

6-8 Civics Clarifications

CIVICS STANDARD ONE: Students will examine the structure and purposes of governments with specific emphasis on constitutional democracy [Government].

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- Constitutional democracy as a structure of government developed from the tension between the need for authority and the need to constrain authority.
- Governments are structured to address the basic needs of the people in a society.

Civics Standard One 6-8a: Students will understand that governments have the power to make and enforce laws and regulations, levy taxes, conduct foreign policy, and make war.

Essential Question:

- Why does a government have certain powers?

The focus here is on understanding the need for these powers (the *why?*) and having a general knowledge of what these specific powers entail. The need for order and security within is addressed through the power to make and enforce laws and regulations. The need to promote national interests abroad, especially security and economic interests, is addressed by the power to conduct foreign policy. The power to make war arises primarily from the need for security. The power to levy taxes arises from the need to pay for it all.

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

- 1) Why does the government enforce their laws with police rather than allow people to be free?
- 2) Why does the government take taxes out of our paychecks?
- 3) Why does the government fight wars?

Civics Standard One 6-8b: Students will analyze the different functions of federal, state, and local governments in the United States and examine the reasons for the different organizational structures each level of government employs.

Essential Question:

- What different needs should be addressed by the different levels of government?

The student should understand the general concept of **federalism**: a territorial division of power based on the overall sovereignty of the national government with constitutionally guaranteed powers for state governments within the boundaries of their respective states. In theory, this division of power is clearly delineated and distinguishable. In reality, however, the flow of power has shifted over time between the federal and state governments and has resulted in alternating periods of cooperation, conflict, and controversy throughout the course of American history. More than 200 years after the

signing of the Constitution, Americans continue to disagree about the proper role for these levels of government.

Then the student should understand the United States has adopted a federal system for a variety of reasons including our negative experiences with unitary (as British colonies) and confederate systems (under the Articles of Confederation), the distrust of centralized power, the relative sensitivity of state or local governments to the particular needs and views of their citizens, and the relative efficiency of state or local governments in responding to these needs and views. Advantages to federalism include allowing a variety of “local” governments to deal with local problems while allowing local voters to hold local officials accountable; permitting more points of access and greater opportunities for political participation; better protections for individual rights; and fewer constraints on innovation.

The benchmark also explicitly calls for knowledge of the reasons for or responsibilities of the different structures of government at each level, which essentially arise from the differences in needs addressed. Generally stated, the functions of the national government include national defense, monetary policy, and foreign representation. Infrastructure, protection from crime, welfare, education, and other practical needs are more clearly the responsibility of state governments. Sewage, garbage, culture, urban development, and traffic control are usually the tasks of local government.

Example questions can come from turning the previous paragraph into “why” questions.

CIVICS STANDARD TWO: Students will understand the principles and ideals underlying the American political system [Politics].

Enduring Understanding

Students will understand that:

- The principles and ideals underlying American democracy are designed to promote the freedom of the American people.

Civics Standard Two 6-8a: Students will understand that the concept of majority rule does not mean that the rights of minorities may be disregarded and will examine and apply the protections accorded those minorities in the American political system.

Essential Questions:

- How might the majority threaten individual and minority rights?
- Why are citizens protected by the Constitution?
- Should individual rights be limited?

Students should understand that democracy means rule by the people, and that majority votes are just an indicator of what the people want. Although that principle is central to the American political system, it is not absolute. People, including large numbers of them (i.e. majorities), sometimes act out of anger, prejudice, or ignorance and are not always well informed. By limiting the principle of majority rule, Americans have attempted to balance the interests of individuals with the common good.

Majority rule places a very important constraint on governmental authority, but it is completely insufficient to protect individual liberty. Every student destined to become an American citizen should understand that the majority can be as much of a tyrant as any dictator. They should understand that the addition of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution was motivated by the recognition that citizens need protection from abuse of governmental authority, even when the government is theoretically obedient to the will of the majority of the citizens.

There are many instances in American history where minority groups once did not receive the same protections as the majority. The benchmark is somewhat misleading in speaking of the “rights of minorities,” because minorities are not *now* accorded any more or less rights than members of a majority. What we now call the rights of minorities is founded on individual rights. The Constitution does not specify group rights. So understanding this benchmark really comes down to understanding the meaning and purpose of the Bill of Rights with the expectation that students should also appreciate how these rights protect minorities from discrimination. There are many examples of how minorities were served by political documents and court rulings that protected individuals from discrimination.

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

- 1) If most people follow one religion, why shouldn't the government pass a law that restricts the rights of people with other religious beliefs?
- 2) If most Americans are offended by people who protest a war, why not allow the government to declare protestors “unpatriotic” and put them all in jail?
- 3) Why might Americans be unable to prevent newspapers or websites from printing letters that insult other people?

Civics Standard Two 6-8b: Students will understand the principles and content of major American state papers such as the Declaration of Independence; United States Constitution (including the Bill of Rights); and the Federalist Papers.

Essential Questions:

- How do the principles of major American state papers guarantee liberty to contemporary Americans?

It would be a bit much to insist on an understanding of the whole content of these papers, especially the Federalist Papers, but students can well achieve an understanding of the main principles reflected in these documents. The overriding principle is individual liberty; most of the other principles concern the means to achieve liberty.

The principles of the major state papers are the principles and ideals of American democracy. The introduction to Civics Standards Two draws specific attention to the fact that “...[t]he American political system was intentionally created to rest on a foundation of individual liberty, freedom of religion, representative democracy, equal opportunity, and equal protection under the law.” Political equality, rights, limited government, checks and balances, and other principles of American government are pronounced, asserted, and discussed in the state papers. The understanding of the principles called for

by this benchmark is the understanding reflected in these papers, which requires some perspective on the times in which they were written. An analysis of what the authors really meant in their assertion of a principle and why they asserted them could help students achieve this benchmark. For example, what did “all men are created equal” mean at the time of the Declaration of Independence?

