vote.”

What are the virtues Perez is living out in his actions of driving people to the polls and in his statements? I'll read his statements again before we discuss it.

(**Generosity** by giving his time and resources to help other people get to the polls, **Citizenship and Duty** by wanting to make his country a better place and by helping those less fortunate in his community to exercise their right to vote; **Solidarity** in promoting the shared common interest that we should be able to participate in our elections and to vote, regardless of the outcome)

4. Thinking about Perez and Rolls to the Polls, let's look again at the definitions of **duty** and **citizenship** and discuss why it is our duty as Americans citizens to vote?

(It's important to vote so that everyone's voice is heard, and we the people determine who controls our government and the policies they promote. Even though it may seem like one vote is unimportant, you probably saw if you kept up with this election that a small number of votes can make a big difference in a close race. Voting in an election makes sure that THE PEOPLE of The United States hold the power in government. Voting is a way of honoring those who have fought and sacrificed for our rights to vote)

Leader Intro to Biden Speech:

Over many years, America has become increasingly divided, and we too often view each other as enemies. For a government ruled, as Abraham Lincoln said, “by and for the people,” we need to learn how to disagree while still respecting each other. Let’s watch Joe Biden’s first speech as president elect where he calls on us to lessen the divisiveness and to work together.

Lesson Video on Biden’s Speech:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prXVtQnM4O4>

Leader Summary:

Biden stated, “It’s time to put away the harsh rhetoric, lower the temperature, see each other again, listen to each other again... and to stop treating our opponents as enemies, we’re all Americans... this is the time to heal in America.” Let’s talk about the values and virtues this statement reflects and how it speaks to our lives now and in the future.

Discussion Question Options on Biden Speech *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses or bullet points if needed)*

Before beginning our discussion, let’s read over the virtues and their definitions - included within the online lesson as a separate document.

5. Why do you think we have political parties like the Democrat and Republican parties?

(Political parties enable us to band together with others who agree with our views of what public policies to pursue, and to promote candidates who will support these policies and our values.)

6. Do you think that when we disagree with another person’s view on education, immigration, how to reduce poverty, taxation, and even issues such as police reform, we should treat them with less respect?

If we do treat others who disagree with us with less respect, what is the cost, how does this hurt our country, if at all?

(If we continue to disrespect those we disagree with, it will continue to become increasingly difficult for us to work together to achieve shared goals such as reducing poverty, educating our nation’s children, protecting our nation from foreign threats and managing and eventually eliminating the coronavirus.)

7. How can we practice **respect for others** and **tolerance** when debating or disagreeing with others... whether it’s about politics or something else?

(By listening to others without interrupting, by trying to learn from someone else’s views even if it’s different than your own, by trying to understand another person’s perspectives and motivations behind their opinion, by practicing responsible and caring communication— ex: “I understand what you’re saying, but have you ever thought about that this way?” or “I think differently about that situation...”)

8. In President Elect Joe Biden’s speech, he reached out to those voters who supported President Donald Trump, saying “They are not our enemies. They’re Americans.” What does this mean to you?

(We should respect people with opinions different from our own; we should focus more on what unites us as Americans.)

9. What values unite us as Americans, and remember a value we share doesn’t mean we are living it out perfectly today, but what values do we aspire toward as Americans?

(individual liberty; equal treatment under the law; opportunity to become educated, to work and to provide for ourselves and our families; the right to determine our own government through our participation in the political process and elections.)

Journal Writing Option

1. Write about the values or issues that you care most about and that you think our government should address. Or, pretend that you are running for elected office. Write a speech about the things you care about and would want to focus on/promise Americans if you were elected to office.

Extended Activities:

1. Students may not be old enough to vote yet or to drive people to the polls, but that doesn't mean their voices shouldn't be heard. Brainstorm with your group ways that they can take action on things that matter to them and changes that they want to see made in our local or national government. Ideas can be writing letters or emails to your state and federal representatives and senators, passing out flyers and buttons for campaigns, going to community gatherings/meetings to share your opinion, etc.

2. Practice our civic duty to debate issues with respect and to then vote. Pick an issue for your group or class that you know they care about and where there are strong and differing opinions. Hold a debate or class discussion on the issue ensuring that a variety of opinions are fully presented. During the debate or discussion, enforce fairness and respect for others. Then hold a mock vote with secret ballots that the class leader tabulates. Ask students to then discuss why they think one side won.

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