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## **COURSE SYLLABUS - American Democracy A Draft Syllabus Outline for a University-Level, Advanced Undergraduate Course**

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## COURSE SYLLABUS

# American Democracy

## A Draft Syllabus Outline for a University-Level, Advanced Undergraduate Course

In 2021, the state legislature of South Carolina passed the REACH Act, wherein undergraduate students are required to complete a three-credit course that contains, at a minimum, the reading of the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, five Federalist Papers, and one document foundational to “the African American struggle.” These mandated readings were declared “Founding Documents.” The present draft syllabus was conceived, in part, to fulfill REACH Act stipulations, as well as serve the needs of educators in similar curricular circumstances.

### Unit 1: Thinking Historically

In this course, students will be asked to “think historically,” which, in itself, can be a real challenge. To help them prepare for deep discussions of democracy, rights, and various manifestations and uses of power, students should complete the readings below. The instructor should then go over the main points (like the “five ‘c’s’ of historical thinking”) and engage the students in discussion about how and why historical thinking is both different and necessary.

#### READINGS

- Andrews, Thomas and Flannery Burke. 2007. [“What Does it Mean to Think Historically?”](#) *Perspectives on History*. January 1, 2007.
- Crocker, Andrew. 2017. [“Thinking Historically.”](#) *Medium*. October 26, 2017.
- Hoffer, Peter Charles. 2004. “Two-Faced History.” In *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud – American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Wineburg, Sam. 2010. “Thinking Like a Historian.” In Library of Congress, *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly*. Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter).

### Unit 2: What is democracy?

#### DOCUMENTS

- [“A WATCHMAN,”](#) *Maryland Gazette*. August 15, 1776.
- [“The Key of Liberty: Showing the Causes Why a Free Government Has Always Failed and a Remedy against It,”](#) *William Manning*. 1799.
- [“Of the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects”](#) in *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, 1838.
- [“Speech of Ernestine Rose,”](#) *Women’s Rights Convention*. Worcester, MA: October 15, 1851.
- [“Gettysburg Address,”](#) Abraham Lincoln. November 19, 1863.
- [“Let America Be American Again,”](#) Langston Hughes. 1936.
- [“Port Huron Statement,”](#) *Students for a Democratic Society*. June 15, 1962.
- [“Remarks by President Biden at The Summit for Democracy Opening Session,”](#) Joseph Biden. December 9, 2021.

## Unit 3: Whose revolution?

### TOPICS

- Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation (1775)
- Revolutionary rhetoric versus the reality of slavery
- Self-emancipation by African-Americans
- Cornelius Tye (“Colonel Tye”) and Black freedom fighters
- Nationality Act of 1790
- Haitian Revolution (1791–1804)
- Gabriel’s Rebellion (1800)

### DOCUMENTS

- [Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams](#), 31 March–5 April 1776.
- [“Declaration of Independence,”](#) Committee of Five, 1776.
- [“Petition of Slaves to the Massachusetts Legislature, 1777.”](#)
- [Excerpt from Notes on the State of Virginia](#), Thomas Jefferson, 1787.
- [Nationality Act of 1790.](#)
- [“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”](#) Frederick Douglass, 1852.

### WRITING ACTIVITY: PERSPECTIVES

**Objective:** Students understand that the American Revolution looked and felt differently to different groups.

Have the students read the assigned documents and consider the author. Drawing on each document, students should extract what the “revolution” meant to each author, answering the following questions: What problems did the author hope the revolution would solve? What groups did the author expect the revolution to include and exclude, and why? How do you imagine the author felt about the revolution (were they pleased, disappointed, etc.), and why?

### IN-CLASS DISCUSSION: THE MEANING OF REVOLUTION

**Objective:** Students understand the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of the American Revolution.

#### TOPIC 1: “FOUNDING FATHERS”

Given the assigned documents, how should we view the “Founding Fathers”? Is the moniker “Founding Fathers,” itself, problematic, since it asserts that the revolution was a male-only affair? Should enslaved Americans, who fought for and often achieved their freedom during the war (albeit on the side of the British) be included in the idea of the “Founding Fathers”?

#### TOPIC 2: FREEDOM

Since the rebel colonists did not offer freedom to enslaved people, many of the rebel leaders were enslavers, and many colonists fought specifically to preserve slavery, while the British explicitly offered freedom to the enslaved, actively aided in self-emancipation, and accepted thousands of enslaved people into their ranks, which side in the revolution was actually the side of “freedom”?

Students can discuss and debate, with an eye towards the difference between reality and rhetoric, versions of “freedom,” from emancipation from enslavement to the freedom from taxations and economic restrictions.

### TOPIC 3: REVOLUTIONARY

The words revolution and revolutionary mean dramatic change and the replacement of the status quo with an entirely new system. Was the American Revolution a true revolution? Were the state assemblies after the war dramatically different from the colonial assemblies? Were American leaders the same basic group (demographically and literally) both before and after the war? Did the enslavement of Africans or the persecution of Indigenous Americans end? Were the economics of the 1780s dramatically different than the 1760s?

## Unit 4: US Constitution

### TOPICS

- Failures of the Articles of Confederation
- Shays’s Rebellion
- Constitutional Convention of 1787
- Major issues/debates
- Sectionalism/slavery

### DOCUMENTS

- [The Constitution of the United States, 1787.](#)
- [Notes on the Debates in the Federal Convention,](#) James Madison, 1787.

