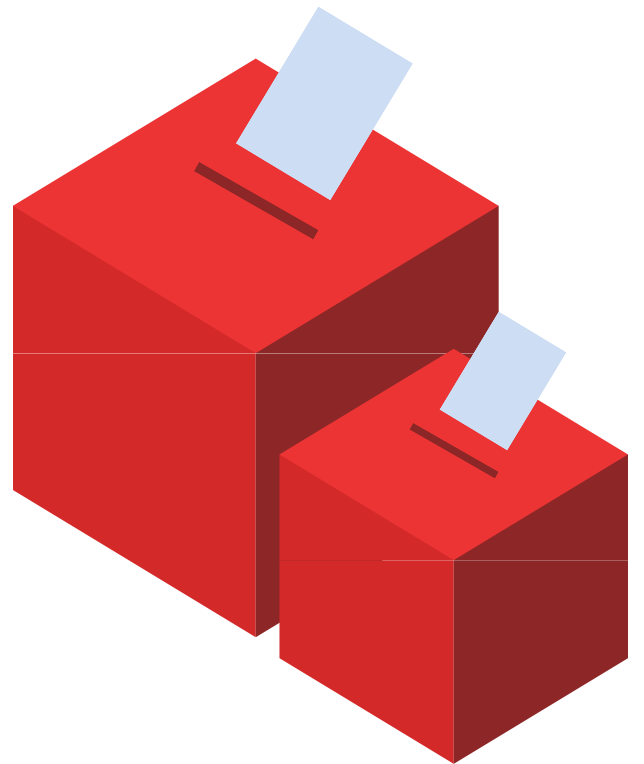


★ 2024 ★

RHODE ISLAND LAW DAY

VOICES OF DEMOCRACY



FRIDAY, MAY 3, 2024

MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAM GUIDE



2024 RI LAW DAY

VOICES OF DEMOCRACY



The 2024 Law Day theme **Voices of Democracy** recognizes that in democracies, the people rule. For nearly 250 years, Americans have expressed their political views and wishes by speaking their minds and voting in elections. This year's theme encourages Americans to participate in the 2024 elections by deepening their understanding of the electoral process, discussing all issues in honest and civil ways, and fulfilling their civic duty to vote so that government remains responsive to the wishes "of the people, by the people". Let's Celebrate this year's Law Day by lifting our voices to strengthen our democracy.



LESSON ON DEMOCRACY: DEFINING DEMOCRACY

As we seek to define democracy, we might consider the relationship between a democratic government and the freedom and liberty we expect it to provide. Many people today view democracy as having many parts and look at more than a country's leaders, laws and constitution to measure its effectiveness. They also study a variety of other factors, such as society's culture and institutions, both of which are created by the people and shaped by history.

Culture includes a society's unwritten rules of right and wrong, or acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Those unwritten rules can influence the choices of leaders, especially when breaking the rules will offend enough citizens to cost the leader public support. Institutions include courts, political parties, government bureaucracies, schools, unions, professional organizations, industries, and other organizations through which large groups of individuals collectively influence the lives and opinions of citizens and the choices of leaders.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What is Democracy?

Possible responses: The word democracy describes a form of government. It refers to the government of the people, by the people and for the people. Overall, democracy means the power of the people as the rulers are elected by the people. Democracy is based on a fundamental principle of political equality. In a democracy the people have a say in how the government is run. They do this by voting and there are rules about who can vote. Democracies are different from dictatorships.

What are the basic principles of Democracy?

Review key terms associated with Democracy with students

Federalism – the constitutional division and sharing of power between the US state governments and the national government, also known as the federal government. It promotes political participation, economic equality across the country, provides for multiple levels of government action and accommodates for a diversity of opinion.

Judicial Review – courts have the authority to determine the legitimacy of the acts of the executive and legislative branches of government

The Rule of Law – principle under which all persons, institutions, and entities are accountable to laws that are: publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated; suggests that no one is above the law. It's the law which says that government can only legally use its power in a way the government and the people agree on.

Limited Government – a political structure where laws limit the powers of the government to avoid misuse. Democracy is a significant example of a limited government where the power is distributed across the cabinet. It also restricts a single person from using excessive influence in decision-making. Primary leaders have very little governing power over the decisions and laws that are created without approval from other branches or leaders within the government. Everyone is bound by the US Constitution. Examples of limited government include Requirement of majority consent, No rule by decree, Separation of powers, Constitutionalism, Independent courts and Bill of Rights

Popular Sovereignty – The idea is that the authority, legality and legitimacy of the government is created by the will or consent of its people. It was used by the framers of the Constitution as a founding principle of the government of the United States of America. The belief is that the power to govern flows upward from the people, rather than downward from the rulers. Simply put, it means rule by the people.

Separation of Powers – The legislative, executive, and judicial functions of government are divided among separate and independent branches. Under this system no one branch of government can become too powerful. For example, the legislative branch makes the law, the executive branch enforces the law, and the judicial branch interprets the law. Congress makes laws, sets the budget, and declares war. The President appoints judges, is Commander in Chief of the military, and can grant pardons. The Supreme Court interprets the law and can declare a law unconstitutional.

