



Lesson 18.1 “What is Democracy?”

Unit 18: Civics and Government Today

Lesson Objectives

- Students will discuss and identify the essential difference between a democracy and a monarchy.
- Students will analyze historical images and nonfiction to explore the six characteristics of American democracy.
- Students will write and draw about democracy in action.

Lesson Competencies

- I can interpret and use information delivered orally or visually and respond by asking relevant questions, summarizing key points, or elaborating on ideas. (ELA 7)
- I can analyze primary and secondary sources and draw appropriate conclusions. (Moose SS)
- I can determine the central idea of a text and explain how key details and text structure/organization support the focus. (ELA 3)
- I can state an opinion that answers a question about a topic or text. (ELA 6)

Essential Questions

How has New Hampshire come to be the way it is?
How have New Hampshire’s people shaped its government?

Focus Questions

How do people act as good citizens in a democracy?

Estimated Time

One or two 40-minute class sessions

Materials & Equipment

Chart paper or whiteboard
“Democracy Superhero” infographic for projection
Access to student readings in “Unit 18: Civics and Government Today,”
Learn It! “[Government and Democracy](#)”
Class set of “Learn It! Characteristics of American Democracy” worksheet
“Democracy in Action” image set for printing or projection
Class set of “Who is Democracy?” worksheet
Markers, crayons, or colored pencils



Educator Introduction & Rationale

For thousands of years, people have lived together in communities. People have learned that by working together they can protect one another from dangers, help one another overcome hardships, and inspire one another to accomplish great things. These three ideas—of working together, sharing burdens, and respecting each other’s rights—are why people form governments. American communities are governed under a system known as democracy. Reference the [student overview](#) for more information.

This is the first lesson in Unit 18: Civics and Government Today. In this lesson, students define “democracy,” an essential first step toward answering a unit focus question “How do people act as good citizens in a democracy?” The root meaning of democracy, “power of the people,” lends itself to an exploration of democracy in action. What power do people really have in a democracy? What action can they take with that power? This lesson centers on these “powers,” the six major characteristics of American democracy:

1. representative democracy
2. rule of law
3. limited government
4. free and fair elections
5. active citizens
6. a free press

With the image of a superhero as a visual scaffold, students build their understanding of these characteristics by reading nonfiction text and examining historical images. They conclude the lesson by using this understanding to create their own democracy superhero.

If students have not completed any earlier units in the “Moose on the Loose” curriculum and need more experience with analyzing historical photographs and documents, please see the second reinforcement activity before proceeding through the lesson. A matching game reinforcement activity is recommended for students who need more time to develop an understanding of the six characteristics. An extension activity is also provided for students who are ready to be challenged to look for examples of democracy in action in the news. Please adapt all the material in this lesson, as necessary, to meet the needs of the students in your classroom. Please note, lesson vocabulary and definitions are at the end of the document. You may wish to preview these with your students.

Learning Activity

Actuation

Which works best? Present students with this public interest scenario. A town is planning to build a new park. There are many decisions to make: where it should be located, what features will it have, who will build it, and how to pay for it. Discuss which of these approaches for making these decisions will serve the interests and ideas of the most people in the town:

- A single town leader, perhaps with some advice from a small group of other important people, decides where the park will go, what it will feature, how much it will cost, and how to pay for it.
- The public gets to share their opinions with a group of town leaders at a meeting; then the group of leaders votes based on what they heard from the community.

Ask students to explain why they think the approach they chose works better. Make a list of the big differences between the two approaches on a white board or chart paper.

Student Reading

What is democracy? Before you begin Direct Instruction, have students read pages 1-8 in Unit 18, Learn It! "[Government & Democracy](#)."

Direct Instruction & Discussion

Democracy or monarchy? Write "monarchy" above the list describing the first approach and "democracy" about the list describing the second approach and add short definitions.

- **Monarchy:** A form of government led by a king, queen, or emperor who holds the leadership position for life
- **Democracy:** a government ruled by majority vote of the people

Remind students that when the United States was still a collection of American colonies ruled by Britain, government worked like the first approach because Britain was a monarchy. When the colonies revolted against Britain and joined together to form their own country, they decided to create a government that worked more like the second approach. Explain that leaders of this brand-new country looked way back into the past, to the ancient Greeks, to find the inspiration for the kind of government they wanted: democracy.

