



Teaching the Unit

Unit 18: Civics and Government Today

Unit Summary

For upper elementary students, the material contained in Unit 18: Civics and Government Today may be their first exposure to information about how the government works and the role of citizens in a representative democracy. Students are introduced to the fundamental principles that are the foundation of American government and essential to its preservation. Although many of these concepts are abstract, students can engage these concepts and grasp them in concrete forms. This unit also covers the structure of the federal government, the state government, and local government in New Hampshire, as well as media literacy, civic virtue, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Educators are encouraged to use historical examples that appear throughout the “Moose on the Loose” to illustrate civics and government in action.

Full Educator Overview

Note to Educators

A word about civics and “Moose on the Loose” . . .

The New Hampshire Historical Society takes seriously its responsibility to offer high-quality civics resources. The material offered in “Moose on the Loose” covers not just the logistics of civics instruction but also the foundational principles that are so important to our nation’s past, present, and future. Although well within the grasp of children at the elementary grade levels, these foundational principles are sadly curtailed in most civics instruction today. “Moose on the Loose” hopes to remedy that.

“Moose on the Loose” includes numerous instructional resources on civics and government geared specifically for elementary students. Many of these resources appear throughout the “Moose,” interwoven with the state’s history, but two units in particular focus on these subjects. The first is Unit 6: Establishing Government, which explores the creation of both the New Hampshire and U.S. constitutions, beginning with the fundamental ideas that shaped the Founding Fathers’ decisions about the type of government best suited to support our liberty and prosperity. This unit also introduces the concept of rights. Note that this unit focuses on state and national constitutions as they were when they were created, not necessarily as they are today.

The second is Unit 18: Civics and Government Today, in which students return to these fundamental ideas as they learn about the characteristics of American democracy; the structure of national, state, and local governments; the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and the importance of media literacy. This unit focuses on the way national, state, and local governments work today, not necessarily the way they worked when they were created. The lesson plans for this unit encourage more in-depth explorations of key concepts in American civics and government that are vitally important to our society today. Students are given many opportunities to both learn and take action in constructive ways that emphasize how our democratic processes are supposed to work.

The two units were designed to work together, and combined they offer a scaffold to expand civics instruction in later grades.



Foundational Principles and Informed Action in Civics Education

Unlike other units in “Moose on the Loose,” the unit plan for Unit 18: Civics and Government Today does not contain additional content material for educators that deepens their knowledge of a particular historical topic. Instead, the educator overview in the unit plan discusses best practices for civics education at a time when American government and politics seem to be in crisis in our country. Increased partisanship, the breakdown of traditional norms that have preserved American democracy, and an adult population that probably knows less about civics and government than any previous generation have prompted calls for schools to improve students’ civics education. Yet most educators lack the resources and training to do so. “Moose on the Loose”—and particularly the units on constitutions (Unit 6) and civics and government (Unit 18)—attempts to lay the foundation that will help rectify these problems for New Hampshire teachers and their students.

New Hampshire state law currently requires students to begin civics education before eighth grade, and many New Hampshire schools do not offer instruction in American civics and government until middle school. The little civics and government instruction introduced in younger grades tends to gravitate toward national symbols and holidays. Yet scholars who study civics education have found that substantive instruction in this topic must start at the elementary level in order for students to become fully immersed in democratic beliefs and practices. In many ways, the classroom may be the first civic experience of a child’s life. The behaviors that shape good citizenship—fair play, following rules, concern for equity—are well suited for elementary classrooms and certainly within the grasp of elementary students.

But practical lessons in social behavior and acceptable classroom habits are not sufficient for instilling in students a true understanding of democratic principles. It is essential that behaviors are linked firmly with the ideas that underlie our system of government, and elementary students are certainly capable of grasping these ideas with suitable guidance and instruction. Even in middle schools, much of civics education centers around learning the logistics of how government works (how many senators come from each state, how old does one need to be to run for president) rather than the foundational concepts that have shaped American democracy.

This problem is exacerbated by an emphasis on skills over content knowledge and the general enthusiasm for getting students to “take action” when the national civics standards calls for students to “take *informed* action.” The distinction between the two is critical to successful civics education and for cultivating the kind of civic behavior that a democratic society requires to survive and thrive.

