



WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

“The Citizen Tango”

In this workshop for Grades 3-5 and adaptable for K-2, students are introduced to a multi-week unit exploring seven civic skills that The Civic Circle calls “steps to democracy.” They are: civility (Listen!), news literacy (Learn!), voting (Choose!), voluntarism (Join!), organizing (Speak!) and public service (Lead!).

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Sing and explore the song “The Citizen Tango.” (“Take seven steps to democracy.”)
2. Ask and answer the question “What is democracy?”
3. Ask and answer the question “What are my rights and responsibilities?”
4. Ask and answer the question “What is a citizen?”

STANDARDS

Common Core:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3/4/5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.2

Determine (Grade 3)/Paraphrase (Grade 4)/Summarize (Grade 5) portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

C-3 Framework:

D2.Civ.3.3-5 (Civics): Examine the origins and purposes of rules, laws, and key U.S. constitutional provisions.

D2.Civ.5.3-5 (Civics): Explain the origins, functions, and structure of different systems of government, including those created by the U.S. and state constitutions.

D2.Civ.8.3-5 (Civics): Identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities.

Maryland Standards of Learning:

- *The Foundation and Functions of Government* 1.A.1. (Examine the foundations, functions and purposes of government).
- *Individual and Group Participation in the Political System* 1.B.1. (How individuals' roles, perspectives, shape political system).
- *Protecting Rights and Maintaining Order* 1.C.1.a. (Responsibilities associated with citizen rights, free speech, etc.) 1.C.2.a. (Explain balance between common good, individual rights).

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVEL

Grades 3-5. Adaptable for Grades K-2.

ESTIMATED TIME TO COMPLETE

One to two class periods.

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

- Lyrics (with accompanying chords) of “The Citizen Tango.” (Appended below.)
- For Grades 3-5, [YouTube video of “The Citizen Tango.”](#)
- For Grades K-2, [YouTube video of “What is Democracy? Civic Circle Skills.”](#) [Click](#) this link:
- To request MP3 only, please email info@theciviccircle.org.
- “What is Democracy?” PowerPoint slides. (To request slides, please email info@theciviccircle.org.)

WARMUP/ICEBREAKER

- Go around the room and invite each student to share their name (if first session) and their favorite dessert. If on virtual platform, invite students to “popcorn” around the room. (When student A has shared, he/she/they calls on student B, and so on.)

Discussion: We all like different desserts, but would anybody ever judge someone else for liking a different desert than they did? (Allow students time to answer.)

• *Say:* In our democracy, many people look and sound different from one another, or think and act differently. But we all are members of the community, and we are all living here in the United States together. The differences between us make life more interesting, and tend to make our decisions in a democracy stronger and better. One definition of democracy is that everybody belongs—no matter what your favorite dessert is, or how you might be different from other people. Let’s listen to a song about democracy, and how we can all get there in “seven steps.”

“The Citizen Tango”

Watch, listen to, or sing “The Citizen Tango.” (For K-2, watch expanded song/dialogue vid, “What is Democracy? Civic Circle Skills.”) Share the song’s lyrics (below) via handout or in the chat. The song may be listened to on MP3, watched on YouTube, or sung by the teacher acapella or with an instrument. Encourage the students to sing along. (If virtual, on mute.)

Discussion: What is democracy? What are my rights and responsibilities? What is a citizen?

Using the “What is Democracy” PowerPoint, if desired, walk students through the lessons in the song. (Relevant slides are in all caps.)

• Read or sing the refrain of The Citizen Tango:

Take seven steps to democracy
You have rights, and you are free
But your responsibility
Is to be a citizen

• *Say:* We’ll take all seven steps to democracy together, but first I have three questions:

What is democracy?

What are my rights and responsibilities?

What is a citizen?

Let’s start with:

What is Democracy?

Can anybody define democracy? (Wait for students to answer.)

Say: One way to think about democracy is: Who is in charge? Someone needs to be in charge, to GOVERN. A GOVERNMENT writes laws to keep us safe, make our lives better, and help us get along.

• What if no one were in charge? (Wait for students to answer.)

Another word for that would be ANARCHY. What do you think that would be like? (Wait for students to answer.)

- What if there were no traffic lights, no trash pickup? (Allow discussion to unfold. Possible threads: What if there were no rules in the classroom? Would that be fair? What if someone started hitting everyone else. Should they be allowed to stay? Would that be fun?)

Share this quotation:

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” – James Madison

Say: What do you think Madison meant by that? (Wait for students to answer.)

