“WE THE PEOPLE” THEN AND NOW

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students are introduced to the Preamble to the Constitution. They will examine the significance, wording, and the fundamental purposes that establish the framework for the Constitution. Students will also discuss the meaning of those three words as they apply to them as young people of the United States. Students will examine primary source documents for a better understanding of what the founding fathers meant when they wrote the phrase, “We the People.” Students will view a short film clip from We the People Movie that will begin the lesson as well as their inquiry into the Preamble and the compelling questions for this lesson:

What does “We the People” imply?
How was the phrase different in the 1790s as compared to present day?
What do the words in the Preamble mean?
What is the purpose of the Preamble?
What is the importance of the first three words of the Constitution of the United States, “We the People,” and how has the meaning of those three words changed over time?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Students will analyze the significance of the three words “We the People” and how the words have changed in meaning over time.
• Students will examine the Preamble and additional historical documents, discuss its meaning through the founders’ eyes as well as its relevance today.
• Students will show their understanding by creating a visual representation of what the phrase means to them.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

• What do you think of when you read or hear the phrase “We the People?”
• What significance is there to the three words “We the People?”
• What do you think the founding fathers meant when they wrote those three words, and what do you think that the phrase means to us today?

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL & CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

TEACHERS NOTE

While most students will have formally studied the history of early America prior to the writing of the Constitution, there may be some students who have had no exposure to American history or the founding documents. This lesson is designed to introduce students to civic education through the words “We the People” and to help students to explore the language and intention of our founding documents. This lesson and We the People, A Giant Screen Film clip will enhance students’ understanding of the significance of the first three words of the U.S. Constitution and how the meaning of those words have changed over time. Students will begin to make a personal connection to our nation’s history and its documents.

ESTIMATED CLASS TIME

Two to three 45 minute class periods

MATERIALS

• Copies of the following 1 per student
  • Preamble to the United States Constitution
  • Primary source documents A-D included in this lesson
  • Primary Source Analysis Documents
  • Library of Congress Analysis Tool
  • National Archives Document Analysis Worksheet
  • National Archives Visual Image Analysis Worksheet
• Graphic organizer
• Historical background (optional)
• Modified Frayer Model for vocabulary (optional)
• We the People Movie Clip
• Highlighters, pens/pencils
• Projected image of the Constitution of the United States (optional)

VIDEO CLIP

• We the People Section 0-19
This segment lays the foundation for a discussion of the historical significance of the three words “We the People” and will provide a platform for future lessons.

VOCABULARY & KEY CONCEPTS

• U.S. Constitution
• Preamble
• “We The People”
• popular sovereignty
• justice
• insure
• domestic
• tranquility
• defense
• promote
• general, welfare
• liberty
• posterity
• ordain

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS. Reading: History/Social Studies. 6-8. 1
CCSS. Reading: History/Social Studies. 6-8. 2
CCSS. Reading: History/Social Studies. 6-8.7
CCSS. Reading: History/Social Studies.6-8.3
INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

In 1787, after years of struggle for independence from Great Britain, the men who would later be known as the founding fathers gathered in Philadelphia to form a government that would not only strengthen the new nation, but unify it. Realizing that the country needed a stronger government than the one that had been established following the Revolutionary War, the founding fathers carefully considered the foundation and principals of government before crafting the central guiding document of our democracy—the Constitution of the United States.

PROCEDURES

INTRODUCING THE PREAMBLE

Introduce students to the lesson by providing them with copies of the historical background reading, a copy of the Preamble, and present the guiding questions to this lesson. An image of the Constitution could be projected.

• Have students follow along as you read the Preamble out loud.
• Discuss with students how the Preamble forms the six goals of government and sets the purpose of our government.
• The six goals include:
  • form a more perfect union
  • establish Justice
  • insure domestic Tranquility
  • provide for the common defense
  • promote the general welfare
  • secure the Blessings of Liberty for ourselves and our posterity
• Have students circle words they do not understand on their copy of the Preamble.
• Review the words that students are not familiar with and have a brief discussion about the meaning of each phrase.

