

ACTIVITY

Supporting Question 2: Defining Democracy

Overview

About This Activity

Students explore Supporting Question 2 through a series of activities designed to help them think about the meaning of democracy in the United States. First, they explore the meaning of democracy by analyzing the dictionary definition of *democracy* and then reading a series of quotations about democracy. Next, they complete a four-square vocabulary graphic organizer on the word *democracy* and then reflect on a series of statements about democracy. Students conclude by creating a headline that demonstrates their understanding of what democracy can mean in the United States.

Supporting Question	What can democracy mean in the United States?
Formative Task	Create a headline in response to the supporting question: "What can democracy mean in the United States?"
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: Definition of "Democracy" from <i>Merriam-Webster's Dictionary</i> • Reading: What Is Democracy? • Handout: Working Definition of "Democracy" <p>Find these materials in this Google Folder.</p>

Procedure

Activity 1: Discuss the Meaning of a Government "For the People, by the People"

Project the first definition of *democracy* from the **Definition of "Democracy" from Merriam-Webster's Dictionary** handout: *a government by the people*. You might also share that Abraham Lincoln characterized the United States as a "government by the people, for the people" in his 1863 Gettysburg Address during the Civil War. Ask students to turn and talk with a partner to answer these questions:

- What does it mean to have a government run "by the people"? What does it mean to have a government "for the people"?

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- Outside of formal government (local, state, or federal), where does democracy live? What does democracy look like in those places?

Answers to these questions may include that the people get to make decisions about what they want the government to be able to do and that democracy can happen in schools, communities, and organizations, many of which have leadership and governing structures.

Activity 2: Student Definitions of “Democracy”

Next, as a class, read aloud **What Is Democracy?**, which includes some quotations about democracy from various sources. Once you’ve finished, have students select one quote from the reading that stands out or resonates with them to discuss with a partner. Have pairs share their selected quotes and discuss why they chose them.

Then have students individually fill out the **Working Definition of “Democracy”** handout, which includes a four-square vocabulary diagram. Students will fill in the word *democracy* in the middle of the graphic and then add the following in each square: the definition of *democracy* in their own words, words and symbols that they associate with democracy, what democracy is not, and a picture. After completing the diagram, students should share some of their squares with a partner. If time permits, have students volunteer to share with the class.

Activity 3: Explore What Democracy Means in the United States

Transition from an abstract definition of democracy to a discussion of what democracy means in the context of the United States. Have students journal their responses to the following statements, and then discuss as a class. When journaling, have students write about the extent to which they agree or disagree with a statement, and ask them to come up with an example that is illustrative of their position on the statement.

- The United States has always been a democracy.
- The US government today is a government run by the people and for the people.
- I have a voice in US democracy.

Note that some students, including newcomers to the United States, may need extra support to answer some of these questions that rely on prior background knowledge of US history and/or experience with American government and institutions. It is important that you explain to

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students that there is not a right or wrong answer to these questions and that they are meant to spark reflection and discussion with classmates.

Discuss students' responses as a class. If time permits, consider incorporating a movement-based activity like [Barometer: Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues](#), which allows students to share their answers by representing how much they agree or disagree with the statements on a continuum.

Formative Task

Create a Headline

For the formative task, use the [Create a Headline](#) teaching strategy to have students compose a headline that captures their answer to the supporting question, "What can democracy mean in the United States?" Students should draw from their vocabulary diagrams, written reflections, and class discussion to write their headlines. The headline that students create should contain both a subject and a verb and be no more than about 12 words in length. You might ask students to write a brief (no more than three-sentence) explanation of how they arrived at their headline.