- What if one person ruled? Another word for that is MONARCHY. In a monarchy, the person in charge is a king or a queen. Nobody gets to pick a monarch. They're just born in charge. Sometimes one person grabs power, using an army. That's called a DICTATORSHIP. Nobody gets to pick a dictator, either.
- Sometimes a few rich people get all the power. That's called an OLIGARCHY.
- In our American democracy, ALL THE PEOPLE RULE. Democracy is rule by the many, by all. By the people. Democracy originated in ancient Greece, more than 2,000 years ago. DEMOS means “THE PEOPLE” and KRATEIN means “TO RULE,” so DEMOCRACY literally means “THE PEOPLE RULE.”
- The ancient Athenians practiced what's called “direct democracy,” which meant that average citizens literally gathered in the public square to help write the laws themselves. Our American democracy is called a “representative democracy,” which means we elect officials, from the President all the way down to state and local officials, to represent us. We rule because we have the power to vote our officials in and out of office, which is one way to tell them what laws and policies we want.

Any questions about democracy? (Discussion.)

- Let's go to our second question:

What are My Rights and Responsibilities?

- Americans have always stood up for the people, and for what's fair, even if it meant challenging the folks in charge. The COLONISTS who left England to live in North America, got angry with the British king, King George III. They didn't like having no say in the British government, and they didn't like paying a lot of money in taxes to the king.

They fought for their rights. But what *are* our rights?

The DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE said that “all men are created equal”—or as we now think of it, all men and women—all people—are created equal, and have a *right* to “life, liberty,” (or freedom), “and the pursuit of happiness.”

Ask: Does anyone know who wrote the Declaration of Independence? (Allow students to answer.)

Say: Thomas Jefferson was one of the main writers of the Declaration. That seems strange to us now, because like a lot of the Founding Fathers he owned enslaved people. Many Founders got rich off people in bondage working on their plantations, often under cruel conditions. The Declaration also left out women, who did not get the right to vote until more than 140 years later.

Discussion: What do you think the enslaved people on Jefferson’s plantation would have thought of the Declaration? What do you think his wife might have thought of it? (Allow students to answer.)

Say: Founding Fathers *were* all men, and their behavior did not match their words. But the Declaration, and the new government they created, changed things for everyone.

Their statement that everyone was equal and had rights that could not be taken away helped the movement to get rid of slavery. To make his case, African American anti-slavery activist David Walker argued: "See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language?"

Women launching their movement for the right to vote in the mid-1800s wrote their own “Declaration,” modeled on the Declaration of Independence, rewriting the words to say "that all men *and women* are created equal."

Now “we the people,” including women and all people of color, get to choose our leaders, by voting in elections. We have rights.

Discussion questions: What else do we know about the Declaration of Independence? Does anyone know what year it was signed?

What day was it signed? What do we celebrate on July 4? Have you ever thought about why July 4 is called Independence Day?

- *Say:* The founders wanted a new kind of government, where the people were in charge. Can anyone name some of our rights as Americans?

Discussion questions: Where do we find some of these rights?

Has anyone ever heard of the Bill of Rights?

Where do we find the Bill of Rights?

Why was the Bill of Rights passed?

- The Founders wrote Constitution when America was being formed as a new nation, to establish what might be called the “rules of the road” for the United States. But American rights were very important to the people who had just won independence from England, and they wanted their rights spelled out clearly.

Share on the board or in the chat the First Amendment to the Constitution, and invite one of the students to read it aloud.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Some of that language might sound old-fashioned, but here is a simple way to think about it.

Discuss:

EQUALITY
FREEDOM TO SPEAK
FREEDOM OF RELIGION
FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY – GATHER IN PUBLIC
CHALLENGE THE GOVERNMENT FOR REDRESS OF WRONGS–PROTEST, LOBBY,
SUE
TRIAL BY JURY

What about our responsibilities?

- What do we mean by responsibility? Can anyone define responsibility? Here are some ways to think about responsibility:

RESPECT OTHER PEOPLE’S RIGHTS
I HAVE A RIGHT TO SWING MY ARMS
YOU HAVE A RIGHT NOT TO BE HURT BY MY SWINGING ARMS
I HAVE A RIGHT TO SPEAK
YOU HAVE A RIGHT NOT TO BE HARMED BY MY SPEECH

Discussion questions: Can you think of a time when you got to exercise your rights?

Can you think of a time you did *not* get to exercise your rights?

Are there any other responsibilities that you think are important to us as Americans?

In a way, the question about responsibility brings us to our third question:

What is a Citizen?

- Can anybody define citizen?

In a way, responsibility and citizenship go together. Being responsible *means* being a good citizen. Doing what you should.

- A good citizen gets that other people have rights, too. That means treating others the way you want to be treated. It's called the Golden Rule.
- A good citizen also participates and helps in a COMMUNITY.

Can anybody tell me what a community is? (Discussion)

A community is a group of people who live or work together. Like your neighborhood, your school, your town, your city, your state—even the whole country. Communities stick together.

