

Tracing Democratic Ideas

What evidence of democratic ideas exists in historical documents from the early colonies in North America to the U.S. Constitution?

Overview

Students analyze excerpts from historical documents, including the Mayflower Compact, The General Fundamentals, The Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution, to identify evidence of democratic ideas.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://education.nationalgeographic.org/activity/tracing-democratic-ideas/>

Directions

1. Activate students' prior knowledge about democracy.

Ask students: *What is democracy?* Have students brainstorm for two minutes and collect their responses on the board. Students will likely respond with answers such as freedom, the right to vote, and representation. Students with more background knowledge may mention the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. Tell students that, in this activity, they will review some core democratic ideas and look for evidence of three democratic ideas in several documents from throughout U.S. history.

2. Review fundamental principles and values of American constitutional democracy.

Distribute the Fundamental Principles and Values of American Constitutional Democracy worksheet. Ask students to read, highlight, and annotate the document for answers to the question: What is democracy? Ask them to also identify three values or principles they think are the most important. Then, have students find a partner and share their annotations and the three values or principles they found most important. There will be discrepancy among the choices students made. Explain that people find different things important, but together these make up the fundamental principles and values of democracy. From this broader list of core values and principles, students will narrow their focus to three democratic ideas.

3. Discuss three democratic ideas.

Tell students that they are going to work with three democratic ideas in particular. Write the following

on the board and read them aloud:

- social contracts
- rules for self-government
- equal laws for all people

Ask: How do the fundamental principles and values of democracy that you read about inform these three democratic ideas? Ask students to share their responses with a partner. Next, call on students to share their answers with the class. Have students select a principle or value and explain how it informs one or more of the three democratic ideas. List student responses on the board as they are agreed upon by the class. Some example answers:

- Common Good: calls for citizens to accept their obligation and relates to the obligation of forming social contracts
- Popular Sovereignty: relates to the ability to self-govern; talks about the collective citizenry holding the authority over the public officials
- Equality: talks about people being equals before the law with no hierarchy

Students should realize that multiple democratic principles and values connect with the three democratic ideas they will focus on. Tell them they will identify these three democratic ideas in different historical documents. Explain that the Fundamental Principles and Values of American Constitutional Democracy document can be used as a reference throughout this activity.

4. Analyze the Mayflower Compact.

Write on the board the three focus democratic ideas as the headings of a three-column grid: social contracts, rules for self-government, equal laws for all people. Distribute the Mayflower Compact. Ask students to work individually to read the Mayflower Compact and look for the three democratic ideas. After students read and annotate their copy, bring the class together. *Ask: Did the Pilgrims incorporate democratic ideas in the Mayflower Compact? What are some examples?* Consider all answers and briefly discuss each as a class. Write student responses on the board in the appropriate column once the class as a whole determines where each belongs. Make sure all students understand the democratic ideas and the document analysis process. Explain that they will now work in small groups to see how these democratic ideas were incorporated in several other important documents throughout U.S. history.

5. Analyze documents for evidence of democratic ideas.

Have students count off by threes. Distribute The General Fundamentals worksheet to all students who are “1’s”. Distribute The Declaration of Independence to all “2’s” and the U.S. Preamble and Amendments I & XIV to all “3’s”. Have students individually read and annotate their document. The instructions at the top of the worksheet guide students’ analysis of the document. Remind students that one sentence of text may connect with multiple democratic ideas. Students can also mark

passages they have questions about or find interesting. When students have completed their individual reading of the document, have students form groups of three with others who read the same document. Ask them to discuss the document as a group and decide how that document incorporates the three democratic ideas that are the focus of this activity. Remind students that they must be the experts on their document so that they can explain it to their peers when they switch groups.

6. Identify patterns of democratic ideas across documents.

Reorganize students into groups so that the three documents are represented in each group. Ask students to explain to their groups their document and the democratic ideas that it contains. Monitor the groups so that each student has an opportunity to explain their document and that all other students in the group are listening. Ask students to take notes about similarities, differences, and patterns they see among the democratic ideas in the documents. After all students have shared, have students discuss in their groups how these democratic ideas were incorporated into the Mayflower Compact, General Fundamentals, Declaration of Independence, and U.S. Constitution Preamble and Amendments.

7. Develop a thesis statement about democratic ideas in several documents in U.S. history.

Ask groups to use their personal devices or a group computer to find the following information for each of the four documents they analyzed:

- Who is the author of each document?
- In what time period was each document written?
- What other things were happening at the time that formed the historical context of the documents?

After students find background information about the documents, distribute a piece of butcher paper or poster board to each group. Have students cut and paste the four documents in chronological order to the butcher paper. Ask students to write the background information they gathered about each document on the paper.

Write the following question on the board: *Did the documents that were written during colonial times influence the democratic ideas in the United States Constitution? Use evidence to defend your answer.* Ask students to formulate their own thesis that answers the question. Explain that a thesis statement should articulate their position on the topic and how they will support that position. Have students present their evidence through visuals such as a flow chart or graphic organizer. Tell students they can represent each of the three democratic ideas with an icon or image to more easily visualize it throughout the four documents.

8. Peer-review thesis statements

When all groups are finished, have students hang their posters up around the room. In their groups, have students rotate from one poster to the next. Ask them to review each poster and use sticky notes to mark their evaluation of the thesis and supporting evidence using the following system:

- well stated (+)
- adequate (✓)
- needs improvement (–)

Review students' peer evaluations. Circle the theses and evidence that received the most plus signs in one color and answers that were common but inaccurate with a different color. Have students read the most highly rated theses and evidence. This will reiterate the most well stated answers and solidify reasoning about the democratic ideas in the documents they analyzed. Also discuss with students the common inaccurate answers to clarify any misconceptions.