The need for high-quality civics resources that focus on foundational principles is not just restricted to elementary schools, and more than any other units in “Moose on the Loose,” Unit 6: Establishing Government and Unit 18: Civics and Government Today are scalable. Although written for upper elementary students, the material is well-suited to serve as a foundation for middle and high school students’ civics instruction as well. Teachers can expand upon these concepts by adapting lesson plans and activities to delve more deeply into the complexities of American democracy.



Although there are certainly challenges in teaching substantive civics programs, there are also tremendous benefits. Civics education can help educators to:

- Teach empathy and develop students' understanding of the common good
- Incorporate inquiry, including opportunities for students to take meaningful action
- Illustrate the wide variety of perspectives that exist in American society
- Develop students' critical thinking skills in contexts that are relevant to their lives
- Use historical examples to create the distance necessary to evaluate complex issues, to understand how our society got where it is today, and to appreciate the work and sacrifices of those who came before us
- Engage students in civil dialogue and find common ground even amidst disagreements
- Provide current, real-life examples for evaluating sources, information, and arguments
- Develop students' understanding of the difference between opinion and informed opinion
- Cultivate students' sense of agency in their own lives

All of these are essential to supporting American democracy.

Course Essential Questions

Essential questions are designed to be answered repeatedly throughout the entire curriculum. This unit particularly addresses the following essential questions:

- How has New Hampshire come to be the way it is?
- How has New Hampshire been shaped by many voices?
- How have New Hampshire's people shaped its government?

Unit Focus Questions

Lessons in this unit are geared towards students answering the unit focus questions comprehensively through a variety of methods. This unit's focus questions are:

1. How do people act as good citizens in a democracy?
2. What are the people's rights and responsibilities?
3. What are the responsibilities of federal, state, and local government?
4. How is a balance of power part of our democracy?

Lesson Plans

In the "Civics and Government Today" unit, two lessons introduce students to the definitions of democracy and living document. The next three lesson plans examine limiting government, the specifics of the New Hampshire state legislature, and local government. The sixth lesson plan is a writing assessment about the balance of power in government today. Then, students investigate how to behave as a good citizen through paying taxes, balancing rights and responsibilities, and civic engagement. The last two lessons curate activities on media literacy and guide students through essential skills of civil discourse and mediation in difficult discussions in order to create a strong community.

Lesson Plan 1: What Is Democracy?

Students first compare monarchy and democracy before reading about and creating a "Democracy Superhero," made up of the six characteristics of American democracy.



Lesson Plan 2: What Is a Living Document?

After using a primary source to introduce the idea of a living document, students examine four amendments about voting with a thinking routine and explore how the U.S. Constitution is amended.

Lesson Plan 3: Federalism and the Separation of Powers

Students compare how a school is separated into levels of governance to understand federalism and identify ways in which their federal, state, and local governments affect them, then make graphic notes about the three branches and play a game using their knowledge.

Lesson Plan 4: The New Hampshire State Legislature

Students first “meet” their legislators, then identify core parts of New Hampshire’s legislative process through a simulation game before reflecting about whether and how they could change existing laws.

Lesson Plan 5: Local Government

Construction of a class K-W-L chart helps students identify what they want to know about their local government so they can figure out resources to investigate it, then they participate in a mock town meeting and vote on class issues.

Lesson Plan 6: Balance of Power Writing Assessment

After discussing how a balance of power works, students use unit knowledge to complete graphics and then write an essay about a balance of power in government today.

Lesson Plan 7: Rights and Responsibilities

Students discuss how rights and responsibilities connect through examples in their lives and in historic images.

Lesson Plan 8: How Do Taxes Work?

Students first discuss how to pay for a public service and sort services into public and private before debating whether a public service should be paid for by federal, state, or local government and write a proposal for a new service in their town.

Lesson Plan 9: Good Citizenship and Civic Engagement

After assessing cartoons to develop a definition of good citizenship, students rank the traits of good citizenship, role play conversations about why to vote, and complete a Venn diagram comparing good citizenship in adults and children.

Lesson Plan 10: Media Literacy

After defining media literacy, students engage in activities exploring and practicing media literacy from a curated list of outstanding websites.

Lesson Plan 11: Perspectives in a Democracy

Students learn an active listening technique and consider the difference between debate and discussion before using scenarios about town conflicts to practice mediation and civil discourse.