### READINGS

- Balz, Dan et al. 2023. [“The Hidden Biases at Play in the US Senate.”](#) *The Washington Post*. November 17, 2023
- Finkelman, Paul. 2000. [“Garrison’s Constitution: The Covenant with Death and How It Was Made.”](#) *Prologue Magazine* (Winter 2000).

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: CONSTITUTIONAL MULTIVERSE

**Objective:** Students will learn the nature of contingency, a key historical concept. The US Constitution was a product of deliberate decisions and unambiguous motives, but it could have gone quite differently. Students need to understand that the final document was not the only option.

### OPTION 1: ROADS NOT TAKEN

The “Constitutional Convention” of 1787 met from May 25 to September 17, quite a length of time. Trapped in a single, airless (because they sought secrecy and did not open the windows) room during the hottest, most humid months of the Philadelphia calendar, the thirty-something white men in attendance at any given time discussed and debated a dizzying variety of governmental options. Many of those possibilities, including a triumvirate presidency, allowing only the richest men to vote, and a unicameral legislature, were voted down and out. In this activity, students are divided into groups and set to scouring Madison’s *Notes* for ideas that never made the final cut. Once a group has found a failed idea that interests them, they are to explore context (larger discussion / issue at the time) and the man behind it. In a presentation to the class, each group explains the idea and context, and then tries to convince their classmates that it should have been included in the US Constitution. [*The instructor should monitor the group work and ensure that there is no overlap.*] This defense of an idea that may seem odious to them requires some imagination, and, maybe, some play-acting. The classmates are encouraged to oppose the motion and fight for the Constitution as it stands. A written component of this activity is an easy addition—asking each group to commit to writing its findings and argument.

### OPTION 2: LEFT OUT

The US Constitution does not include African-Americans (enslaved or free), women, or Indigenous Americans in “We the people,” though, together, they greatly outnumbered white men. In this activity, students, either as individuals or in groups (small groups may add a productive discussion dynamic to the work) are encouraged to go through the document and note all the places where it should be changed to include the majority of Americans in 1787. Changes may be as small as a word, or as big as the functioning of a branch of government. Students should not neglect the more mundane aspects, such as taxation and commerce—every word matters! Perhaps the students also want to suggest amendments to the Constitution.

When the work is completed each student or group (verbally or in writing) should imagine they were alive in 1787 and explain whether or not they would have voted to ratify the final document as it was presented to the states (i.e., not with the students’ changes). Students should explain and defend their answer: Why would they support a government that excludes the majority of people? Or, would the chaos of the Articles of Confederation (still in effect in 1787) be preferable to an exclusionary federal government? What was more important, a flawed government with the power to restore order and ensure profitable commerce, or holding out for something “more perfect”?

## Unit 5: The Federalist Papers

### TOPICS

- Ratification debates
- Hamilton, Madison, Jay
- Background on the Federalist Papers

### DOCUMENTS

- [\*The Federalist Papers Nos. 10, 39, 41, 43, 51.\*](#)

### IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: TRANSLATION

**Objective:** Students will come to understand the basic motives and ideas behind supporters of the US Constitution. Moreover, they will learn how to read and analyze historic documents.

Have the students read the assigned essays, then select one that is personally interesting to them. Students will then outline and annotate the essay in their own words (either on computer or by hand). Have them utilize this format, to help them organize their thoughts:

Federalist Paper #

Author

Overall Topic

Overall Goal

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Etc.

Is the argument convincing?

Notice that the topic and goal are two separate categories, as in many instances the goal of the author is not the same as the declared topic. If students are unfamiliar with the three authors of the essays (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay), the instructor should set aside time to go over each. For each paragraph, students should list the main points (in other words, “translate” the points into 21st century American English).

At the end, the student should assess whether they found the points/argument persuasive. Here, students should be encouraged to draw upon their own political beliefs and voice their objections and agreements. If the instructor is so inclined, students can then go around the room giving the “highlights” of their essays (repetition isn’t a problem, as it will hammer home the main ideas), then their opinion. Perhaps some interesting and productive discussion will be sparked.

## Unit 6: The virtues and vices of “compromise”

### TOPICS

- Election of 1800
- Missouri Crisis, 1819-21/“Compromise of 1820”
- Nullification Crisis, 1832-33/“Compromise of 1833”
- “Compromise of 1850”

### DOCUMENTS

- “[Positive Good](#)” speech to the US Senate, John Calhoun, 1837.
- “[Higher Law](#)” speech to the US Senate,” William Seward, 1850.
- [Excerpt from \*Disquisition on Government\*](#), John Calhoun, 1851.

### READINGS

- Finkelman, Paul. 2011. “The Appeasement of 1850” in *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, edited by Paul Finkelman and Donald Kennon. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Hammond, John Craig. 2019. “President, Planter, Politician: James Monroe, the Missouri Crisis, and the Politics of Slavery.” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 105, Issue 4 (March): 843–67.

### IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: LEGISLATIVE “COMPROMISES”

**Objective:** Students will learn that labels (like “compromise”) are not always what they seem to be and may mask unsavory motives and outcomes.

The famous legislative packages of 1820, 1833, and 1850 have been hailed as “compromises” since the moment of their passage. But are they really *compromises*?

Class discussion: Have the class come up with a working definition of “compromise” that all students can agree on.

Hand out the attached worksheet (Appendix 2). As a class, fill in the blanks together. Enter the year at the top (“Compromise of 1820,” for instance). In each line of the left column marked “Bill,” enter each part of the deal. Then, put an “X” in the appropriate column: pro-slavery, antislavery, draw. Do this for 1820, 1833, and 1850, then decide if each one actually meets the definition of “compromise.” Done correctly, the class will see clearly that each “compromise” was not a compromise at all, but a significant victory for pro-slavery forces.