- One meaning of *citizen* is an official resident of a particular country. Like what shows up on your passport.
- But you're a *citizen* of your community with or without a passport. And the Constitution protects the rights of *everyone* who lives here—passport or no.
- Another way to think about being a citizen, being American, is to think about the seven steps we talked about respect, truth, voting, helping, speaking out, fighting for what's right, and being a leader.

Invite students to take turns reading the verses of the song:

LISTEN

Listen respectfully, even if you disagree

LEARN

Stick with the facts, learn the truth before you act

CHOOSE

Vote! Win or lose, use your right to choose

JOIN

Get out and help someone

Join in, have some fun

SPEAK

Speak loud and clear

Say what people need to hear

ACT

Fix what's wrong

Numbers make you strong

LEAD

Here's one last step to take
Be a candidate
If you see a need
Run for office, take the lead
Be the boss today
Have the final say

Conclusion: "The Citizen Tango"

- Sing "The Citizen Tango" again (MP3, acapella/with instruments, or YouTube), and this time invite the students to stand up and do hand and body motions together. Make these up, or invite students to make them up. For example, march with swinging arms on "seven steps." Point on "You." Use ASL for "Free." Raise one hand high for "Vote," etc. (Sing on mute if virtual, but enjoy moving together.)
- Conclude with final "popcorn" round robin. What is one word that this song and/or time together made you think of? Or: what is one word that democracy makes you think of?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What is democracy? | What are your rights and responsibilities as a member of your school, community, state and nation? | What are the ways you can communicate with elected officials and representatives?

VOCABULARY

Democracy, Government, Representative, Responsibility, Community, Citizen, Amendment.

MATERIALS

The Citizen Tango

Intro: Am-E-E7-A

Am E
Take seven steps to democracy
E Am
You have rights and you are free
 Am E
But your responsibility
E7 Am
Is to be a citizen

E
Listen respectfully

Even if you disagree

Am
Stick with the facts

Learn the truth before you act

Dm
Vote, win or lose

E E7
Use your right to choose

 Am E
Take seven steps to democracy

E Am
You have rights and you are free

 Am E
But your responsibility

E7 Am
Is to be a citizen

E
Get out and help someone

Join together, have some fun

Am
Speak loud and clear

Say what people need to hear

Dm
Act together, fix what's wrong

E E7
Numbers make you strong

Am E
Take seven steps to democracy

E Am
You have rights and you are free

 E
But your responsibility

E7 Am

Is to be a citizen

E
Here's one last step to take
Be a candidate
Am
If you see a need
Run for office, take the lead
Dm
Be the boss today
E E7
Have the final say

 Am E
Take seven steps to democracy
E Am
You have rights and you are free
 E
But your responsibility
E7 Am
Is to be a citizen
 E Am
Be American!

FOR GRADES K-2

- Watch the full-length [“What Is Democracy? Civic Circle Skills”](#) song and dialogue video, instead of just listening to the standalone song.
- Narrow discussion to the three key questions, emphasizing discussion and simplifying the answers.
 - a) What is democracy?**
Democracy is rule by the people. We get to vote and have a say in government. To govern means to be in charge.
 - b) What are my rights and responsibilities?**
All people are equal, but we must treat others how we want to be treated. I get to speak freely, but you have the right not to be harmed by my speech.
 - c) What is a citizen?**
A good citizen participates or helps in a community, which is a group of people who live or work together. A good citizen also takes all seven “steps to democracy.”
- Invite discussion on each of the “steps to democracy.” What is meant by each “step?” Which “step” would students most like to take, and why?

- Invite the students to create their own hand motions and choreography for the song. If virtual, students may move together, even if on mute.
- If possible, look for an opportunity to perform the song. If virtual, can the school music teacher help the students create a virtual choir and recording? If in person, can parents/guardians be invited to watch a ten-minute performance?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For Grades 3-5

iCivics:

- *A Dive Into Democracy* Lesson Plan, from *Foundations of Government* Curriculum Unit.
- *Citizen Me* Lesson Plan, from *Citizenship and Participation* Curriculum Unit.

Click the green “teach” button [on the iCivics home page](#).

Center for Civic Education:

- [What is Democracy](#) lesson from *We the People: The Citizen & Democracy* textbook.

Ushistory.org:

- [The Declaration of Independence and its Legacy](#).

Newsela:

[Greek Influence on U.S. Democracy](#) under Government & Economics.

Books:

Victory or Death!: Stories of the American Revolution, by Doreen Rappaport

For Grades K-2

Teaching Civics:

[Super Civic Toolbox](#), by grade level.

National Conference of State Legislatures:

[Time for Kids: Your Ideas Count!](#) 2nd and 3rd Grade Edition.

Ben's Guide to the U.S. Government:

[Declaration of Independence: 1776.](#)

Books:

"*I Am America,*" by Charles R. Smith. Watch on YouTube [HERE](#).

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