

## TEACHER OUTLINE

# What is Democracy?

**NOTE FOR TEACHERS:** *The ideas in this unit are important – and can be taught in many different ways. You should feel free to select from and alter these resources to suit the needs of your students.*

- **TASKS:** *How much time will you have to explore this unit? That may help you decide which tasks to include, and whether to assign any as homework or incorporate them into the class period. You may also consider whether to make these individual tasks or the focus of small-group work.*
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### **BIG IDEAS:**

- In a democracy, the people have the power – directly or indirectly – to affect public policy.

### **BIG QUESTIONS:**

- What should we expect from a well-functioning democracy?
- How is the USA doing? What are our strengths and weaknesses?

### **RESOURCES:**

- **Teacher Instruction**
  - [SLIDE LINK](#)
  - [VIDEO CLIP](#) (An example of how one teacher uses these ideas in class)
- **Formative Tasks: Exploring Trends**
  - Who was included in our original understanding of “We the People”? How has that definition broadened over time? Can you use the Constitution to explore other changes to democracy?  
**Source:** [The Constitution](#)
  - Many observers are worried about the stability of our democracy. ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)) Can you find public opinion polls to support or undermine those claims? You might look into polls that measure how well-informed the electorate is, whether the public supports restrictions on key freedoms, or views on the acceptability of violence after a disputed election.  
**Potential Source:** [Pew Research](#)
- **Summative Task:** [Critique Our Democracy!](#)
- **Going Further: Exploring Reforms**
  - We’ve explored changes over time that many people believe have improved American democracy. Do you see room for more improvement? If so, how would you change the law or the Constitution to address those weaknesses?  
**Potential Source:** [A More Perfect Constitution](#)

- What role can groups or individuals have in improving democracy, *other* than through legal or Constitutional change? Explore actions you believe could strengthen U.S. democracy, in ways big or small.

**Potential Source:** [Global Citizen](#)

# CRITIQUE OUR DEMOCRACY!

## > REFLECT:

- Consider the [elements of traditional democratic theory](#). Political scientist Robert Dahl used these:
  - ENLIGHTENED UNDERSTANDING
  - INCLUSION
  - CITIZEN CONTROL OF THE AGENDA
  - EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION
  - EQUALITY IN VOTING

## > WRITE:

### ● WHERE WE'RE STRONG:

- A) **React (In 4+ sentences):** Identify one of the elements you think you could use to argue the U.S. is doing a good job of being a democracy. Describe what it means to you and what it makes you think about. Explain what about life in the U.S. you could use as evidence to support your claim.
- B) **Research (In 4+ sentences):** Find a recent news story that supports your claim. Link to it here! Summarize some important details, and explain how it shows our country demonstrating elements of a good democracy.

### ● WHERE WE CAN BE STRONGER:

- A) **React (In 4+ sentences):** Identify one of the elements you think you could use to argue the U.S. is NOT doing a good job of being a democracy. Describe what it means to you and what it makes you think about. Explain what about life in the U.S. you could use as evidence to support your claim.
- B) **Research (In 4+ sentences):** Find a recent news story that supports your claim. Link to it here! Summarize some important details, and explain how it shows our country demonstrating elements where we need to improve to be a better democracy.

## TEACHER OUTLINE

# Who Are We?

**NOTE FOR TEACHERS:** *The ideas in this unit are important – and can be taught in many different ways. You should feel free to select from and alter these resources to suit the needs of your students.*

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### **BIG IDEAS:**

- The population of the United States has changed over time – and that has affected national policy.
- Healthy democracies are *inclusive* of all citizens, both in terms of *rights* and of *input* into policy.

### **BIG QUESTIONS:**

- What are important parts of your own identity?
- How has the United States changed demographically over the last century?
- What factors have influenced those changes in our country's population?
- How has demographic change led to new public policies?

### **RESOURCES:**

- **Teacher Instruction**
  - [SLIDE LINK](#)
- **Formative Tasks: Exploring Trends**
  - Take a look at [Slide 7](#) in the presentation above, with Census figures for the U.S. population over time. Notice that every ten years, the Census conducts and provides an official count of the population, as well as the percent by which it has grown over the last decade.
  - **Q1:** What is the general trend of the rate of population growth in the U.S. over time?
  - **Q2:** What factors do you think could lead the population of a country to grow more quickly, grow more slowly, or even shrink?
  - **Q3:** Pick a particular Census year in which you notice that population growth has sped up or slowed dramatically over the preceding decade. Can you come up with a theory that helps to explain this change, based on historical events?

