

Stick to Your Principles

By *Amy Cummings* for Blue Ridge PBS (WBRA, WMSY, WSBN)
Hidden Valley Middle School, Roanoke, VA

Grade Level: 8

Time Allotment: Two 90-minute class periods (one period for the introductory and learning activities, and one for the culminating activity)

Overview:

Most adults realize the gift of living in a country where the government is shaped by what we recognize as the fundamental principles of government: rule of law, limited government, consent of the governed, democracy, and representative government. Our participation in our government is not only welcome, but it is needed in order for our democratic republic to survive! Does the average eighth grader appreciate all this? They will after completing the exercises in this lesson, which has been developed to demonstrate to them what our country would be like if all that we hold dear were taken away.

Subject Matter: Social Studies, English

Learning Objectives:

The student will be able to:

- Describe the fundamental principles upon which American government is based and explain their importance to daily life.
- Prepare interview questions designed to demonstrate understanding of the fundamental principles of American government and be able to predict responses based upon the comprehension of the principles.

Standards:

Virginia Standards for History/Social Studies courses and Computer/Technology standards <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Superintendent/Sols/home.shtml>

CE.2a

The student will demonstrate knowledge of the foundations of American constitutional government by

- a. explaining the fundamental principles of consent of the governed, limited government, rule of law, democracy, and representative government.

English 8.1

The student will use interviewing techniques to gain information.

- a. Prepare and ask relevant questions for the interview.
- b. Make notes of responses.
- c. Compile and report responses.
- d. Evaluate the effectiveness of the interview.

Media Components:

Video

- United Streaming video <http://www.unitedstreaming.com>- *Civics at Work: Government, Civil Society, and Citizenship*

Materials:

- Half-sheets from “Principles of American Government” handout
- “[Principles of American Government](#)” PowerPoint
- A laptop or desktop computer with Microsoft PowerPoint connected to an LCD projector
- Eighteen to twenty note cards

Prep for Teachers:

- Copy the “Principles of American Government PowerPoint Handout” and cut it into four pieces.
- Connect a presentation computer equipped with Windows Media Player and Microsoft PowerPoint to an LCD projector.
- Load the presentation computer with the United Streaming video <http://www.unitedstreaming.com>- *Civics at Work: Government, Civil Society, and Citizenship*
- Load the “[Principles of American Government PowerPoint](#)” on the presentation computer.
- Have three note cards ready to give each group.

Introductory Activity:

1. Tell students that today we are going to study how people make decisions about the way things are going to be done and how they make decisions as a group. Tell them that the first decision is going to be about how we might go about making a change in the classroom policies. Pick one of your classroom policies that the students could vote to change by raising their hands. For example, if you collect papers by having students pass their papers to the front of the row, then propose that they vote to change that. Those wishing for paper handling to stay the same may vote by raising their hands, and then those wishing for the change may vote for what they want as well. The example that you pick is not as important as making sure it is something non-controversial to the students so that your point becomes the focus instead of the issue. When the voting is complete, tell them that what just happened was democracy: they, the people, made a decision for themselves. Furthermore, explain that the example was *direct democracy* since each student voiced his own vote.
2. Next, call representatives from the class to the front of the room. You could choose one student from each row or table, or one student to represent two rows or two tables, depending upon the layout of the room. Make sure that students understand that each student picked represents a specific group of students in the room. If time allows, you could give each grouping in your room 90 seconds to select a person to represent their part of the room. Make sure that there are at least three student representatives.

3. In a clear voice that all students in the room can hear, tell the representatives if you were going to buy lunch for the whole class from any of the local restaurants, the representatives would get to pick the restaurant and the meal that everyone will eat. The representatives must decide among themselves, and discuss it in front of the whole class. Depending on the group, there may be some disagreement among them. Even if the representatives can agree, the other students in the room may try to influence their decision and/or express displeasure at the decisions being made. Once a decision has been made, allow the representatives to be seated and ask the class to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making decisions this way. You may record their responses on the board. Positive responses may include: Everyone had a say, it was faster than getting all twenty or so of us to agree, etc. Negative responses may include that some people tried to influence the representatives and that some people did not get what they wanted. Explain to students that making decisions that way is an example of *representative* democracy, in which people elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf.
4. Explain to students that *democracy* and *representative government* are two of the five fundamental principles of American government. Others include *rule of law*, which means that those who govern are bound by the law. That means that the representatives we elected couldn't do just whatever they wanted but they have laws that control what they can do. Another is *consent of the governed*, which means that people are the source of the government's power. In other words, the government cannot rule without the power given to it by the people. The government has power to rule because we let it. The last is *limited government*. This means that the government can't control everything. There are limits to what it can control.