Optional vocabulary lesson: Discuss the vocabulary words then have students write their own definitions for the words and create visuals to go with each word. Drawings do not need to be elaborate, but they should provide students a connection to the word. Research has shown that students’ understanding of vocabulary words increases by more than 30% when students include a visual representation. An example of this type of strategy might be a modified Frayer Model, which is a graphic-visual organizer for building vocabulary and understanding. Templates for a single word and for multiple words are provided in the teacher resources. Suggested words for this segment of the lesson are:

  union          promote
  justice        general welfare
  ensure (insure) ordain
  domestic    establish
  tranquility  Constitution
  common defense

EXTENSIONS

Mike Wilkins created the Preamble with license plates entitled Preamble (1987) that is now on display in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American Art.

MIKE WILKIN’S PREAMBLE AT THE SMITHSONIAN

Students could create a similar visual by creating a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation for each word in the Preamble. For instance “We” would be one slide with visuals, “the People” would be on the second slide with a visual, and so on. There are no limitations or restrictions on how students can visually show their understanding of this important part of the U.S. Constitution.

Have students do a side by side comparison of the Preamble and the Declaration of Independence to examine the ideals of democracy and government expressed in these two significant founding documents.

MODIFICATIONS

• Provide students with annotated copies of the primary source documents.
• Conduct whole class analysis of primary source documents
• Choose only two documents for analysis

RELATED DOCUMENTS

Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, 1774–1789 Library of Congress
George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress
Correspondence from Jefferson to Madison indicating the need for a Bill of Rights
Elbridge Gerry’s reasons for not signing the Constitution

FURTHER RESEARCH

• Investigate the idea of a “more perfect union” at the Charters of Freedom and the Constitution at the National Archives.
• At the site investigate the documents to find evidence of our nation’s efforts to be “a more perfect union.”

TAGS

Preamble, US Constitution
PROCEDURES (continued)

• Continue the lesson by asking students:
  • In the United States today, who do you think are included in “We the People?”
    In other words, who are the people protected by the Constitution and its amendments? Generate a list on the board for students.

FRAMING THE FILM
After discussing the purpose of the Preamble and having examined the vocabulary, prepare students to view an excerpt from We the People, A Giant Screen Film. Framing the film will activate students’ background knowledge.

*We the People, Movie Excerpt OA 1-19*

This segment lays the foundation for a discussion of the historical significance of the three words “We the People,” and provides a platform for future lessons.

• Ask students to focus on the phrase “We the People” as well as the images that are presented in the film clip.
• Pose the following questions:
  • In the context of 1787, who do you think the founders considered to be “the people” in “We the People?” How do you know? What historical evidence can be used to back up your claim?
  • Has the definition of “We the People: changed over the last 200 years? Why or why not?

*We the People, Movie Excerpt OA 1-19*

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

TEACHERS NOTE
In 1787, “We the People,” did not include all people. The historical documents included in this lesson provide students with a “snapshot” of 1787 and the years that followed when not all individuals living in the United States were represented by the words “We the People.” The issue of slavery, women’s rights, and rights of indigenous people, immigrant groups, and social groups shaped our history. This change over time will illustrate to students that the Constitution is a “living” document–its meaning can change both in fact and interpretation.

• Students will examine historical documents to further their understanding of how the founding fathers interpreted the phrase “We the People” in the 1790s and to reflect on how its meaning has changed over time. Students should cite evidence to support their answers in the graphic organizer provided.
• There are four documents for students to analyze:
  • An annotated document for scaffolding is provided in the teacher resources.
  • Document B: Copy of the Three-Fifths Compromise from the U.S. Constitution (1787)
  • Document C: Illustration, Woodwork Etching, “Am I not a man and brother?” (carved around 1780 and used in an 1837 broadside print)
  • Document D: Federal Census Information (1870)
PROCEDURES (CONTINUED)

HISTORICAL NOTE ON DOCUMENT A
John Adams, a prominent patriot, was serving as a U.S. diplomat in England at the time of the signing of the Constitution. He was a strong supporter of the U.S. Constitution and later served as Vice-President to George Washington and then as the second President of the United States.

