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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2008 Volume IV: Representations of Democracy in Literature, History and Film

An Introduction to America’s Culture of Democracy

Guide for Curriculum Unit 08.04.02
by Justin M. Boucher

This unit approaches the legend of American democracy and uses it to critically evaluate students’ understanding of American government. It presents a concise perspective on the history and culture of democracy in the United States. In this way the students will have the tools to begin to understand the roots of their perspectives on democracy. The ultimate goal of this unit is to give the students a much deeper understanding of the idea of democracy in America.

This unit focuses on two essential questions “What is democracy?” and “Is America a democracy?” Answering these questions will require us to look at the various foundational documents in American history, as well as various depictions of American government and politics. Additionally, we will look at various moments in American history when that democracy was expanded or extended to cover a greater portion of the population. This study will allow us to fully discuss the essential question, answering further questions like: is democracy a cultural ideal as well as a governmental system? If we are a democracy, when did we become one? And if we are not, what stands in our way? Furthermore, is democracy something we should aspire to as a nation at all? Or is it merely a term we apply to our existing system, regardless of its truth? Each of these questions not only requires a strong understanding of the history and culture underlying American democracy, but also allows for the demonstration of that understanding.

(Recommended for U.S. History, grades 10 and 11; Civics, grades 9-12; and A.P. Government, grades 10 and 11)

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