Finally, discuss Finkelman’s main points and his call to change the name from “compromise” to “appeasement.” Consider: How much do names matter? Why do Americans prefer a “compromise” version of history? The instructor can either keep the discussion purely oral, or can ask the students to put their ideas in writing for assessment.

### IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: PRIORITIES

**Objective:** Students will understand that “compromise,” on which so much of American life and politics is supposedly based, means prioritizing values and make sacrifices.

The entire federal system (three branches of government, state powers versus federal powers) is based on the premise that compromise is a virtue; that forcing competing interests to give in to each other is a positive good. The system cannot function if there is not a “spirit of compromise” at all levels and among all parties. If there is obstruction at any level or in any branch, bills do not become law, government services and powers are crippled, and constitutional crisis ensues. But is compromise, itself, a good thing? Did the framers of the Constitution make a terrible mistake?

Individually, students should rank their five (5) most important issues/political topics. They should then assess on which they are willing to compromise (that is, give up some important part) and on which they are not. They must select at least three (3) on which to compromise, and explain, in writing, why they are willing to do so, and how far they are willing to go.

Once students have completed their lists and explanations, the instructor should then have students, one at a time, read their lists aloud. Students should pay attention to each other’s priorities (what they value most and least, or what their overall objectives are). After every student has announced theirs, the instructor will give fifteen (15) minutes for students to make alliances and negotiate with each other to get one (1) “bill” on one (1) topic/issue passed by the class, via majority vote. The challenge is, obviously, getting a majority to agree and lobbying your classmates to support your position. Each student’s list and written explanations should be turned in to the instructor for assessment.

## Unit 7: Minority Rule

### TOPICS

- Gerrymandering
- Transition from class-based voting (property requirements, taxes) to race-based voting state-by-state in the 1810s-30s
- Capitalism
- Territorial expansion
- *Dred Scott* Supreme Court ruling
- Secession

### DOCUMENTS

- Excerpt from “[Dred Scott v. Sandford, Opinion of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney](#),” 1857.
- “[South Carolina Ordinance of Secession](#),” 1860.
- “[Cornerstone Speech](#),” Alexander Stephens, 1861.

### READINGS

- Mitchell, Allison Mashell. 2023. “[The Sides Have Switched in the Fight Over Majority-Minority Congressional Districts](#).” *Time: Made by History*. October 4, 2023.
- Varon, Elizabeth. 2022. “[The Secessionist Roots of the Jan. 6 Insurrection](#).” *The Washington Post*. June 15, 2022.
- Wang, Hansi Lo. 2023. “[Many voters say Congress is broken. Could proportional representation fix it?](#)” *NPR*. November 18, 2023.



## ONLINE TOOLS

- [“Gerrymandering Project,”](#) Princeton University.

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: GERRYMANDERING

**Objective:** Students will learn the fundamentals of gerrymandering and achieve a realistic understanding how it operates and shapes real life.

### OPTION 1 (TACTILE)

*This option requires the instructor/school to purchase 48 black & red checkers pieces for each group. The pieces can be bought online through retailers such as Amazon for about \$9 per bag of 24 pieces.*

Black/red are used as neutral colors, not associated with any partisan organization or demographic. Colored poker chips are also an option, as long as they are not associated with partisanship. Keeping the activity free from politics or social controversy protects the instructor, minimizes distractions to the students, and demonstrates how gerrymandering is a weapon that can be wielded by anyone, regardless of motive.

Once poured onto the table, the checker pieces/poker chips are not to be moved, in order to simulate the realistic nature of populations densities.

1. Split the class into groups of four.
2. Each group gets 18 red and 24 black.
3. Each group needs to be at a desk or table large enough for a sheet of white paper 3'x 3'.
4. The paper should lay flat on the surface of the table/desk.
5. The group thoroughly mixes up their blacks and reds (shaking in a bag is a good method).
6. The pieces are then dumped all together on the paper.
7. Pieces should be smoothed out so they all lay flat.
8. Without moving any of the pieces, each group then takes a pencil and draws district lines on the paper in such a way that the minority (red) have more voting districts than the majority (black). The “districts” should have a minimum 5 pieces each.
9. Drawing the districts may take several tries, so perhaps using different colored pencils for each attempt is a good idea.
10. As students are engaged in the activity, the instructor should explain they are gerrymandering—ensuring a minority will dominate. The process, of course, deliberately aims at thwarting democracy.
11. When each group has settled on their districts, the papers can be displayed in the classroom so everyone can see the odd shapes and geometric acrobatics required to rig elections.
12. The strange shapes should be compared to existing voting districts in various states today, most notably in Texas, Maryland, and South Carolina. The Princeton “Gerrymander Project” website is excellent for assessing different states.

## OPTION 2 (WHITEBOARD)

1. The instructor prepares in advance a series of transparencies for an overhead projector, or images on a computer, to be projected onto a large whiteboard. Each slide should have randomized red and black dots, with the dots large enough to be seen clearly throughout the classroom. One color should be in the clear majority.
2. One by one, or in groups of two or three, students come up to the whiteboard and use a dry-erase marker to draw “voting districts” on the whiteboard, aiming to “gerrymander” the dots so the minority color is in the electoral majority.
3. After each attempt, the lines on the board can be erased.
4. The instructor may choose to encourage the students who are not at the board to participate through verbal instructions, much like a gameshow, where the audience tries to direct the contenders.
5. At the conclusion of the activity, the instructor should use the aforementioned “Gerrymandering Project” resources to demonstrate how voting districts today are often created the same way (trying to make a numerical minority the electoral majority).