Unit Vocabulary

amend	(verb) To revise or change
amendment	(noun) An addition to an existing document; in the U.S. Constitution, the amendments come after the original document
ballot	(noun) Something used to cast votes in an election. Ballots can either be on a piece of paper or a computer
bicameral	(noun) A legislature that has two parts; the U.S. Congress is bicameral because it has the House of Representatives and the Senate
bill	(noun) In government, a draft version of legislation that is under debate and not yet law



Bill of Rights	(noun) The first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution that list the freedoms of the people and states; the Bill of Rights was adopted in 1791
board of aldermen	(noun) A governing body of a city or town
branch of government	(noun) A section of government with its own purpose; the U.S. government has three sections of the government with different responsibilities that support each other to create, examine, and enforce laws
budget	(noun) An estimate for how much money will be spent and made in a set amount of time
bureaucracy	(noun) A group of unelected people who manage government business
cabinet	(noun) In government, a group of people who advise the leader
candidate	(noun) Someone who is applying for a job. In a presidential primary, a candidate is a person who is trying to get the job of president of the United States.
central government	(noun) The center or federal government of a group of states; the U.S. central government is in Washington, D.C.
check	(verb) In government, when one part of the government legally stops another part from taking its desired actions
checks and balances	(noun) The idea where separate parts of the government are given powers to stop each other's actions and are made to share power
citizen	(noun) A member by law of a nation or group
citizen legislature	(noun) (noun) A group of people chosen or elected to make the laws for a colony or state; citizen legislators are not full-time politicians and usually have other jobs
citizenship	(noun) The position of belonging to a nation or group by law
city council	(noun) A group of elected officials that makes laws for a city
civic disposition	(noun) Having the traits necessary to take on the responsibilities of citizenship in a community
civic engagement	(noun) Actions taken to participate in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a community
civic virtue	(noun) Actions citizens do and qualities citizens have that benefit their community
civility	(noun) Behaving or speaking in a polite manner
clerk	(noun) A person who manages and keeps records and accounts in an organization
committee	(noun) A group of people who make decisions and plans about a specific topic or issue
common good	(noun) A phrase in the preamble of the Constitution; what is best for the community
community	(noun) A group of people living together or having something particular in common
compromise	(verb) The process of coming to a solution that works for everyone
consensus	(noun) When a group of people come to agreement about an issue



constitution	(noun) A document laying out the rules for how a government will work
Constitution	(noun) The document that lays out the framework for how the federal government works; written in 1787 and ratified in 1789
Declaration of Independence	(noun) The document that said the 13 colonies would be free of Great Britain's control; it was adopted in 1776
deliberative session	(noun) A time to explain, discuss, and debate proposals in government
democracy	(noun) A government ruled by majority vote of the people
democratic process	(noun) When citizens participate in governing their community
dictator	(noun) The ruler of a nation or people who has absolute power
discrimination	(noun) Unjustly treating someone or something differently
election	(noun) When people vote for a person for office or other position
eligible voter	(noun) Someone who is legally allowed to vote in an election
equality	(noun) When people or things are treated the same
executive	(adjective) Describing the person or branch of government who puts plans and laws into effect
executive branch	(noun) The section of government that puts plans and laws into effect
executive council	(noun) In New Hampshire, the elected group of people who advise the governor
federal	(adjective) The central government of a group of states; the U.S. federal government is in Washington, D.C.
federalism	(noun) When local towns, states, and the federal government share power together
foundational principle	(noun) An idea on which something stands; one foundational principle of the United States is the rule of law
founding documents	(noun) A piece of writing that states the ideas or principles on which a government was founded; in the United States, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Federalist Papers are founding documents
Founding Fathers	(noun) The people who led the colonies in the American Revolution, then designed and set up the government of the United States; also called the framers
free press	(noun) When the group of people who report the news are allowed to speak without controls from the government
General Court	(noun) The official name for the New Hampshire state legislature
good citizenship	(noun) Actions people take to appropriately behave as a member of a community, such as civic duty
government	(noun) A group of people that have the power to make and carry out laws for a community
governor	(noun) The leader of the executive branch of a state government
House of Representatives	(noun) One of two legislative chambers; usually larger than the Senate
individual rights	(noun) Freedoms a person has under a democratic government; for example, to speak freely or pursue happiness
infringe	(verb) To actively break a law or agreement



