



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1998 Volume IV: American Political Thought

"We, the People": New Voices in the Constitutional Debates

Guide for Curriculum Unit 98.04.02
by Sophie Bell

This curriculum unit introduces tenth grade United States History students to criticisms and defenses of the Constitution. The unit aims to challenge students to evaluate the Constitution's accuracy in claiming to "promote general welfare," and is imagined to follow and culminate a traditional study of the Constitution. This unit will help students situate the Constitution within the context of race, gender, and class dynamics of the early nation. Students will read and discuss challenging primary and secondary documents, practice oral and written debate, and have an opportunity to bring the Constitution to life through speech-making.

The Constitution was written by a group of people who did not mirror the diversity of the nation at the end of the 18th century. All of the delegates to the Constitutional Conventions were white, male property owners. It was obviously not in their interest to promote increased freedom or economic opportunities for women, African-Americans, Native Americans, or unpropertied men. An argument can be made that the lifestyles of the "founders" depended on the cheap labor and diminished social positions of these other groups, and that their position as elites caused the framers to draft a document that protected the status of the rich and powerful, more than general equality. Students will engage with this criticism of the Constitution, as well as developing and defending their own opinions about its strengths and weaknesses.

The unit uses primary documents to help students of history to connect with what happened in the past. Students will read excerpts from the Constitution, as well as people's opinions of it. They will also read and discuss Howard Zinn's criticisms of the Constitution in "A People's History of the United States." The unit asks students to assume, as often as possible, the roles of the people being studied. Students will have opportunities to speak or write as James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Luther Martin, Hiawatha, Benjamin Banneker, Daniel Shays, and Abigail Adams. The unit is also designed to help prepare students for the open-ended and persuasive writing tasks they are being asked to perform in many statewide tests, such as the Connecticut Academic Performance Test.

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