## OPTION 3 (ONLINE)

*This option is primarily for online instruction, but certainly can be employed in an in-personal class with computers, or offered as an assignment. There are several online platforms that can be used to recreate, virtually, the above activities: Padlet, Whiteboard (Zoom app), and Google Jam Boards.*

# Unit 8: Reconstruction

## TOPICS

- A nation no longer dominated by the “Slave Power” minority
- Attempt at interracial democracy
- Federal activism in the direction of civil rights
- White supremacy terrorism
- Black Codes
- Sharecropping

## DOCUMENTS

- [“Emancipation Proclamation,”](#) Abraham Lincoln, 1863.
- [“Protest of the Freedmen of Edisto Island to President Johnson,”](#) 1865.
- [14th Amendment to the US Constitution,](#) 1868.
- [15th Amendment to the US Constitution,](#) 1870.
- [“On Civil Rights,”](#) Robert B. Elliott, 1874.

## READINGS

- Nelson, Megan Kate. 2021. [“1871 Provides a Road Map for Addressing the Pro-Trump Attempted Insurrection.”](#) *The Washington Post*. (January 8, 2021).

## ONLINE TOOLS

- [\*Erasing the Black Freedom Struggle\*](#), Zinn Education Project.

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: PUBLIC MEMORIAL

**Objective:** Students will come to a deeper understanding of the implicit and explicit messaging in public memorials, as well as the potential impact of such renderings.

The United States' first major memorial to Reconstruction, arguably the most complex and important era in the nation's history, just opened in Beaufort, South Carolina in March 2017. There is, of course, much more to that epic, decades-long battle over freedom, rights, and democracy than the famed "Sea Island Experiment" on the Georgia/Carolina coast. In this activity, students will identify an individual person or event from Reconstruction they deem worthy of a public memorial or monument, then design and explain that commemoration.

### STEP 1: ESSAY

Students will research the person/event they have selected, then write an essay explaining what the person experienced/accomplished and why they merit a public memorial (citing all sources of information, of course—the instructor may want to designate which sources can be used or create parameters, to ensure that students do not engage with neo-Confederate/"Lost Cause" falsehoods and propaganda).

### STEP 2: MEMORIAL PROPOSAL

Students will craft a proposal for an actual public memorial, detailing every aspect: exact location, appearance (statue? plaque? sign? school or road name? etc), size, colors, lighting, target audience, and any explicit message. In writing, students will justify every decision. Students should be encouraged to be creative, not only in considering how to celebrate/commemorate the person/event, but also in design and impact.

### STEP 3: CLASS PRESENTATION

Students will present to their classmates their proposal and design, explaining, verbally, all decisions and justifications. Their classmates should be prodded to ask questions, challenge the presenter, and offer feedback.

### [OPTIONAL STEP 4: MODEL]

Students are given the opportunity to actually create a model of their memorial, using software and 3D printing, or by hand out of wood, Legos, or building material, depending on the school's resources. The models can then be displayed, sparking further discussion of the meaning and legacy of Reconstruction.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT: WILL THE REAL REVOLUTION PLEASE STAND UP?

**Objective:** Students will achieve a more nuanced understanding of sociopolitical revolutions, comprehend the power of mythmaking and nationalism in shaping how people see those events, and appreciate the profound changes wrought by Reconstruction.

Students are likely familiar with the idea that the "American Revolution" occurred in the 1770s and marks the "birth" of the United States as an independent republic (Americans celebrate the nation's "birthday" every July 4!). And, since Unit 3 of this course delved into some of the basic concepts and debates of the Revolutionary era, students should be ready to return to "Revolutionary" ideals of freedom and equality.

This writing assignment asks student to compare the Revolution of the 1770s with the attempted revolution of Reconstruction. In a formal essay with an introduction featuring a thesis and context, a body providing supporting evidence and argument, and a conclusion that restates the thesis and summarizes the main points, students will answer the following question: Was Reconstruction more important than the American Revolution?

Students should consider the following in their assessment: What were the goals of the leaders in each instance? Were those goals met—why or why not? Was actual democracy an objective? Did leadership change during the era? How much social, political, and economic change was attempted? Was the status of women, African Americans, and Indigenous Americans significantly altered? Which revolution better lived up to the ideals of freedom and equality?

Alternatively, this exercise can work as a class debate, aided by a graph on the board featuring the questions/categories listed above. As a class, you can fill in the chart and debate in real time the scope and importance of change.

By answering these questions, students will confront the very real differences between the two revolutions and come to grips with the nature of, and limits to, change in American history. As a conceptual reference, students can examine the *1619 Project*, which seeks to strip away generations of mythmaking and propaganda concerning the American Revolution, reassess the “birth” of America in light of the African American experience, and relocate that birth from 1776 to 1619. Likewise, students can consider an argument moving the “birthday” from 1776 to 1865.

## Unit 9: Second Slavery

### TOPICS

- Racial segregation (“Jim Crow”)
- “Lynch Law”
- Convict labor
- Voting obstructions
- Confederate memorials
- *Plessy v Ferguson*
- Redlining

### READINGS

- Anderson, Carol. 2021. “Self-Defense.” In *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. New York: One World.
- Best, Ryan. 2020. “[Confederate Statues Were Never Really About Preserving History.](#)” *FiveThirtyEight*. (July 8, 2020).
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. “[The Case for Reparations.](#)” *The Atlantic*. (June 2014)
- Stevenson, Bryan. 2021. “Punishment.” In *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. New York: One World.