interest group	(noun) A group of people who care about a particular issue and try to influence the government on that issue
journalist	(noun) A person who investigates and reports the news
judge	(noun) A person who knows the law and decides for the community whether actions follow the law
judicial	(adjective) Describing the people or branch of government that decides if laws are fair
judicial branch	(noun) The section of government that decides if laws are fair
justice	(noun) 1 Behavior or treatment that is fair and right 2 A person who knows the law and decides for the community whether actions follow the law; justices are similar to judges but sit on state supreme courts or the U.S. Supreme Court
law	(noun) A rule that regulates the actions of members of a community
legislative	(adjective) Describing the people or branch of government that makes laws
legislative branch	(noun) The section of government that makes laws
legislator	(noun) A person elected to serve in either the House of Representatives or Senate
legislature	(noun) A group of people chosen or elected to make the laws for a colony or state
literacy	(noun) The ability to read and write
living document	(noun) A paper that is added to or changed through time
local control	(noun) When decisions about government are left up to the local community, rather than the state or federal government
majority	(noun) More than half of a group
mayor	(noun) The elected executive of a city
media	(noun) A system to communicate with a large number of people, such as television, radio, or newspapers; for example, the news media communicates about events
media literacy	(noun) The ability to identify different means of communication, to recognize and to evaluate the messages in the information, and to create your own communication
minority	(noun) Less than half of a group
moderator	(noun) A person who leads a meeting to ensure it is organized and balanced
monarchy	(noun) A form of government led by a king or queen who holds the leadership position for life
motion	(noun) A formal proposal made in a meeting
neutral	(adjective) Describing something or someone who is not on any side of an issue
party divide	(noun) When political groups disagree on many issues and have trouble working together
perspective	(noun) The point of view expressed through writing, speech, photographs, and other sources of information
point of order	(noun) A question in a formal meeting whether the rules are being followed
political party	(noun) An organized group of people with similar goals and opinions about how a nation should function. The United States has two major



	political parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.
politician	(noun) Someone whose profession is to be in government
president	(noun) The elected executive of a government
press	(noun) News media including print and digital publications
public service	(noun) Something that is supplied for the benefit of the people; examples of public services are police, libraries, school, roads, courts, and military
representative	(noun) The person selected by a group of people who will communicate their views and make laws for them
republic	(noun) A community where people are governed by their elected representatives
responsibility	(noun) An action an individual takes to be accountable for something
rights	(noun) Something a person should legally or morally be able to do or get to have
school board	(noun) A group of elected representatives who make decisions about the school system in a town
select board	(noun) A group of people elected to govern a town
Senate	(noun) One of two legislative chambers; usually smaller than the House of Representatives
separation of powers	(noun) When the actions government can take to govern are divided among parts of the government in order to limit government's power
social contract	(noun) An agreement between people and their government to give up some rights in exchange for security and law and order
society	(noun) What comes when people live together in a community
sponsor	(noun) In government, a member of the House or Senate who officially presents a bill to the legislature
supervisors of the checklist	(noun) People elected to maintain the official list of voters
tax	(noun) An amount of money, added to the regular cost of an item, that goes to the government
town council	(noun) A group of people elected to govern a town
town meeting	(noun) A formal gathering of the citizens of a town to discuss and vote on town business
town meeting day	(noun) The day on which a formal gathering of the citizens of a town to discuss and vote on town business occurs; in New Hampshire, this day is traditionally the second Tuesday in March
town report	(noun) A yearly document laying out the management, money matters, and actions of a town
veto	(verb) To reject something; in government, to reject the final version of a bill passed by the legislature
voter turnout	(noun) The number of people who voted in an election divided by the number of people allowed to vote; shown as a percentage
warrant	(noun) A document giving authority to do something
warrant article	(noun) A planned action or discussion item to be considered at a town meeting



Using the Student Content Readings

The student content for this curriculum is designed to be used in many ways. Here are suggestions for reading activities and strategies that support independent and guided reading at different stages of each unit. Please note that some lessons in this unit use the student content in their learning activities.

- **Introducing Units:** Preview the student content before diving into lesson plans and activities. Ask students to skim the text by looking for key design elements. What are the headings? What do they tell us about the big ideas of the unit? Look for words in bold. What are the important vocabulary words used in this unit? Which are familiar? Which are not? What kinds of graphics or images are used in this content? Which important ideas do they illustrate?
- **Developing Understanding:** Some lesson plans direct you to specific sections of the student content, but the student content should be revisited throughout completion of a unit. Students can create visual representations of specific sections, summarize paragraphs, or complete jigsaw chunking and present their section summaries to other students.
- **Reviewing Concepts:** After lessons, return to the student content to look for evidence of the concept explored in the lesson. Students can create timelines, cause and effect charts, mind maps, and Venn diagrams using the information provided in each section.
- **Extending Comprehension:** Students can develop a review quiz for fellow students by writing their own questions about the information in each section. Translating the content into data that can be displayed on a map or graph is another way to extend comprehension of the text.