**Potential Resources:** [U.S. Population Growth Slows](#)

- **Summative Task:** [Responding to Demographic Change](#)
- **Going Further: Exploring Reforms**
  - In a democracy, government policy should be influenced by the people who live in it. Sometimes, amidst periods of great demographic change, those in power are increasingly unrepresentative of the people.
  - As the makeup of the American population continues to change, in what ways might the United States react to best represent the people?
    - **Q1:** Are there ways we should **spend money** differently?
    - **Q2:** Are there ways we should change the **structure** of our government to be more responsive – from the way elections are held to the nature of the judicial branch?

***Potential Resources:***

- Democratic Principles: The elements of [traditional democratic theory](#)
- Future Changes: [US Census Population Projections](#)
- Proposed Reforms: [Increase the size of Congress](#)

# RESPONDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

## > REFLECT:

- Consider the demographic changes you've explored in the United States so far. Be ready to discuss one or two of those changes – and how they have led to new government policies.

## > WRITE:

### ● NEW PEOPLE IN POWER

#### A) Research and React (In 6+ sentences):

Sometimes demographic changes put more power into the hands of those who have not had as much in the past. Pick one group that has experienced strong growth at some point in American history.

- **Q1:** How have expanded numbers helped the group you chose to influence public policy?
- **Q2:** What challenges might make it difficult for increased numbers to translate immediately into increased power? Discuss.
- **Potential Resources**

Looking for ideas? Here are some possible directions to explore:

- Older voters: [An Important Power in Elections](#)
- Asian voters: [A Survey of Voter Beliefs](#)
- Hispanic voters: [How Politicians Look to Reach Them](#)

### ● THOSE ALREADY IN POWER

#### B) Research and React (In 6+ sentences):

Sometimes demographic changes spark new policies by those already in power. Pick one group that has experienced strong growth at some point in American history.

- **Q1:** How did those already in power react to that group's growth? Make sure to include discussion of **policy** – official government action.
- **Q2:** Why do you think those new policies were formed? Explore possible motivations.
- **Potential Resources**

Looking for ideas? Here are some possible directions to explore:

- Backlash: [Fear of a New Minority Majority](#)
- Immigration Restriction: [The Chinese Exclusion Act](#)
- Providing for the Elderly: [How Social Security May Adjust](#)

## TEACHER OUTLINE

# How Do We Choose Our Leaders? VOTING IN AMERICA

**NOTE FOR TEACHERS:** *The ideas in this unit are important – and can be taught in many different ways. You should feel free to select from and alter these resources to suit the needs of your students.*

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### **BIG IDEAS:**

- Although those in power have long described the United States as a representative democracy, voting was limited at the start to a very small group of elites.
- Centuries of struggle by those with less power have led to significant expansions in American voting rights.
- Our laws and our Constitution reflect those changes – but that doesn't mean that voting is possible for everyone or equally accessible to all.
- Many observers see opportunities for continued reform in the American system of voting and elections.

### **BIG QUESTIONS:**

- What Constitutional amendments have expanded the right to vote?
- What laws have been used to enforce more access to voting rights?
- Who should have the right to vote?
- What methods of voting and elections are best?
- In our federal system, how do our states differ with regard to voting rules?
- What is the best way to balance our interest in security with democratic access to all voters?

### **RESOURCES:**

- **Formative Tasks: Exploring Trends**
  - A healthy democracy is **inclusive** of all its citizens.
  - Have students read the amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Ask them to circle the ones that expand voting rights and be prepared to sum them up. They may mention:
    - **15th:** Bans discrimination on the basis of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”
    - **17th:** Allows U.S. Senators to be elected by popular vote, not state legislatures.

- **19th:** Bans discrimination “on account of sex.”
- **23rd:** Gives DC the right to presidential electors.
- **24th:** Bans poll taxes.
- **26th:** Bans discrimination “on account of age” for those who are at least 18.
- Ask students if they know who is still barred from voting in some or all states.

