

Building Better Citizens Lesson Plan: Participating in Democracy

Overview

In this single-day lesson, students will analyze and evaluate the varied ways Americans participate in democracy by examining how Asian Americans from the 1880s to 1960s used different strategies to address social and political problems. Students will demonstrate their understanding by creating a symbolic flag and engaging in discussions about the effectiveness and personal interests behind different forms of civic participation.

Rationale

This single-class lesson engages students with one of the most important questions from the US Citizenship Test while addressing a significant gap in historical representation. By using primary sources to examine diverse forms of civic participation, students develop critical thinking skills essential for their own democratic engagement while gaining exposure to Asian American History in a digestible format that teachers can build upon later. This approach not only fills a curricular void but also demonstrates how historically marginalized communities have actively shaped American democracy.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify and categorize different methods of democratic participation as outlined in the U.S. Citizenship Test
- Analyze primary source documents to determine what changes Asian American civic leaders sought and what actions they took to participate in democracy
- Evaluate the effectiveness of various forms of civic participation by comparing outcomes achieved through voting, advocacy, organizing, and running for office from the 1880s to 1960s (D2.Civ.5.9-12)
- Assess how personal experiences and historical context influenced individual and group civic engagement strategies (D2.Civ.10.9-12)
- Draw connections between historical and contemporary forms of democratic participation by applying lessons from past civic leaders to current citizenship debates (D2.His.4.9-12)
- Synthesize evidence from multiple primary sources to create visual representations that demonstrate understanding of diverse pathways to democratic participation

Standards

- D2.Civ.5.9-12 Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

- D2.Civ.10.9-12 Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- D2.His.4.9-12 Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

Materials

Google Slide [Presentation](#)

Print from tabs: Primary Document [set](#); Student [Note Sheet](#), 1 per student; Teacher [Note Sheet](#)

Videos: [Gilder Lehrman Two Ways to Participate in Democracy Video](#), [How Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian American elected to Congress](#) video (optional)

Procedure (approximate time in parenthesis, for single 90-minute class)

- 1) Begin with warm-up activity: Students discuss with partners “how they get what they want in their family,” introducing varied strategies and expectations of agency. (5)
- 2) Introduce question from the US Citizenship Test through Think-Pair-Share: "What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?" Define key terms. (5)
- 3) Show Gilder Lehrman [video](#) of Judge Lohier discussing democratic participation. Students compare and contrast their responses to the judge's answers. (5)
- 4) Display and read aloud the US Citizenship Test list of participation methods. Students identify overlaps with their responses and the judge's comments. Highlight the bolded methods students will focus on: vote, help with a campaign, join a community group, give an elected official your opinion, run for office, write to a newspaper. (5)
- 5) Distribute note-taking sheets with "This person sought to change..." and "They took action by..." graphic organizing columns. Introduce sentence stems on slide 11. Divide class into heterogenous groupings and set up four document stations featuring Asian American civic participation examples. (5)
- 6) Conduct document station rotations (5-6 minutes per station). Students analyze primary sources and record what changes individuals sought and actions they took. Document C is the transcript of a video which can be shown on a laptop or class screen. (25)
- 7) Reconvene for document debrief discussion: What similarities and differences did students notice? What connections can they make to other US History events? Further questions for a range of learners are on slide 13. (10)
- 8) Flag activity: Student pairs select three examples from the documents plus one additional participation method not covered, to increase engagement. Students create symbols, draw and label them on a flag template, and write explanatory paragraphs. (15)
- 9) Conduct gallery walk of completed flags. Students analyze similarities and differences in peer work. (10)

- 10) Closure- Refer students back to original question from the Citizenship Test and discuss how understandings have been supported, modified, or refuted. (5)

OPTIONAL

- 11) Current events reading about 2025 citizenship test debates. Gift link on slide 17.
- 12) Lead current events discussion using provided questions about test accessibility versus deeper knowledge requirements.
- 13) Introduce optional extension activity where students develop personal civic action plans.

Assessment

This lesson employs **formative** assessment through ongoing note-taking at document stations and partner discussions, allowing teachers to monitor student comprehension and provide real-time feedback as students analyze primary sources. The creative flag project serves as a **summative** performance assessment where students synthesize their learning by selecting four key examples of civic participation, creating visual symbols, and writing a paragraph explaining their choices, demonstrating both content knowledge and analytical thinking. Sample [rubric](#). Finally, the lesson includes **authentic** assessment through the optional extension activity where students develop and implement a real-world civic action plan, applying their understanding of democratic participation methods to address contemporary issues in their own communities.

Differentiation

This lesson differentiates in a variety of ways. Students engage with diverse materials representing multiple nations of origin and genders, as well as with an example of democratic participation from their own interest.

For developing learners

- Key terms are identified on the Citizenship Test excerpt and conclusion slides.
- Document A and C illustrate multiple forms of participation, allowing for more time reading the texts as a class. If a class can only get to these two texts, they will have still seen four responses to the question from the Citizenship Test.
- Sentence starters provided on the note sheet slide scaffold note-taking.
- Heterogenous paintings encourage student growth.

For accelerated learners

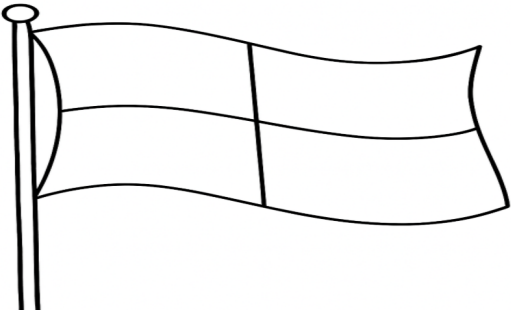
- Extension questions in the document debrief slide 13 encourage deeper analysis and greater mastery of the given standards.
- Two optional extension activities: current event analysis, and “take action” slides at end give ample opportunity for students and teachers to develop skills and content further.
- Comparative analysis of primary documents and outside information.

Materials: Each linked document is a tab on a shared document.

Student Note Sheet

Participate in Democracy Student Note Sheet

Type of Participation	Document	Change Sought	Action Taken



Teacher Note Sheet

Type of Participation	Document	Change Sought	Action Taken
Vote	A - Clara Chan Registers	Chinese American women's suffrage	first Chinese- American woman registered to vote in the US
Help a Campaign	C - Dalip Singh Saund	Reform allowing Indian and Filipino immigrants to become naturalized citizens	campaigned for legislation that led to President Truman signing the 1946 law legalizing <u>naturalization</u>
Join community group	D - Filipino Labor Leaders of the Delano Grape Strike	Better wages and working conditions for farmworkers	Larry Itliong et al. joined and led the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, then built a multiethnic coalition by uniting with Cesar Chavez's NFWA
Give an elected official your opinion	B - Mary Tape Letter, 1885	Educational equality and an end to school segregation for Chinese Americans	Mary Tape wrote directly to the San Francisco Board of Education re: anger at her daughter's exclusion from SF Public Schools
Run for office	C - Dalip Singh Saund	Asian American political representation	First Asian American elected to Congress, 1956 (not first PI/NH)
Write to a newspaper	B - Mary Tape Letter, 1885	Public awareness of educational discrimination	Mary Tape's letter to the Board of Education was published in a newspaper, involving the public in her families fight for equality

[illegible]