- Provide students with analysis documents, the graphic organizer and divide into groups of four students to analyze the documents. Students can analyze all four documents and share their findings with their group. An alternative would be to have each student analyze one document and present their findings to the group. Another option would be to use a Jigsaw Cooperative Learning Technique.
- Use the following questions to get students to source each document and consider the context. Sourcing asks students to consider who wrote a document as well as the circumstances of its creation. Contextualization asks students to locate a document in time and place and to understand how these factors shape its content.

Both sourcing and context are important historical reading strategies.

SOURCING
Students consider who wrote a document as well as the circumstances of its creation. Who authored a given document? When? For what purpose?

Guiding questions for documents:
- Who wrote this?
- What is the author’s point of view?
- Why was it written?
- When was it written? Was it a long time or a short time before or after the event?
- Is this source believable? Why? Why not?

CONTEXTUALIZATION
Students “locate” a document in time and place and to understand how these factors shape its content.

Guiding questions for documents:
- What else was going on at the time this was written?
- What was it like to be alive at this time?
- What things were different back then? What things were the same?
- What would it look like to see this event through the eyes of someone who lived back then?
“WE THE PEOPLE” THEN AND NOW

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  - What things were different back then? What things were the same?
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After students have analyzed the documents review the guiding questions:

- In the context of 1787, who were the people in “We the People?”
- In the context of the United States today, who are the people in “We the People?”
  - What images from the We the People film support your answer?
- How has “We the People” changed over the course of U.S. history?
- What do you feel the we in “We the People” should we stand for?
- What part of “We the People” are you?

ASSESSMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Complete the short essay from the document analysis activity

Create a visual representation of “We the People” and what it represents today.
(picture/video/visual/slide).

Write an essay from their point of view on what the phrase “We the People” means to them as individuals.

Above discussion questions above could be used as writing prompts.
1870

Although individuals have been identified as white or black since the 1790 census, American Indians are first enumerated in the 1870 census. (However, those in the Indian Territory or on reservations are not included in the official U.S. population count used for congressional apportionment until 1890.) The Chinese population is also counted for the first time in the 1870 census.
“Am I not a man and brother?”
The large, bold woodcut image of a male slave in chains appears on the 1837 broadside publication of John Greenleaf Whittier's antislavery poem, “Our Countrymen in Chains.” The image first appeared in the 1780s.

Source: National Archives digital file from b&w film copy neg. of detail of man and banner
http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a44497
Three-Fifths Compromise
Article 1, Sec.2 U.S. Constitution

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons. The actual enumeration shall be made within three years after the first meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent term of ten years, in such manner as they shall by law direct. The number of representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty thousand, but each state shall have at least one representative....

Document Notes:
The Three-Fifths Compromise was proposed by James Wilson and Roger Sherman, who were both delegates for the Constitutional Convention of 1787.
In 1929, Congress fixed the total number of Representatives at 435; currently, there is one Representative for about every 519,000 persons.
Selection from a Letter to John Adams from Abigail Adams
Article 1, Sec. 2 U.S. Constitution

Braintree March 31 1776

“. . . I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor
those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness. After years of struggle for independence from Great Britain, the men who would later be known as the Founding Fathers gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to form a government that would not only strengthen the new nation but unify it. Realizing that the country needed a stronger government than the one that had been established following the Revolutionary War, the founding fathers carefully considered what that government should stand for and then wrote the words that became the Constitution of the United States. This document of democracy, along with the Bill of Rights has guided our nation’s government and people ever since.
Preamble to the United States Constitution

We the People, of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.