- **Summative Task:** [Comparing Voting Laws](#)

- **Going Further: Exploring Reform**

- Students have already compared and evaluated voting laws in the states. To go further, they can propose a new kind of voting law.
- **Q1:** Propose a new voting rule that is not in place anywhere in the United States. Make an argument that it would support democratic values.
- **Q2:** In a federal system of government, some policies are implemented by the national government and others differ by state. Supporters of this system say it allows states to become “laboratories of democracy,” trying out policies on a local scale that could be replicated elsewhere. Opponents argue that some rights should be universal, not subject to individual state decisions. Make an argument that the policy you proposed in Part 1 should either be:
  - Implemented uniformly, on a national scale.
  - Open for states to consider on an individual basis.



# COMPARING VOTING LAWS

## > REFLECT:

- In the United States system of federalism, power is divided between national and state governments.
- While the U.S. government and Constitution make some rules for voting and elections, others are decided by the states.
- You will compare voting laws in two states and decide which best reflects a healthy democracy.

## > RESEARCH: Identify an Issue

- BIG QUESTION: What is one area of voting law where your state differs from another state?
- TEACHER NOTE: You may choose to ask students to use their own research skills, link to some of the resources below, or narrow down topics to one or two issues you would like to focus on.
- POSSIBLE TOPICS:
  - Registration:
    - Does your state have automatic registration?
    - Does it allow for same-day registration?
    - Can younger teens preregister?
  - Identification: [Voter Identification Laws in the States](#)
    - Should a photo ID be required?
    - How easy is it to obtain the necessary ID?
  - Eligibility: [Criminal Conviction and the Right to Vote](#)  
Should those convicted of crimes be able to vote...
    - While incarcerated?
    - After release?
    - After probation or parole period is complete?
    - Never?
  - Available methods of voting:
    - Is there voting by mail? ([Which States Vote by Mail?](#))
    - How available is early voting?
    - How easy is to vote absentee?

## > WRITE: Construct a Persuasive Essay

- BIG QUESTION: Consider the elements of [traditional democratic theory](#). How should states craft laws around voting and elections that best support a healthy democracy?
- As you write, be sure to discuss the balance between *security* and *accessibility*. How should states make voting open to all, while keeping it safe and secure?

### PARAGRAPH ONE: Thesis

- Introduce your topic: What type of voting policy will you focus on?
- Make a clear statement: For the issue you chose, which policy will best support a healthy democracy?
- Be sure that your thesis tells the reader *why* you support the policy stance you chose. It will be a roadmap so that the reader knows what to expect in the rest of your essay.

### PARAGRAPHS TWO & THREE: Evidence

- Contrast your state's policy on the voting-related issue you chose with another state's policy.
- Take a paragraph for each state to explain what you learned. You can share any details you found particularly interesting or persuasive.
- Be sure that your evidence paragraphs provide the information you used to come to a conclusion. The reader should be able to see the path your reasoning is taking.

### PARAGRAPH FOUR: Counterargument

- Clearly address a counterargument, as well.
- What is the most sincere line of reasoning that a supporter of the other state's model might present? Devote some space to explaining that view.
- How would you respond to that line of reasoning? Is there a concession you would like to make? Do you have a way to rebut those claims?

### PARAGRAPH FIVE: Conclusion

- Come to a clear conclusion about which state's policy best supports a healthy democracy.
- Be sure to address the balance between *security* and *accessibility*.

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# Changing the Constitution

**NOTE FOR TEACHERS:** *The ideas in this unit are important – and can be taught in many different ways. You should feel free to select from and alter these resources to suit the needs of your students.*

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### **BIG IDEAS:**

- It's hard to change the U.S. Constitution. It's only happened 27 times!
- Often, constitutional changes have been used to expand democracy by establishing new rights and guaranteeing the franchise to groups who previously struggled for access to power.
- But many analysts believe that our democracy would be healthier with other, more structural changes as well.

### **BIG QUESTIONS:**

- How is the Constitution amended? Understand the proposal and ratification process.
- How can the Constitution's meaning change over time? Understand what political scientists sometimes call the "informal amendment" process.
- What proposals have been made to amend our Constitution further? How do these proposals relate to the elements of democratic theory?