Independent Judiciary – Judges are not subject to pressure and influence and are free to make impartial decisions based solely on fact and law. It allows them to make decisions based on what is right under law, without facing political or personal consequences for the decisions they make. This means that a judge can make decisions in accordance with the law and the facts without the fear of not getting reelected or fear from getting fired or having their salary lowered.

Elected representative – an elected official who has been chosen by the people in an election. Elected is different than appointed. Elected is chosen by vote for an office whereas appointed means chosen or assigned by a board or council to fill an elective office or interim position. Judges are appointed whereas presidents are elected.

Citizens in a democracy have not only rights but also the responsibility to participate in the political system. – What does this mean?

Possible Response: Political participation includes a broad range of activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the world and how it is governed. Taking part in and shaping the decisions that affect their lives is important. Political participation can take many forms. The most common today are lobbying, public relations, litigation, protest, and most importantly, voting. Although in the United States no one is required by law to vote in any local, state, or presidential election, voting is considered an important duty because it is our responsibility to have a say in which people are right to represent us in government. Voting is a very important part of any democracy. When citizens participate in voting, they are contributing to the democratic process by voting for leaders to represent them and their ideas, and the leaders who they believe will support their interests.

How are democracy and community related?

Possible Response: Democratic engagement is the practice of citizenship (defined as membership in a community) through many sources. These can include politics, membership within a community of voters and hopes for a shared future. Democracy also requires a community or society of citizens that can work together to accomplish a common goal.

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: CREATE A WORKING DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY

Begin by asking students to brainstorm words or phrases they associate with the word democracy. What comes to mind when they hear the term? Students can record their ideas on paper.

Next, pass out the reading **What is Democracy?** Please [click here](#) to download the reading. Read each quotation aloud (or ask students to). Then give students a few minutes to reflect on the quotations on their own, adding to their brainstorming from the previous question.

Ask students: What new information and ideas do these quotations give you about what democracy can be?

Ask students to share their brainstormed lists with each other in pairs or small groups. Encourage them to borrow ideas from each other, or to refine their ideas based on what they learn from their classmates.

Then have the students share some of their ideas aloud. Write these ideas on the board to create a class brainstorming list.

Because democracy is both a concrete form of government and a societal aspiration, it is important for students to know that they are trying to define something that is hard to describe. Instead of trying to create one definition for democracy, lead students through the following steps:

Question One: How does the dictionary define democracy?

Response: a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. It is based on rule by the people with popular sovereignty as its defining feature. According to the Oxford dictionary it's a system of government in which the people of a country can vote to elect their representatives.

Question Two: What is one example of democracy?

Response: Voting in school council elections, voting for a presidential candidate, The United States of America.

Question Three: What is one example of something that is not democracy?

Response: A dictatorship, monarchies, military regimes, anywhere people do not have the opportunity to elect their representatives, some countries include: China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia.

Question Four: What image or symbol might we use to represent democracy?

Response: Democracy has no official symbol, though The American flag has stood as a symbol of freedom for over 225 years. Many different works of art could be argued as being representative of democratic principles; such as the Statue of Liberty in modern times or the Parthenon in the ancient world. American symbols may also include the U.S. bald eagle, the Liberty Bell, Mount Rushmore, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

ACTIVITY 2: EXPLORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITY

Now students will have some understanding of the definition of democracy. What is the connection between democracy and our lives today? The next set of readings and questions will help students link the two. Begin by asking students to brainstorm again about the meaning of the word community.

Next, read aloud Suzanne Goldsmith's definition of community and ask students to add to their brainstorming based on any new ideas they learned. Students may brainstorm different definitions of democracy and consider democracy's relationship to their own communities and cultures.

Finally, lead a class discussion about the relationship between community and democracy, using the connection questions on the next page to guide the discussion.

Democracy and Community

From *A City Year* by Suzanne Goldsmith:

Communities are not built of friends, or of groups of people with similar styles and tastes, or even of people who like and understand each other. They are built of people who feel they are part of something that is bigger than themselves: a shared goal or enterprise, like righting a wrong, or building a road, or raising children, or living honorably, or worshipping a god. To build community requires only the ability to see value in others; to look at them and see a potential partner in one's enterprise.

Discussion Prompts:

1. How does Suzanne Goldsmith define community? Do you agree or disagree with her definition? Why or why not? What are some communities that you are a member of?
2. Are the ideas of community and democracy related?
3. Is community possible without democracy? Is democracy possible without community?
4. Often, images reveal more about a complex idea than a definition that relies only on words. What would a picture of a community look like? What might an image of democracy look like? How are they similar? How are they different?

SOURCES

- [Facing History & Ourselves - Defining Democracy](#)
- [Facing History & Ourselves - Democracy & Community](#)



The 2024 RI Law Day Program Guide is presented by the Rhode Island Law Day Committee comprised of members of the Rhode Island Judiciary, Rhode Island Bar Association, Rhode Island Police Chief's Association, Rhode Island Department of Education, and the Roger Williams University School of Law.