American Democracy: *Discussion Guide*

**Overview**

The origins of American Democracy can be traced as far back as the ancient city-state of Athens and the Roman Republic. Our founders based the United States system of government on Greek and Roman experimentation with democracy and on the English system in place at the time. They created a governmental system that addressed the needs of a new nation of diverse people and states.

Help your students investigate the foundation of the U.S. system of government and explore the events that lead to its creation—with this discussion guide and related videos and activities.

**Classroom Activities**

   
   - **Write a Classroom Constitution:** Read the essay entitled “To Form a More Perfect Union,” found at [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/continental/intro01.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/continental/intro01.html), to learn how the framers of the U.S. Constitution negotiated and compromised to create a plan that addressed the needs of a new nation and provided for the needs of future Americans. Make sure students read all seven sections of the essay. Then, have them work in small groups to write a classroom constitution that meets the needs of the entire classroom. Remind students that they will need to negotiate and compromise in order to find methods for addressing everyone’s needs.

   - **Who Framed the Constitution?** Have students learn more about the real personalities of the Constitution’s framers, by reading contemporary character sketches written by one of their own, at [http://www.usconstitution.net/constframe.html](http://www.usconstitution.net/constframe.html).

2. Show the “Learning from the Past: How American Democracy Incorporated Ideas from Other Sources” segment from the video *The American Revolution: From Colonies to Constitution: Shaping the New Nation.* (Access to unitedstreaming is required.)
• **Pre-Viewing Discussion:** Ask your students the following questions before watching the video segment: What do you know about the origins of democracy? Where did it begin? What other countries have implemented some form of democracy? On what system of government is the U.S. model based?

• **Research:** Have small groups of students conduct additional research about the eras mentioned in the video: Ancient Greece/Democracy of Athens (c. 500 B.C.); Roman Republic (c. 509-27 B.C.); Medieval England/Magna Carta (A.D. 1215); Age of Reason (c. A.D. 1660-1789). Have students share their research with the class by presenting an oral report with visual aids. Make sure that students mention what aspect(s) of U.S. government come from the era they researched.

• **Post-Viewing Discussion:** Prompt your students to discuss what they have learned from the video by asking them these questions: Did you know that the U.S. system of government was based on so many models? Were you surprised by how old the concept of democracy is? What did you learn that you did not expect?

3. Show the “Salem Witch Trials” segment from the *American History: Colonial America* video. (Access to unitedstreaming is required.)

• **Accessing Prior Knowledge:** Before showing the video segment, ask students what they know about the Salem witch trials and about the U.S. legal system. For example: What happens when a person is accused of a crime? Are defendants considered innocent or guilty during a trial? What does a prosecutor need in order to convict the accused?

• **Mock Trials:** Have students research the legal process to understand due process. Then stage a mock trial that demonstrates how individuals accused of crimes should be treated.

• **Checks and Balances Diagram:** The video mentions checks and balances that are supposed to protect citizens from miscarriages of justice such as the Salem witch trials. Have students learn more about the checks and balances created by the nation’s founders, and demonstrate their understanding by drawing a diagram illustrating how the system works.

• **Understanding Mass Hysteria:** Could history repeat itself? Evaluate whether an event such as the Salem witch trials could happen again by comparing the event to modern examples of mass hysteria, such as the McCarthy hearings.
  
  
  o [http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/socpsy-8.html](http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/socpsy-8.html)
4. Show the segments “The Constitution” and “The Bill of Rights” from the TLC Elementary School: We the People: A History video. (Access to unitedstreaming is required.)

- **Make Predictions:** Following is a list of documents, concepts, and groups of people that were important to the formation of the U.S. system of government. Before showing the video segments, have students use the literal meanings of each word to figure out what was important about the document, concept, or group: (refer students to a dictionary if they do not know the meanings of certain words) Federalist Papers, Continental Congress, Articles of Confederation, Checks and Balances, Constitution, Bill of Rights.

- **Graphic Organizer:** Have students create a graphic organizer illustrating the three branches of government and the responsibilities of each.

- **Constitutional Ratification Debate:** Have the class separate into groups representing the original thirteen states. Students can pretend that they are early Americans and must decide whether their states should or should not ratify the new constitution. (Encourage students to think about the Constitution from a historical point of view, and not just vote to ratify it because it was actually ratified.) Hold debates among the groups to discuss the pros and cons of ratification.

- **Answer the Question:** Instruct students to write a journal entry or essay answering the question asked at the end of the second segment: Which amendment in the Bill of Rights do you think is the most important? Why?

**Academic Standards**

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL’s Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit [http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp](http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp).

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- **History**
  - Historical Perspective
    - Understands the historical perspective
  - U.S. History
    - Understands the causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in shaping the revolutionary movement, and reasons for the American victory
    - Understands the impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society
    - Understands the institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how these elements were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights
• Language Arts
  o Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
  o Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts
  o Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media
  o Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
• Life Skills
  o Working with Others
    ▪ Contributes to the overall effort of a group
    ▪ Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument
    ▪ Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association have developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching the English language arts. To view the standards online, visit www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm.

This lesson plan addresses the following English standards:
• Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
• Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

National Council for the Social Studies
The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:
• Culture
• Time, Continuity, and Change
• People, Places, and Environments
• Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
• Power, Authority, and Governance