

Unit 2

Our Government

(Note to the teacher: For some classes this unit may take only a few days, for others it may take a few weeks. The teacher will wish to adapt these lessons to the needs of the class.)

LESSON 1

Visiting a "Real" Polling Place

Objectives: To familiarize students, at an early age, with actual polling procedures.
To expand the concept of local, state and national branches of government.
To understand the need for representative government.
To understand that in order to make a well informed decision, voters need adequate information about a candidate's position on issues.
To help students understand that sometimes the voters may vote directly on issues.
To involve parents in voter education.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, permission slips for field trip, bus, chaperones, arrangements made with the place you may be visiting for polling place (e.g. State Capitol or County Courthouse. If your school is a polling place, this may be simpler!)

Procedure:

- You may wish to make a preliminary visit before setting up a field trip to the closest polling place. Visit alternative sites such as the State Capitol, County Courthouse, etc., or ask the local elections clerk to set up a voting machine demonstration in the school. Be sure to invite parents. This will be a learning experience for everyone.

Prior to the visit:

- Discuss the importance of exercising your right to vote.
- Discuss the reasons for one vote per person and secret ballots.
- Discuss voting procedures.
- Discuss some of the issues that concern voters in your state or within your school district boundaries (e.g., a bond election for money for more schools or money for local libraries).

During the visit:

- Discuss which issues local voters will vote on directly. Which issues will the winning candidates vote on for them? Why must voters elect public officials rather than directly voting on everything themselves? How can voters place an issue on the ballot? What must a candidate do to get his name on the ballot?
- Record the student's ideas about local issues that concern voters (to save for the next lesson).

After the visit:

- Have students decorate thank you cards to the people who helped them during their visit.
- Students who are able can write in their journals how they felt and what they thought about their visit to the polling place, one issue or candidate that they would like to vote on or for, and why that issue or candidate is important to them.

LESSON 2

Inviting a Public Official to Visit Our Class

- Objective:** To involve students in everyday issues that affect their lives by inviting a local public official to visit in person or write a letter to the class.
- Materials:** List of issues students selected in previous lesson, paper, marker, computer, access to the internet.
- Procedure:**
- Chart the issues discussed in the previous lesson and talk about the pros and cons of each issue. Tell the students that the class will write a letter to local public officials inviting them to come and talk to the students about the issues that concern them. Tell them you will invite parents to be present for their visits.
 - After all the issues from the chart have been discussed, append them to the class letter and ask the public official to respond to the students' concerns in writing if they are unable to visit.
 - Ask each local official to be prepared to share what his/her job is like if s/he can visit.
 - Ask the public official to share what he/she sees that needs to be done for the school and/or community.
 - Follow up with a thank you note from the students to the officials who visit or write to them or send an e-mail instead.
 - Invite the students to consider what kinds of public officials they believe their [make believe] town will need. Start a list of possible public officials for the [make believe] town.
 - Where will the people in their [pretend] town go to vote?
 - What issues do the students believe the voters in their [make believe] town will be concerned about? Keep a list of possible issues.
 - Tell the students you will return to the lists for their town in a future lesson.



LESSON 3

The Three Divisions of Government

Objectives: To discover how the U.S. Constitution describes how the government should be organized.

To understand why the U.S. Constitution is so important:

- It states that the basic purposes of government are to protect individual rights and promote the common good.
- It limits the powers of government by saying what government can and cannot do.
- It describes what the national government can and cannot do, what state governments can and cannot do, and what local governments can and cannot do.

Materials: Blackboard and colored chalk, crayons, paper, scissors, paste, chart paper, markers, an American flag.

Procedure:

- Draw a circle on the board about one foot in diameter. Within the circle place some small houses. Name the circle the name of the town or city in which you live.
- Draw a square or rectangle of another color around the circle. Add some houses to this square or rectangle. Use both colors of chalk for the houses. Name this square or rectangle the state in which your town or city can be found.
- Draw a large rectangle the width of the entire blackboard around the circle and the smaller square. Use a third color. Name this large rectangle the United States of America. Put smaller squares or rectangles in it to represent the many states in the United States of America.
- Reinforce the concept by studying the American flag. Point out that each star represents a state in the United States of America and in each state there are towns and cities just like ours.
- Ask the students to decide which state their make-believe town is in. Is it a part of the United States of America?
- Point out that their [make-believe] town or city will need rules or laws.
- If it is part of a state, it will also have to obey the state's laws.
- If it is part of the United States of America it will have to obey the nation's laws. How can they know who can make which laws? Look for the answers in the Constitution!

LESSON 4

Local Governments

Objective: To discover the responsibilities of local governments.

Materials: The imaginary town the students have created, crayons, paper, scissors, paste. A copy of the Constitution.