On the chart paper or white board, next to the word "democracy" write this translation of the original Greek meaning: "power of the people" (demos: people, kratos: power).

Tell students that American democracy has six characteristics that work together to make our country, and the communities in it, function. In order for a democracy to have its full power, its people need to understand those six characteristics.

Student Reading	Democracy’s characteristics. Before you begin Guided Practice, have students read page 9 in Unit 18, Learn It! “Government and Democracy.”
Guided Practice	<p>Power of the people. Project or display “Democracy Superhero” and read labels. Ask students to complete reading comprehension questions on the “Learn It! Characteristics of American Democracy” worksheet. Encourage students to refer back to page 9 as they work on the questions.</p> <p>Then, as a whole group look at the “Democracy in Action” image set and work together to decide which power is shown in the image. Have students provide details and explanations to support their ideas about which power is shown in an image.</p> <p>As a whole group, create a definition of the power and add it below the appropriate label on the “Democracy Superhero.”</p> <p>Teaching tip: Although reading the characteristics on the “Moose on the Loose” website is ideal so that students can access vocabulary definitions, a second copy of the reading comprehension questions is provided with the readings inserted in case students don’t have online access.</p>
Independent Practice	Who is democracy? Distribute the “Who is Democracy?” worksheet and review directions with students. Have students use markers or crayons to add details to the figure. What would a democracy superhero look like? Have students work in pairs for brainstorming help.
Reflection	Democracy in action. Allow time for students to share their completed heroes and descriptions. Discuss examples from their own lives when they’ve seen the powers of democracy in action. Consider recording these on a large piece of chart paper to display in the classroom.
Reinforcement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Matching powers and definitions. Work with students to create a set of card pairs. One card in the pair is labeled with one of the six characteristics of American democracy and a simple symbol that visually represents that power. The other card in the pair is labeled with the whole group definition of that power. Students can use the cards to play a memory matching game. Analyze It! If students need more practice looking at historical photographs or documents, use an Analyze It! worksheet to expand and support their understanding of one of the items from the “Democracy in Action” image set. Analyze It! worksheets can be found in the Analyze It! section on the student side of the “Moose on the Loose” website.

Extension

1. **Democracy in action in the news.** Provide students with a section of a national or local newspaper. Challenge them to find a story that reflects one or more of the six characteristics of American democracy.

Supporting Materials

New Hampshire Historical Society Resources

1. New Hampshire State House, circa 1898–1952
2. Reporters Covering the 1952 Primary, 1952
3. Ballot Box, circa 1850
4. Women Marching in Concord, 1915
5. N.H. Supreme Court, 2020
6. New Hampshire Constitution of 1776

Standards

“Moose on the Loose” Content:

- ✓ Students will understand that after the revolution, the United States of America established a federal government; colonies established state governments. They will understand that the New Hampshire State Constitution established the basic structure of government for the state and created laws to protect the people and interests of the state. (3-5.T3.2)
- ✓ Students will understand that New Hampshire today is a modern, diverse state with a rich culture and thriving economy. (3-5.T8.1)

“Moose on the Loose” Skills:

- ✓ Gathering, Interpreting, and Using Evidence (3-5.S1, 3-5.S1.2)

New Hampshire Social Studies Frameworks:

- ✓ Civics and Governments: The Nature and Purpose of Government (SS:CV:4:1.1)
- ✓ World History: Political Foundations and Developments (SS:WH:4:1.1)

NCSS Themes:

- ✓ Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

C3 Frameworks:

- ✓ Civic and Political Institutions (D2.Civ.2.3-5)

Common Core ELA:

- ✓ Key Ideas and Details in Informational Text (RI.4.1, RI.4.2, RI.4.3)
- ✓ Craft and Structure in Informational Text (RI.4.4)
- ✓ Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity in Informational Text (RI.4.10)
- ✓ Text Types and Purposes in Writing (W.4.1b, W.4.2d)
- ✓ Production and Distribution of Writing (W.4.4)

Lesson Vocabulary

citizen	(noun) A member by law of a nation or group
democracy	(noun) A government ruled by majority vote of the people
election	(noun) When people vote for a person for office or other position
government	(noun) A group of people that have the power to make and carry out laws for a community
law	(noun) A rule that regulates the actions of members of a community
monarchy	(noun) A form of government led by a king, queen, or emperor who holds the leadership position for life
press	(noun) News media including print and digital publications