Learning Activities:

Learning Activity #1: United Streaming Video

1. Explain to students that we will view a video clip from a United Streaming video that shows a group of people trying to live together and make rules that everyone in the house can live with. Tell them that in this scene, the group is getting together with the landlord to try to come up with ways to solve problems that they have had lately. There has been a conflict among the tenants about the hours that loud parties have taken place while others try to sleep so that they can make it to work the next day. Also, some of the tenants have had issues with someone putting up too many political signs in the yard. **Provide students with a focus for media interaction** by telling students, to listen in this first clip for the ideas that the group has about how they can decide on some rules.

Play Audio: The landlord is saying, "It seems to me that the only way to solve these problems..."

Visual: Two of the tenants are looking at each other.

Stop Audio: "I think it's a great idea, so what do the rest of you think?"

Visual: Ming is talking.

Ask: “What ways did they come up with to make the rules?” Correct answers include, not making rules and try to get along next time, let the landlord make the rules, and let everyone have a say in the rules and vote on them. When students have answered, you may show the next 20 seconds of the video, in which the tenant that is a police officer recaps the options as they appear on the screen.

2. **Provide students with a focus for media interaction** by asking students to listen in the next clip for what might be wrong with having no rules.

Play Audio: “Now Shana’s suggestion that we have no rules...”
Visual: Shana is on screen alone.

Stop Audio: Martin says, “You’re not the only person that lives here.”
Visual: Martin is arguing with Mari and ripping her political signs out of the ground.

Students should be able to answer that the same problems will keep coming up if there are no rules.

3. **Provide students with a focus for media interaction** by asking them to look in the next clip for what may be wrong with Mike (the landlord) making the decisions.

Play Audio: “It’s clear that we need some kind of order...”
Visual: Mike and Mari are still arguing.

Stop Audio: Mike says, “I make the rules. I get to decide what’s fair.”
Visual: Mike is wearing the military hat.

Students should be able to answer that this is not a good idea because the tenants will get mad and leave.

4. **Provide students with a focus for media interaction** by asking them to watch the next clip and listen for how Todd’s plan would work.

Play Audio: “So I guess that leaves us with Tom’s suggestion...”
Visual: The police officer is talking.

Stop Audio: Mari asks, “So who is going to be on the rules committee?”
Visual: Mari is talking.

Students should be able to answer that a committee will make the rules, keeping in mind that they must protect the tenants’ rights and the landlord’s interests. Then everyone would vote on the rules. They would agree on rules by discussing issues and coming to a consensus. **Ask** students, “Which of the three options that the group talks about using to solve their problems sounds like what we do in the United States? Is it (1) not making rules and trying to get along next time, (2) letting the landlord make the rules, or (3) letting everyone have a say in the rules and voting on them?”

Students should be able to answer that Todd's solution, #3 is like the system used in the United States.

Learning Activity #2

1. At this point, divide students into four groups to do some thinking about what the fundamental principles mean to them in daily life. Give each group the half-sheet of paper for one of the principles from The "Principles of American Government" handout which is included at the end of the lesson. Each half-sheet restates the definition of one of the principles and asks two questions that they will answer as a group, and then report to the rest of the class. Answers will be recorded on the "[Principles of American Government](#)" PowerPoint. **Tell** students, "No groups got a sheet for representative government since we have already demonstrated it, and we will discuss that one as a group first as an example of what to do. For example, in a representative system of government people elect representatives to make laws and conduct government on their behalf." **Ask** students, "What is good about that?" Responses may include that it makes sense to make laws in that way since the population is so big, or that it is good that people have a way to have a say since everyone can't go to Washington or Richmond to vote on every law. Next, **ask** students "What is a problem that could come up if we did not have a representative government?" Responses may include that very few people would have a say in the decisions that the government makes.
2. Give students five to ten minutes to work in their groups. Have a computer connected to an LCD projector. As students finish, have one representative from each group go to that computer and enter their responses on the appropriate slide of the PowerPoint. Then, project the completed [PowerPoint Presentation](#) and allow each group to explain their answers. At a later time, provide each student with a copy of the PowerPoint Presentation, or post it to your class's Blackboard page if your school is using that application.