### VIDEOS

- [Slavery By Another Name](#). 2021. PBS

# Unit 10: Capitalism

## TOPICS

- Monopolies, trusts, vertical & horizontal integration
- Workers' rights
- Unions
- Late 19th century labor strikes
- Socialism
- Communism
- Anarchism

## DOCUMENTS

- "[The Laboring Classes](#)," Orestes Brownson, 1840.
- Excerpt from [Progress and Poverty](#), Henry George, 1879.
- Excerpt from [The Labor Movement: The Problem of Today](#), George E. McNeill, 1887.
- Excerpt from [The End of Anarchism?](#) Luigi Galleani, 1907.
- "[The Workingman's Conception of Industrial Liberty](#)," John Mitchell, 1910.
- "[Acceptance of the Renomination for the Presidency](#)," Franklin Roosevelt, 1936.
- "[Introduction](#)" in *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman, 1962.

## READINGS

- Desmond, Matthew. 2021. "Capitalism." In *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. New York: One World.

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: BUILDING A BUSINESS

**Objective:** Students will confront their perceptions of "fairness," the would-be rights of workers, and the value of different forms of labor.

Divide the students into groups, ideally five per group. First, each group is to decide on a product they want to produce and sell. Each student in the group agrees to a role to play in the business (laborer, manager, accountant, etc.). At least three of the five students must be workers. Second, they must discuss and agree upon priorities: what is more important, maximizing profit or creating a fair system from which all benefit? Third, each group must draw up a business model specifying the key tasks to be played by each group member and a division of profits (percentages) for each member. Finally, each group is to produce a full report explaining their organization, priorities, and rationale. They should be encouraged to draw upon the assigned documents in their explanation.

Since each stage of the exercise requires agreement, this activity may be spread out over multiple days. In particular, the decision on roles and profit percentages will likely yield prolonged debate. Groups should not be permitted to proceed to the next step in the activity until agreement is reached. To expedite the process, the instructor can specify a simple majority for "agreement" (three out of five). To make it a real challenge, agreement can be defined as unanimity.

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: STUDENT LABOR UNION

**Objective:** Students will learn firsthand the challenges of organizing, agreeing upon principles and objectives, winning adherents, and negotiating with administration.

Having studied the basics of US capitalism in this unit, and familiarized themselves with the fundamental arguments and positions concerning labor and business, the class as a whole will form a student labor union. They must decide upon a platform of realistic, school-related, appropriate objectives (healthier food in the cafeteria, free breakfasts, additional parking, etc.), elect officers (president, vice president, secretary, activists), and strategize about peaceful action (walk-out? homework strike? protest rally?). The new union must then convince other classes on campus to join them. Only when three-fourths of a class votes to join can that class be added to the union.

Once half the classes in the department have joined the union, union officers should schedule a meeting with a college administrator (the administrator should be alerted well in advance of the learning activity and relevance to course material). Ideally, the administrator may agree to play along, so to speak, but the instructor may decide to conclude the exercise before it gets that far. In the end, students should get a real sense of what it takes to organize, strategize, and win converts. A writing assignment may be added to the exercise, wherein individual students reflect on their experience and weigh in on the value of unions to American democracy, referring directly to the ideas and arguments found in the assigned documents.

## Unit 11: What does it mean to be American?

### TOPICS

- Nativism
- Know Nothings
- Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)
- Dawes Act (1887)
- *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1904-06)
- Immigration Act of 1924
- Japanese internment
- Anti-Semitism
- “Lavender Scare”
- LGBTQ+ rights

### DOCUMENTS

- [“An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs,”](#) Chief Joseph, 1879.
- Topp, Michael M. (ed.). 2005. “How it Feels to be a Problem.” In [The Sacco and Vanzetti Case: A Brief History with Documents](#). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s.
- Dissent, Justice Robert A. Jackson, [Korematsu v. United States](#), 1944
- [Harvey Milk’s Speech at San Francisco’s Gay Freedom Day Celebration](#), 1978.
- [“Pledge Allegiance,”](#) Natalie Scenters-Zapico.
- Opinion of the Court, Justice Anthony Kennedy, [Lawrence v. Texas](#), 2003.

## READINGS

- Anbinder, Tyler. 2017. ["Today's Banned Immigrants Are No Different from Our Immigrant Ancestors."](#) *Perspectives on History*. February 7, 2017.
- Adkins, Judith. 2016. ["These People Are Frightened to Death': Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare."](#) *Prologue Magazine* (National Archives). Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer).
- Capo, Jr., Julio. 2021. ["There's no LGBTQ Pride without Immigrants."](#) *The Washington Post*. June 17, 2021.
- Ford, Martin. 2018. ["The Irish Girl and the American Letter: Irish Immigrants in 19th Century America."](#) *The Irish Story*. November 17, 2018.
- Michael, Chris. 2023. ["Trump Tells Rally Immigrants are 'Poisoning the Blood of Our Country.'"](#) *The Guardian*. December 16, 2023.
- Murray, Alice Yang. 2000. "The Internment of Japanese Americans." In *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?*, 3–20. New York: St. Martin's.
- Nelson, Megan Kate. 2022. ["How Sitting Bull's Fight for Indigenous Land Rights Shaped the Creation of Yellowstone National Park."](#) *Smithsonian Magazine*. March 1, 2022.
- Reed, Erin. 2024. ["Florida Bill Would Require Mass Biological Sex Affidavits, Ending All Trans Legal Recognition."](#) *Erin in the Morning*. January 4, 2024.
- Smith, Patricia. 2016. ["Practice Standing Unleashed and Clean."](#)

## ONLINE TOOLS

- ["The Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project,"](#) University of Minnesota
- ["North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries, and Oral Histories,"](#) Alexander Street

## WRITING ACTIVITY: PERSONHOOD

**Objective:** Students will learn the very personal impact law can have on individuals, and how easily identity can be politicized and regulated.