Procedure:

- Use the student's imaginary town as a point of reference to avoid speaking in abstractions. Encourage the students to draw new buildings and other places for their town as new ideas occur to them.
- Ask the students to help you list the responsibilities of their town's government,* e.g.
 - public safety (police, fire, lighting services)
 - public utilities (water, gas, electricity)
 - transportation (streets, bus or subway systems, airports, harbors)
 - education and recreation (schools, libraries, parks, museums, sports facilities)
- Discuss how local government services are paid for
 - property taxes and other taxes
 - money from state and national governments (stress this interrelationship)
- Discuss how local government officials are chosen, e.g.
 - election
 - appointment
- Chart what the town government may do and how it will pay for it. Post the local government chart.

(*Children who are ready may wish to search the Constitution themselves; for others the teacher's belief in the Constitution as the "highest law" may be the most important lesson.)

LESSON 5

State Governments

Objective: To discover the responsibilities of state governments.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, the students [make believe] town and a copy of the Constitution.

Procedure:

- Explore what state governments can do, e.g.
 - collect taxes and fees for using toll roads and license fees
 - collect state income taxes
 - decide how to spend tax money
 - build hospitals, roads, and highways
 - make laws about education and health care for citizens of the state
 - protect fish and game in the state
 - provide public welfare for citizens who need help
- Discuss how the state can help the student's town protect the rights of individuals and promote the common good.
- Chart what the state government can do and how it will pay for it. Post the state government chart.

LESSON 6

National Government

Objectives: To survey the responsibilities of the national government.
To find out how the national government can protect the rights of individuals and promote the common good.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, the students [make believe] town and a copy of the Constitution.

Procedure:

- Explore what national governments can do, e.g.
 - pass laws to protect individual rights (freedom of religion and expression, preventing unfair discrimination)
 - pass laws to protect the common good (clean air, national parks, national defense, pure food and drug laws, laws that provide every American with equal opportunity)
 - collect income taxes
- Chart what the national government can do and how it will pay for it. Post the chart.

Discuss:

- How will the actions of the national government affect the people in the [make believe] town?

LESSON 7

The Three Branches of Government*

Objective: To explore how national, state and local governments each divide power and authority among the three branches of government.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, a copy of the Constitution, the [make believe] town, several copies of a local newspaper. (The teacher will wish to select stories about the local town or city legislature in advance of the lesson.)

Procedure: • Illustrate how the Constitution provides for three branches of government on three charts.

1. *The Executive*

- In the nation the Chief Executive is the President, in the State it is the governor, and in the town or city it is generally the mayor.
- The Executive *carries out* the laws (e.g. the President may assign different responsibilities to different agencies such as the Department of Transportation, the Department of Education, etc.).
- Together with the President (or the governor, or the mayor), the agencies or departments see to it that the laws are carried out. *They may not make the laws.*

2. *The Legislative*

- The Congress passes the laws for the nation, e.g.
 - The Congress can pass laws to protect individual freedom (freedom of religion and expression, freedom from discrimination).
 - The Congress can pass laws to promote the common good (e.g. laws providing for clean air, national parks, national defense).
 - State legislatures may pass laws about education and health care for citizens of the state.
 - Since the federal government helps pay for education and health care, however, the Congress may also pass laws about education and health care.
 - State legislatures may pass laws to protect fish and game.
 - State legislatures may pass laws about welfare, etc.

* **Note to the teacher:** You may wish to teach this lesson over a period of several days, or even weeks, adapting it to the needs of your class. You or your successors will be returning to these concepts again and again. Do not be concerned if they are not mastered completely at this point. Many adult citizens will not understand as much as the students will understand.

Discuss:

- What will the [make believe] town's legislature be called? What laws may the citizens of the [make believe] town pass? What ideas can the students get from stories in their local newspaper?

3. *The Judicial*

- The Judicial branch, headed by the Supreme Court, makes decisions about whether the laws passed by Congress are good laws.
 - Do they protect individual rights? the right to a fair trial, to vote, to practice one's religious beliefs? Do they provide citizens with the guarantees the Constitution promises?
 - Do the laws protect equal opportunity for all Americans? Do they promote the common good?
- After you have charted what the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government may do, post the charts to return to in future lessons.
- Return to the student's town. Ask the students to draw some of the citizens of their town and cut out and paste them in the town. Suggest that they include some citizens who have problems for which they need the government's help, or citizens who believe the government must do more to promote the common good. Ask each child to identify the citizen's problem.

Discuss:

- Which government – local, state, or national – can best help with the problem? Refer to the charts to help find the answers.
- Who should take care of a problem like a missing traffic light; the federal, state or local government?
- Who should take care of a problem like discarded cars or trucks left rusting on the streets; the federal, state or local government?
Why?
- Who should take care of a problem like children allowed to use BB guns where it is not safe? The federal, state or local government?
Why?
- Do the students believe any of the problems require a new law to protect individual rights or promote the common good? Should it be a local law, a state law, or a federal law?
- Return to the list of rules or laws the students suggested for their make believe town in Unit 1, Lesson 3. Which of the rules or laws do they now believe the town legislature can pass? Which must be passed by the state legislature? Which by the U.S. Congress? Why?
- Return to the list of issues the students prepared in Unit 2, Lesson 2. Which of the issues on the list do they now believe would be best dealt with by public officials in the town? Which need to be dealt with at the state level? Which at the federal or national level?