### **RESOURCES:**

- **Formative Task: Exploring Trends**
  - How has the Constitution been amended? Have students offer what they already know.
  - Take a look at [the amendments](#).
  - Discuss the definition of democracy. How have some of our amendments been proposed to expand democracy?
    - Students might focus on the amendments that expanded voting rights to new groups, like the 15th, 19th, and 26th Amendments.
    - Students might draw connections to amendments that (like the 1st Amendment and the 14th Amendment's due process clause) have been used to protect speech and expression, or those that (like the 24th Amendment) remove restrictions on voting.
  - Ask students if any of the amendments seem to put new restrictions on democracy. Examples include:

- The [22nd Amendment](#) limits presidents to two terms, and there are democratic arguments both [for and against it](#). Limiting potential tyranny from any one individual also means limiting the people's ability to vote for a leader of their choice as many times as they would like.
  - The [18th Amendment](#) bans alcohol, and while there are arguments for it that rest on elements of a well-functioning democracy that protects its citizens, it is a clear example of a change to the Constitution that restricts a right – and many arguments in favor of it were profoundly undemocratic, focused on prejudice and bigotry.
- **Summative Task: Creative Project**
  - [PROPOSE AN AMENDMENT!](#)
- **Going Further: Exploring Reforms**
  - **Constitutional Convention**
    - Have students complete the Summative Task assignment.
    - Group students into committees in class. These can be based on similar subject matter (The New Rights committee; the Restructuring the Branches committee; the Changing Elections committee) or just for the creation of small-group conversations.
    - Have each committee pick at least one amendment to present to the whole group. Take questions, then comments for and against ratification.
    - Require a vote. If you're modeling a proposal vote in the House or Senate, you might require a  $\frac{2}{3}$  vote in support. If you're modeling a real-life constitutional convention, [there is no precedent](#), but you might require a majority vote or explain why you're adopting a different approach.
  - **Changing the Amendment Process**
    - Amending the [Articles of Confederation](#) required a unanimous vote by all the states.
    - We adopted the Constitution in part because it would have been so difficult to simply amend the Articles.
    - Look at how the Constitution [can be amended](#). It's still not a process that everyone supports.
    - Would students support changing the amendment process?
      - Some groups worry that it's [too easy](#) for a new constitutional convention to make radical changes.
      - Others argue that it's [too difficult](#) to make change.
      - Teachers could allow students to form three groups and debate whether it should be easier or harder to make amendments – or whether things are just right.

# PROPOSE AN AMENDMENT!

## > READ:

- The Bill of Rights (the first 10 amendments to the Constitution).

## > THINK:

- What kind of fundamental change to government or rights would I want to make, if I could?
- Why not just write a law? What is the point of amending the constitution?
- How are existing amendments worded? Is there something useful for me there?
- **Potential Resources:** Amendments That Haven't Yet Succeeded
  - The Equal Rights Amendment
  - Flag-Burning Amendment
  - DC Voting Rights
  - Personhood

## > WRITE:

- You're going to propose a new amendment -- a change to the Constitution -- using this format:
- **PART A (3+ sentences): WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?**
  - Factually describe something you'd like to change. What are things like now? Give details about current policy in whatever area you'd like to change. This could relate to any one of these:
    - **Structure of Government:** A way in which you want to change the powers of the branches, the qualifications for office, or any other process described in the existing Constitution.
    - **Rights and Liberties:** An area in which you want to declare that the Constitution does OR does *not* provide certain rights.
    - **Anything Else:** It's OK to be creative here. What other reasons might someone have for changing the Constitution -- rather than just writing a law?
- **PART B (5+ sentences) WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?**
  - Explain what's bad about the situation you described above. Are there harms you can point to?
  - Any data you've got goes here. Include a link to sources!
  - Then give an example scenario -- with details -- of how one person (real or fictional) could be harmed, or cause harm, under current policy. You're telling a story.
- **PART C (5+ sentences): WHAT'S YOUR SOLUTION?**
  - Describe your solution, in language that is easy to understand.
  - This is the conversational version of what you will put into official-sounding words when you include the actual text of your amendment.

- Include a follow-up to your earlier scenario. How would the person you described (real or fictional) be helped by your amendment? You're showing the happy-ending version of your story.

- **PART D (As long as you like): HOW IS YOUR AMENDMENT WORDED?**

- Write the actual words of a constitutional amendment you will propose in class. Be sure to write it in **exactly the language you want to see put in the Constitution**.
- You're not just *describing* it -- you're paying careful attention to the wording. It can be brief -- as long as it does what you want it to do.
- As you write, *consider in your own mind* (or even ask someone else for input):
  - Is there any way that my amendment is too *broad*? Does it do more than I meant to do?
  - Is there any way that my amendment is too *narrow*? Does it cover less than I intended?