Individually, students should read Justice Taney's majority decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) and Erin Reed's January 2024 reporting on Florida House Bill HB 1233. Students should define how in each instance personhood is defined, then compare and contrast the goals and reasoning. How is American identity established? Who gets to decide? What are the motives and values? How has American personhood changed (if at all) from the antebellum era to today? To expand the writing assignment, students can draw on the other assigned documents to make a larger argument about the evolving and controversial meaning of "American," as well as draw conclusions about who is and is not included in American democracy and why.

# Unit 12: Racial Justice

## TOPICS

- Persistence of Jim Crow segregation & terrorism after WW2
- Redlining & racial housing covenants
- *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision (1954)
- Resistance to school integration at the state and local levels
- Escalation of white supremacy terrorism
- Dr. King's leadership and the SCLC
- Civil rights activism among college students (CORE, SNCC)
- Birmingham, 1963; Selma, 1965
- Police riots, 1965–68
- 1968 "Crime Bill" and the militarization of police
- Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994

## DOCUMENTS

- "[A Negro Nation within a Nation](#)," W. E. B. du Bois, 1935.
- "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963.
- "[Where Do We Go From Here?](#)," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967.
- "[Requiem for Nonviolence](#)," Eldridge Cleaver, 1968.
- "[Calling on All Silent Minorities](#)," June Jordan, 1974.

## READINGS

- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. "[The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration](#)." *The Atlantic*. (October 2015).
- McClendon, Blair. 2021. "[To James Baldwin, the Struggle for Black Liberation was a Struggle for Democracy](#)." *Jacobin*. June 19, 2021.
- Thompson, Heather Ann. 2010. "[Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History](#)." *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (December): 703–34.



## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: KING V CLEAVER

**Objective:** Students will understand that the “Civil Rights Movement” was not a monolith, and that Black Power offered a very real, direct challenge to American racism and capitalism.

Split students into groups and assign each group either King’s “Where Do We Go From Here?” or Cleaver’s “Requiem for Nonviolence”. The students read the speeches quietly to themselves, then discuss as a group. Each group should answer the following questions:

1. What are the main points the speaker is making?
2. What does the speaker believe are the major problems facing the United States?
3. What in the speech indicates the speaker’s values and background? What examples or evidence from their experience or background informs their understanding of US democracy? What solutions does the speaker offer?
4. What are the speaker’s overall, long-term goals?
5. What tactics does the speaker embrace to achieve those goals?

Once the small groups have completed these tasks, the entire class should be divided into “King” and “Cleaver,” depending on their group’s reading (physical division is ideal, so the sides are clear). The instructor should then provoke an informed and respectful debate. Ask each side of the class the six questions, one by one, taking turns, having the students answer aloud. Both sides can then learn from each other. After the questions have been answered by each side, then ask the students to choose which side they agree with, regardless of their small groups’ reading. So King kids voluntarily bunch together on one side of the classroom, while Cleaver students assemble on the other. The instructor should then observe and comment about how that process occurred. (Were students eager/enthusiastic? Unsure? Did some need convincing?) The instructor should point out these occurrences and draw students’ attention to their own decision-making processes.

Finally, the instructor should ask each group to defend its decision, and to explain why the other side is wrong. Passionate discussion/debate should ensue, with the instructor carefully overseeing (making sure that the class does not descend into chaos, that students are being respectful, and that history/evidence is not being abused or misrepresented). At the conclusion of the activity, the instructor should draw the class’s attention back to the material, revisiting the split in the Civil Rights Movement between King’s nonviolence advocates and Black Power adherents.

## Unit 13: Women’s Liberation

### DOCUMENTS

- [“On Equality of the Sexes,”](#) Judith Sergeant Murray, 1790.
- [Excerpt from \*Women and Economics\*,](#) Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1898.
- [Excerpt from \*Women and the New Race\*,](#) Margaret Sanger, 1920.
- [“The Problem that Has No Name”](#) in *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan, 1963.
- [“Living the Revolution,”](#) Gloria Steinem, May 31, 1970.
- [“Women’s Rights are Women’s Rights,”](#) Hillary Clinton, Sept. 5, 1995.

## READINGS

- Baker, Carrie N. 2022. "[The Equal Rights Amendment Has Been Ratified. It is the Law.](#)" *Ms. Magazine*. (January 27, 2022).

## IN-CLASS DISCUSSION: WOMEN'S RIGHTS

**Objective:** Students will confront their own views on how inclusive democracy should be, as well as the possible limits of freedom and rights when it comes to women.

In a simple class discussion based on the assigned readings, the instructor should pose the following questions one at a time, allowing the class time for students to consider their feelings and formulate a position.