TipTeacher Tip

To promote group thinking and attention to the document, give each group an enlarged text of the document. Have the groupwork start with one person reading the text aloud to the group.

Modification

Monitor the groups carefully to scaffold discussions and engage all students.

Modification

Partner students who have reading difficulties with students who are stronger readers.

Tip

Student groupings can be done in different ways. Use a system that works best for the number and abilities of students in your classroom.

Tip

The Butcher Paper Thesis is a technique that allows students to formulate a thesis and organize evidence they would use if they were writing an essay. It is less time consuming in the classroom and allows for deep thinking and discussion. Students practice writing thorough thesis statements and organizing information and ideas, which will help them write organized essays later.

Alternative Assessment

Use worksheet answer keys to guide student reading and discussion. Evaluate quality of students' final thesis statements and the evidence they provided to support the thesis.

Extending the Learning

- Juxtapose the democratic ideas present in the early colonial documents with those of the Iroquois and Cherokee nations. Use translations of the 114 Wampum and Cherokee Court cases

from the 1800's to show the democratic processes Native Americans had in place.

- Have students investigate what events in society called for the 26th and 27th Amendments. This investigation should illustrate how the Constitution is a living document that can and does change. Ask students to consider: *Do you have ideas about what might be an upcoming amendment? If so, what? Why is it needed?*

Objectives

Subjects & Disciplines

Social Studies

- United States government
- United States history

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- analyze excerpts of historical documents to identify evidence of democratic ideas
- explain how democratic ideas were incorporated in several documents from the Mayflower Compact to the U.S. Constitution

Teaching Approach

- Learning-for-use

Teaching Methods

- Cooperative learning
- Discussions
- Information organization
- Jigsaw
- Reading

Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- 21st Century Student Outcomes
 - Information, Media, and Technology Skills
 - Information Literacy
 - Learning and Innovation Skills
 - Communication and Collaboration
 - Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- 21st Century Themes
 - Civic Literacy
- Critical Thinking Skills
 - Analyzing
 - Creating

- Understanding

National Standards, Principles, and Practices

National Council for Social Studies Curriculum Standards

- **Theme 10:**

Civic Ideals and Practices

- **Theme 5:**

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- **Theme 6:**

Power, Authority, and Governance

National Geography Standards

- **Standard 12:**

The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1:**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.10:**

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9:**

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

The College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- **D2.Civ.14.9-12.:**

Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

- **D2.Civ.2.9-12.:**

Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system, with attention to various theories of democracy, changes in Americans’ participation over time, and alternative models from other countries, past and present.

- **D2.His.5.9-12.:**

Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.

Preparation

What You’ll Need

Materials You Provide

- Glue
- Highlighters
- Markers
- Butcher paper or poster board
- Pens
- Sticky notes

Required Technology

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per small group

Physical Space

- Classroom

Grouping

- Jigsaw grouping

Other Notes

This activity is intended to be conducted in three 50-minute class periods. Day 1—students review the Fundamental Principles and Values of American Constitutional Democracy and analyze the Mayflower Compact. Day 2—students analyze historical documents, identify patterns of democratic ideas across documents, and develop a thesis statement supported by evidence. Day 3—students wrap up their thesis statement, peer-review thesis statements and evidence, and discuss main ideas of the activity.

Resources Provided: Handouts & Worksheets

- [Fundamental Principles and Values of American Constitutional Democracy](#)
- [Mayflower Compact](#)
- [The General Fundamentals](#)
- [The Declaration of Independence](#)
- [U.S. Constitution Preamble and Amendments I and XIV](#)
- [Mayflower Compact Answer Key](#)
- [The General Fundamentals Answer Key](#)
- [The Declaration of Independence Answer Key](#)
- [U.S. Constitution Preamble and Amendments I and XIV Answer Key](#)

Background & Vocabulary

Background Information

Many people point to The Mayflower Compact as the earliest democratic document in North America. This social contract articulated the consensus of the new settlers of Plymouth Colony to create just and equal laws and have mutual regard for one another. The Compact embodied the first mention of self-government in the colonies and introduced the idea of law made and carried out by the people. The Mayflower Compact was the first step, an early inkling of what would become the backbone belief of the United States political system. Democratic ideas seeded in the Mayflower Compact were

incorporated in several historical documents including The General Fundamentals of Plimouth Colony, The Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States.

Prior Knowledge

["Familiarity with the founding of Plymouth Colony, including the Pilgrims and the Mayflower Compact", "Basic knowledge of democratic ideas", "Skills to analyze text for evidence"]

Recommended Prior Activities

- None

Vocabulary

| Term | Part of Speech | Definition |
|------------------------|------------------|---|
| abridge | <i>verb</i> | to shorten or reduce. |
| arbitrary | <i>adjective</i> | determined by choice, not by standards or rules. |
| body politic | <i>noun</i> | people of a nation or the nation itself considered as a political entity. |
| covenant | <i>noun</i> | agreement or treaty. |
| despotism | <i>noun</i> | absolute power or control. |
| inviolable | <i>adjective</i> | secure from destruction, violence, infringement, or desecration. |
| posterity | <i>noun</i> | all future generations. |
| prudence | <i>noun</i> | quality of being wise and cautious with practical matters. |
| social contract | <i>noun</i> | agreement for mutual benefit among individuals or between an individual or group and the government or community. |
| transient | <i>adjective</i> | lasting only a short time. |
| usurpation | <i>noun</i> | wrongful or illegal seizure. |

For Further Exploration

Articles & Profiles

- [National Geographic Education: Signing of the Mayflower Compact](#)
- [The Political Views of the Mayflower Colonists](#)

Partner





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