To truly understand a principle, one must be able to identify its practical applications. Such understanding is addressed more directly in Standard Three, but the focus there is on the Bill of Rights. Students should be able to identify the practical applications of the principles not included in the Bill of Rights. While these principles are sometimes in conflict and while disparities have always existed between the realities of daily life and the ideals of American democracy, the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy depends largely on the efforts of each succeeding generation to live up to these principles and narrow the disparities.

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

- 1) What is the meaning of “We the People?”
- 2) Why is the claim that “all men are created equal” important to American democracy? How has the meaning of the phrase changed over time?
- 3) Why was there a debate about whether we should have a strong federal government or not? Should the debate continue?

CIVICS STANDARD THREE: Students will understand the responsibilities, rights, and privileges of United States citizens [Citizenship].

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- Effective citizens are committed to protecting rights for themselves, other citizens, and future generations, by upholding their civic responsibilities and are aware of the potential consequences of inaction.
- Distinctions between a citizen’s rights, responsibilities, and privileges help to define the requirements and limits of personal freedom.

Civics Standard Three 6-8a: Students will understand that civil rights secure political freedom while property rights secure economic freedom and that both are essential protections for United States citizens.

Essential Questions:

- In what ways are citizens protected from the government? From each other?
- How might shared rights lead to conflict between citizens or citizens and the government?
- To what extent do property rights define an individual’s freedom?

This benchmark calls for a further elaboration of the ideal of freedom by making a distinction between political and economic freedom. At this stage, a student should understand the connection between civil rights and the requirements of democracy, which is the means by which political freedom is secured. Freedom of expression, the right to vote, the right to due process, etc., are clearly necessary to democracy, and thus to the

securing of freedom. Yet the lack of property rights would make even these rights precarious, blurring the distinction between political and economic rights in practice. Some basic property rights can be considered essential protections for political as well as economic freedom. The enormous powers and resources that governments possess pose considerable threats to a relatively defenseless individual. Civil and property rights impose reasonable limits on those who hold power and create the conditions in which fundamental individual liberties might be protected and enjoyed.

The center of gravity in this benchmark is the understanding of the connection between property rights and freedom in general. Citizens, by applying civil rights, can acquire property or make economic decisions freely. The student will have to understand the concept of “economic” freedom to see how property rights relate to the subset of human activities we label economic. In essence, economic freedom is the right to own, use, and dispose of property, but it also involves the right to sell one’s labor. A well-developed understanding would include the realization that property rights can also conflict with freedom, and that they are subject to the same conflicts and tradeoffs as other rights or values and may actually curtail or even deny other people’s liberties (e.g. claiming slaves as property or attempting to keep minorities out of neighborhoods).

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

- 1) Why is private ownership of businesses and homes seen as important to freedom?
- 2) How might the property rights of a business owner threaten the freedom of others?
- 3) Which is more important: Making sure everyone has a job or allowing everyone to choose their job? Why?

Civics Standard Three 6-8b: Students will understand that American citizenship includes responsibilities such as voting, jury duty, obeying the law, service in the armed forces when required, and public service.

Essential Question:

- Why should American citizens perform certain civic duties?

Responsibilities is the word that dominates this benchmark. The benchmark lists examples of what citizenship in a democracy requires, and understanding why each is necessary elaborates the understanding of the general purpose of citizenship responsibilities. The general purpose, of course, is to meet the requirements of freedom. Demands for freedom create the potential for great disorder unless citizens of a free society act responsibly. Students should explore responsibilities like those listed in the benchmark and understand how and why citizens meet the challenges presented in them.

Open-ended questions that teachers might ask in a classroom include:

- 1) How can people be free if they have responsibilities like jury duty and possibly military service?
- 2) Why are people responsible for obeying the law even if they don’t agree with it?
- 3) These days, many citizens do not vote in most elections. Is there reason to be concerned?

CIVICS STANDARD FOUR: Students will develop and employ the civic skills necessary for effective, participatory citizenship [Participation].

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- Effective citizens can research issues, form reasoned opinions, support their positions, and engage in the political process.
- Effective governance requires responsible participation from diverse individuals who translate beliefs and ideas into lawful action and policy.

Civics Standard Four 6-8a: Students will follow the actions of elected officials, and understand and employ the mechanisms for communicating with them while in office.

Essential Questions:

- Which means for communicating with office holders is usually more effective and why?
- Why is it important to know about the person and circumstances when communicating with an officeholder?

This benchmark moves from *becoming* informed about candidates to *staying* informed about elected officials. Student understanding of participation is expected to spiral at the grade 6-8 level so that students acquire the skills and understandings needed to monitor the actions of, and communicate effectively with, officials *after* they have been elected to office.

Understanding the mechanisms for communicating with office holders involves why citizens should communicate and awareness of the available means to communicate and their relative effectiveness. What is an effective method of communication depends on the person in office and circumstances. For example, a citizen just can't walk to the front door of the White House and ask to see the President (at least not anymore). But a citizen could (and often will) call a school board member or other local official at home to discuss issues of importance. A representative democracy is supposed to function at its best when informed citizens communicate a range of ideas, opinions, desires, and concerns to their representatives so that they might enact prudent public policies and serve in ways that honor and promote the common good. Failure of citizens to communicate with officials tends to give unwarranted weight to the views of those who do take time to contact them.