- Why were women excluded from American democracy?
- How did women of the Revolutionary era feel about this exclusion?
- How is birth control a women's rights issue?
- How does American consumerism and capitalism shape women's roles and rights?
- Was the Women's Liberation movement as important to democracy as the Black Power movement?
- Why are some Americans afraid of Women's Liberation?
- Do you support the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)?
- Why has the ERA not been officially added to the US Constitution?

To complicate the discussion, a distinction can be made between free white women, free women of color, and enslaved women.

## Unit 14: The Wealth Gap

### TOPICS

- What is the wealth gap?
- Racial divide in generational wealth

### READINGS

- "[Wealth Inequality in the United States.](#)"
- Jan, Tracy. 2018. "[Redlining Was Banned 50 Years Ago. It's Still Hurting Minorities Today.](#)" *Washington Post*. March 28, 2018.
- Jeltsen, Melissa. 2022. "[When a Right Becomes a Privilege.](#)" *The Atlantic*. May 15, 2022.
- Kamen, Debra. 2022. "[Widespread Racial Bias Found in Home Appraisals.](#)" *New York Times*. November 2, 2022.
- Lee, Trymaine. 2021. "Inheritance." In *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. New York: One World.
- Lyon, Georgia. 2022. "[How Does the Citizens United Decision Still Affect Us in 2022?](#)" *Campaign Legal Center*. January 21, 2022.
- Jabali, Malaika. 2023. "Strings Attached." In *It's Not You, It's Capitalism: Why It's Time to Break Up and How to Move On*, 159-75. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books.
- Schermerhorn, Calvin. 2023. "[Ronald Reagan's Policies Continue to Exacerbate the Racial Wealth Gap.](#)" *Time: Made by History*. December 4, 2023.

## Unit 15: Free speech & “Cancel Culture”

### TOPICS

- Alien & Sedition Acts (1798)
- Burning of abolitionist mail by the Jackson administration
- Anti-abolitionist violence
- Lincoln’s suspension of *habeas corpus* in Maryland (1861)
- Espionage & Sedition Acts (1917, 1918)
- “Coercive patriotism”
- *Schenck v US* (1919)
- Red Scare of 1919
- Second Red Scare/“McCarthyism”
- *Brandenburg v Ohio* (1969)
- *Hustler Magazine v. Falwell* (1988)
- Post-9/11 fears
- Social media

### DOCUMENTS

- [“Speech to the Jury,” Eugene V. Debs, 1918](#)
- [The Fight for Free Speech](#), American Civil Liberties Union, 1921.
- [“Who is Loyal to America?”](#) Henry Steele Commager, 1947.

### READINGS

- Applebaum, Anne. 2021. [“The New Puritans.”](#) *The Atlantic*. (Aug. 31, 2021).
- Benesch, Susan. 2014. [“Countering Dangerous Speech: New Ideas for Genocide Prevention.”](#) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- Binkley, Collin and Moriah Balingit. 2024. [“Harvard President’s Resignation Highlights New Conservative Weapon against Colleges: Plagiarism.”](#) *Associated Press*. January 3, 2024.
- Gibbons, Chip. 2019. [“Free Speech is a Left-Wing Value.”](#) *Jacobin*.
- Mishan, Ligaya. 2020. [“The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture.”](#) *The New York Times Style Magazine*. (December 3, 2020).

### IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: WORDS MATTER

**Objective:** Students will confront and assess the line between the freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment of the US Constitution and the need for “national security” and “political correctness.”

Break the class into small groups, ideally 3–4 students each. Ask them to consider if there are any ideas, ideologies, or beliefs that are dangerous to the republic. Ask them to put in writing what ideas they deem dangerous, why, and what kind of danger the idea poses. The task is limited to *ideas*, not actions. To kick-start the discussion, ask them to assess the ideologies of socialism, communism, and anarchism (all of which have been covered in this course).

Then ask them about antigovernment militarism, authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, nativism, and racism (more vague and fluid than formal ideologies). Are militias a threat? Is public protest a threat? Is there a moral difference between peaceful and militant protest? (The instructor might remind students that the United States was born through violent protests and rampant illegality.) Finally, ask each group to decide on a remedy for each threat they perceive. Ask them to be specific: should certain words, phrases, or symbols be made illegal or restricted? If so, how exactly?

If a group concludes that there should be no restrictions whatsoever, and that no beliefs or ideologies pose a real threat, then that group should explain in detail their rationale, specifically addressing the ideologies and ideas listed above (why each is not a threat).

Once the groups have completed their work, they can share with the class. Ask the class to then offer views of the “cancel culture” some claim pervades the United States today. Should certain words or ideas be “canceled”? An energetic discussion should ensue, especially since, in small groups, they have just explored their feelings on free speech.

Depending on the size and enthusiasm of the class, this activity may be expanded into homework (dealing with specific ideologies individually at home, then reporting back to the group in the next class or spread out over multiple days).

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: SOCIAL MEDIA

**Objective:** Students will confront and assess the line between the freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment of the US Constitution and the need for “national security” and “political correctness.”

Whether we like it or not, our lives today are dominated by social media. Politicians employ it to win points with voters or attack opponents; celebrities use it for self-promotion and gossip; journalists break the latest news; and average Americans “curate” a “lifestyle” through apps that deeply effect their self-esteem. But what role should social media play in America’s supposed democracy? We saw how, on January 6, 2021, thousands of Americans, motivated by falsehoods and “alternative facts” on social media, stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to assassinate Congressional leaders and prevent the peaceful transfer of administrations. And we have seen that algorithms and Artificial Intelligence can flood newsfeeds with images, videos, and posts designed to create fear, anger, and panic among unsuspecting users, and are weaponized by governments.