Culminating Activity:

1. In this part of the lesson, students will create interview questions for a role-play activity. Divide the class into groups of four. One of the groups will be the "dictators" and the other groups will be the "reporters." Explain to students that the extreme opposite of the democracy that we have in the United States is when one person rules and has all the power. That person may have come to power on his or her own, usually backed by friends and supporters, which is what we call a dictator. The other way a person could get sole power is to be born into the job and be an absolute monarch, such as a king or emperor.
2. **Say** to your students, "Here's the situation: Popu Wasapi is the fictitious dictator of Malalaki, a small fictitious island nation. He has absolute control over the country. He makes all the laws, holds all of the power of government, and does not have to answer to anyone about what decisions he makes or how he makes them. His people fear him, because they do not have the right to question his authority. He has decided to visit the United States to learn about our technology so that he can set up a technical academy in

Malalaki and appoint students to attend it. As he is getting off the plane in New York he is met by a group of American reporters who have heard all about him and what kind of ruler he is. He is aware of America's democratic ways and is unimpressed, thinking that his way of doing things is much better. He realizes that not all Americans may have a positive opinion of him. He makes a speech to the American people and the President of the United States and then allows the reporters to ask him questions."

3. The dictator group will work together to craft the speech that Popu Wasapi will say to the group of reporters.

4. Each of the 3 groups of reporters will create three questions to ask Popu Wasapi and record each on a note card. Possible questions may include, "Why don't you let your people help make any decisions?" or "What is going to happen to the government in Malalaki when you pass away?" The dictators should be prepared to answer these questions.

5. Role-Play: The dictators will select one of their members to act as Popu Wasapi and give his speech to the reporters. The other class members will play the reporters and ask their questions one at a time. Anyone from the dictator group may answer so that the whole burden does not fall on one of the dictators. As each reporter's question is answered, the reporter who asked that question should record the answer on the back of the card.

5. Individually, each student will compose a paragraph explaining why he or she would or would not want to live in Malalaki. This may be assigned as homework if time does not permit for it to be done in class.

Cross-Curricular Extensions:

Art:

- Examine the work of artists from countries ruled by dictators and look for signs of political dissent.

Language Arts:

- Write an essay on one of the Principles of America government
- Write a short story set in a country with a dictator

Community Connections:

1. Invite a guest speaker who is an immigrant to this country who has come from a place where the principles such as ours are not followed who can explain what those conditions are like.

Principles of American Government



Directions: Read the vocabulary word and definition below, then read the questions that follow. Discuss each question and come up with an answer as a group. Choose one person to be the scribe and record the answers in the space provided.

“Consent of the Governed” refers to the idea that the People are the source of any and all governmental power. The government has the power to rule only because the people allow it.

1. How is the concept of “consent of the governed” good for us?
2. Give an example of what could happen if “consent of the governed” was not one of our principles of government.

Principles of American Government



Directions: Read the vocabulary word and definition below, then read the questions that follow. Discuss each question and come up with an answer as a group. Choose one person to be the scribe and record the answers in the space provided.

“Limited government” means that the government is not all-powerful and may do only those things people have given it the power to do.

1. Why is it good that the government’s power is limited?
2. Give an example of something that could happen if the government’s power were not limited.

Principles of American Government



Directions: Read the vocabulary word and definition below, then read the questions that follow. Discuss each question and come up with an answer as a group. Choose one person to be the scribe and record the answers in the space provided.

“Rule of law” means that the government and those who govern (the President, representatives in Congress) are bound by the law. They are not “above” the law. They must follow the law, too.

1. Why is the concept of the “rule of law” a good thing?
2. Give an example of a problem that could come up if there were no “rule of law.”

Principles of American Government



Directions: Read the vocabulary word and definition below, then read the questions that follow. Discuss each question and come up with an answer as a group. Choose one person to be the scribe and record the answers in the space provided.

“Democracy” refers to the idea that the people rule themselves.

1. Why should we be able to rule ourselves?
2. Give an example of something that could happen if the people did not have the power to have a say in making the laws.