Additional Resources

Format: Book

Title: *The Bill of Rights: Protecting Our Freedom Then and Now*

Author/Creator: Syl Sobel

Audience: For Students.

Description: A look at each of the 10 amendments in the Bill of Rights, suitable for grades 4–7

Format: Podcast

Title: "Civics 101"

Author/Creator: New Hampshire Public Radio

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Fun and irreverent series that explores how American government works, with some politics and history thrown in

Website: www.civics101podcast.org/

Format: Podcast

Title: "Civics 101: NH"

Author/Creator: New Hampshire Public Radio

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Fun and irreverent series that explores how New Hampshire state government works, with some politics and history thrown in

Website: www.civics101podcast.org/newhampshire/



Format: Website

Title: "Constitution in the Classroom"

Author/Creator: National Constitution Center

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Projects, lesson plans, educational resources, and virtual classroom presentations centered around the U.S. Constitution

Website: constitutioncenter.org/learn

Format: Website

Title: "Constitution USA"

Author/Creator: Peter Sagal from NPR

Audience: For Educators, with some videos appropriate for Students.

Description: Short videos of Sagal traveling around the country seeing the Constitution in action and explaining various components of the the Constitution and the Bill of Rights

Website: www.pbs.org/show/constitution-usa-peter-sagal/

Format: Website

Title: "Crash Course: The Constitution"

Author/Creator: John Green

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Fast-paced and irreverent video covering the Articles of Confederation and the creation and ratification of the Constitution

Website: www.youtube.com/watch?v=bO7FQsCcbD8

Format: Website

Title: "Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics"

Author/Creator: Craig Benzine and PBS

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Follows the same format as John Green's popular Crash Course series on history with fast-paced narrative explanations of key concepts, animations, and thought bubbles. Might be suitable for advanced middle school or high school students

Website: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Irk4oY7UxpQ

Format: Book

Title: *How the U.S. Government Works*

Author/Creator: Syl Sobel

Audience: For Students.

Description: Geared toward upper elementary and middle school students, it explores the three branches of the federal government

Format: Website

Title: "iCivics"

Author/Creator: iCivics

Audience: For Students and Educators.

Description: A wide variety of teaching resources, including games, activities, DBQs, and lesson plans, that cover all of U.S. civics

Website: www.icivics.org/



Format: Book

Title: *If I Were President*

Author/Creator: Catherine Stier

Audience: For Students.

Description: A picture book that explores what a girl would do if she were elected president

Format: Book

Title: *The Liberty Key*

Author/Creator: Lorenca Consuelo Rosal

Audience: For Students and Educators.

Description: Cartoons, documents, and stories explore the creation of the NH Constitution

Format: Program

Title: NH's Kid Governor

Author/Creator: New Hampshire Institute for Civics Education

Audience: For Students.

Description: A statewide program to annually elect a kid governor

Website: nh.kidgovernor.org/

Format: Website

Title: "Teaching Resources"

Author/Creator: Center for Civics Education

Audience: For Educators.

Description: Age-appropriate lesson plans on the fundamentals of American government

Website: www.civiced.org/teaching-resources

Format: Website

Title: "We the People"

Author/Creator: Scholastic Kids

Audience: For Students and Educators.

Description: Online book with a few videos and graphic organizers explaining how American government works

Website: <https://wethepeople.scholastic.com/grade-4-6.html>

Format: Book

Title: *We the People: The Citizen & and the Constitution*

Author/Creator: Center for Civic Education

Audience: For Students.

Description: High-quality civics textbook and teacher's guide for students, focusing on national government. Four levels of the curriculum cover grades 3 to 12

Format: Book

Title: *We the Kids: The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States*

Author/Creator: David Catrow

Audience: For Students.

Description: Appropriate for kids ages 4–9, this picture book uses illustrations to explain the Constitution's preamble

Format: Book

Title: *We the People: The Story of Our Constitution*

Author/Creator: Lynne Cheney

Audience: For Students.

Description: Illustrated story of the creation of the Constitution, suited for grades 5–8