Ask students to divide themselves into two groups: no regulation/restriction of social media (complete freedom of speech), and regulation/restrictions on social media (limits to free speech). Ask each group to come up with a clear argument for their position, and to support that argument with specific examples from current events and history. Each group must select an individual to make their “case” to the class. After one side makes their case, the other group gets to rebut. After each side has made their statements and rebuttals, ask the students to reconsider their position and, if they would like, change groups (have the groups at opposite ends of the room makes the change-of-mind more dramatic, as students have to walk the distance in full view of their classmates). Be sure to not put any stigma on students who change their position, so that the exercise is an honest appraisal of class opinion.

After the opportunity for position change, ask the class as a whole to assess the mood of the class. Does one side dominate? If so, what is the most convincing of their arguments? What action, if any, would the majority group like to see? How would the minority feel about such a policy? The goal is to really get the students to think about their priorities and the line between freedom and security. They all use social media, but can they acknowledge the inherent dangers? Are they bothered by these dangers? Are the dangers worth the risk of personal and national safety? An individual writing assignment can be added to this activity to get students to think deeper about their own personal priorities and concerns.

## Unit 16: Is the USA a democracy?

### READINGS

- Bond, Shannon. 2023. "[2024 Elections Are Ripe Targets for Foes of Democracy.](#)" *NPR*. December 29, 2023.
- Browning, Christopher R. 2018. "[The Suffocation of Democracy.](#)" *The New York Review*. (October 26, 2018).
- Burgis, Ben. 2022. "[The Supreme Court is an Antidemocratic Monstrosity. We Should Break Its Power.](#)" *Jacobin*. (June 2022).
- Frum, David. 2023. "[Suddenly, Trump is Interested in Democracy.](#)" *The Atlantic*. December 29, 2023.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2019. "[America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One.](#)" *New York Times*. August 14, 2019.
- Landis, Michael. 2018. "[The United States Isn't a Democracy – and Was Never Intended to Be.](#)" *The Washington Post* (November 6, 2018).
- Sinha, Manisha. 2021. "[The Case for a Third Reconstruction.](#)" *The New York Review*. (February 3, 2021).

### IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: DISCUSSION

**Objective:** Students will perceive the difference between democracy as a concept in American rhetoric and realities of the US sociopolitical system.

The course began with a discussion about the meaning of democracy in America and de Tocqueville's fears about a "tyranny of the majority." Pose to the class the following questions and encourage them to consider all the material covered:

- Has your view of American democracy changed?
- Should Americans fear a "tyranny of a majority" or a "tyranny of the minority"?
- Has the United States ever actually been a functioning democracy?
- Do Americans actually want a real democracy, or is that too dangerous / scary?
- What changes, if any, would they like to see in US government and laws?

## IN-CLASS OR TAKE-HOME ACTIVITY: TIMELINE

**Objective:** Students will use actual historical evidence to support an argument.

Use an online timeline creator, such as <https://www.tiki-toki.com/>, with text and image insert capability. Tiki-Toki has a free version, but there are other brands with similar free features.

Have students choose a position: the United States is a democracy; or the United States is *not* a democracy. If the former, students will create an interactive timeline (complete with text and images) featuring key moments and figures in American democracy. Timeline moments should not be generic definitions or “facts,” but part of the overall argument. The starting point is, in itself, part of the argument: Did American democracy begin in 1619, 1776, 1865, etc.?

If the student concludes that the United States is not a democracy, then the timeline should highlight failures, problems, and errors of American political and legal history. For instance, if the student sees the Constitutional Convention as a site of failure, then 1787 should be included and the view explained.

In both cases, the timeline should act like an argument essay, convincing the audience of the thesis’s validity. A suggested grading rubric is included in Appendix 3.

## Appendix 1: Suggested Readings

- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Anderson, Carol. 2021. *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Blackmon, Douglas. 2008. *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Doubleday.
- Finkelman, Paul. 2014. *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*. New York: Routledge.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole et al. 2021. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. New York: One World
- Jabali, Malaika. 2023. *It's Not You, It's Capitalism: Why It's Time to Break Up and How to Move On*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books.
- Kruse, Kevin et al. 2023. *Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Legends and Lies About Our Past*. New York: Basic Books,.
- Landis, Michael. 2014. *Northern Men with Southern Loyalties: The Democratic Party and the Sectional Crisis*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Oshinsky, David M. 1997. *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press..
- Richards, Leonard. 2000. *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Rothstein, Richard. 2018. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York: Norton.
- Sinha, Manisha. 2000. *The Counter Revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Wills, Garry. 2005. *Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power*. Boston: Mariner Books.

## Appendix 2: Compromise Worksheet

“COMPROMISE OF \_\_\_\_\_”

Bill	Pro-Slavery	Anti-Slavery	Draw

Example of a completed table

“COMPROMISE OF 1850”

Bill	Pro-Slavery	Anti-Slavery	Draw
Fugitive slave law	X		
No restrictions on the spread of slavery to NM and UT	X		
Slave trade permitted to continue in DC	X		
CA admitted as a free state		X	
TX debt paid	X		
TX boundary settled			X



### Appendix 3: Timeline Grading Rubric

	None	Poor	Satisfactory	Excellent
Clear thesis				
Appropriate images for all timeline points				
Text for all timeline points that directly and clearly supports the thesis				
Demonstrates understanding of the readings and course material				
Demonstrates thoughtfulness				
Followed all instructions				