

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	<b>2</b>
<b>Lesson 1</b>	Civic Life, Politics, and Government. ....	<b>5</b>
<b>Lesson 2</b>	The Foundations of American Political Life ....	<b>11</b>
<b>Lesson 3</b>	The Structure of American Government. ....	<b>17</b>
<b>Lesson 4</b>	The United States in a World of Nation-States . ....	<b>23</b>
<b>Lesson 5</b>	The Citizen’s Role in American Democracy . ....	<b>29</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	Cartoons and Illustrations . ....	<b>37</b>

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# Introduction

## The National Standards for Civics and Government

In 1994, with support from the Department of Education and the Pew Charitable Trust, the Center for Civic Education developed its National Standards for Civics and Government. These voluntary standards have since received high praise from teachers and other educators as useful guidelines for developing curricular frameworks and course outlines in the field of civics and government.

The National Standards for Civics and Government emphasizes content, defining what all students should know and be able to do in this field. The National Standards presents guidelines for three grade-level groupings: grades K–4, grades 5–8, grades 9–12. The same five broad themes are presented on all three levels but with increasing sophistication and complexity at each higher grade level.

With this booklet, *Civics and Government in Cartoons*, you will be able to present these five key themes in a concise, vivid, and enjoyable way. Each of the booklet's five lessons is based on one of the five themes. Here is a summary of the themes in the national standards, along with some key questions associated with each one:

### **CIVIC LIFE, POLITICS, AND GOVERNMENT**

What is the purpose of government? Why is it important to distinguish limited from unlimited government? What is a constitution, and what types of constitutional government are common?

### **THE FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL LIFE**

What is unique about American constitutional government? What common characteristics and basic values underpin our political system? What role do diversity and conflict play in it?

### **THE STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT**

What is the structure of shared powers making up our national government? How do national, state, and local governments interact? What is the role of the law and the courts? What role is provided for partisan politics in our system of government?

### **THE UNITED STATES IN A WORLD OF NATION-STATES**

What exactly is a "nation-state"? How do nation-states interact, and what impact do international organizations have on this interaction? What should the role of the United States be in a world of nation-states?

### **THE CITIZEN'S ROLE IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

What are the key characteristics of a good citizen? What are the rights of citizens, and what responsibilities do those rights entail? In what ways can citizens most effectively take part in civic life?

Each lesson in *Civics and Government in Cartoons* explores one of these five broad themes. The four political cartoons in each lesson focus on the questions we have grouped under each theme listed above. For the most part, these questions parallel subtopics dealt with in the national civics standards. We hope this approach will make *Civics and Government in Cartoons* a useful tool for introducing students to the key concepts and issues they will be working with in your classes.

## Civics and Government through Political Cartoons

The national standards are presented as content standards. To the extent that “content” means a body of systematically interrelated facts and concepts, political cartoons may contribute to learning—but probably only in a modest way. In the National Standards, however, “content” means more than this. It signifies not only the knowledge students need but also the intellectual and participatory skills they must possess if they are to function as responsible citizens. Among the skills stressed in the standards are an ability to evaluate the views of others, take a clearly defined stand on an issue or problem, and defend that position in a reasonable and coherent way.

It is in helping to develop these skills that political cartoons have a unique role to play.

It is not always easy to relate abstract concepts about government or political science to the daily experience and deepest concerns of students. That is where political cartoons can make a difference. Cartoons have an immediacy that is hard to resist. Their use of concrete images and symbols helps them capture both the meaning and the emotional impact of abstract issues and complex political and social trends.

John Locke wrote, “Whenever law ends, tyranny begins.” Eloquent words, it is true, but even these words are unlikely to leave as lasting an impression as the starving child in Alan King’s cartoon about Somalia’s anarchy on page 7. Or, to take another example, the image of the mob crying “Gimme” in the Edwards cartoon on page 33 presents, in an especially forceful way, the idea that citizenship entails responsibilities as well as rights.

But political cartoons are not useful only because they illustrate ideas dramatically and with emotional force. A good political cartoon is far more complex than, for example, a billboard advertisement or a political poster. It rarely states an opinion in so many words. Its aim is to instruct, as well as to exhort. It invites us to take part in a dialogue by showing us the reasons for the opinions it presents so dramatically.

As *Civics and Government in Cartoons* should make clear, political cartoons often touch on many issues that can be used to clarify and teach the five central themes around which the National Standards in Civics and Government is organized. They bring those themes to life and illustrate dramatically their importance in the ongoing debates that animate our democratic society. Obviously, political cartoons alone cannot teach all facets of the civics standards, but we think you will be pleasantly surprised to see how many concepts they can help to clarify. It is our hope that the cartoons and lessons in *Civics and Government in Cartoons* will provide you with a convenient supplement to help you awaken an interest in government and politics and bring them to life for all of your students.

## Using Visual Images in the Classroom

Many textbooks today contain colorful visuals, but, all too often, these images function primarily to fill space or offer little educational value. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable, often doing little more than providing simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, school materials pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help the students master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as social or historical documents. The lessons in MindSparks booklets focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, all of which include an emotional power and the ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

After using the booklet, you may wish to look at some of the many other MindSparks products using editorial cartoons, photographs, posters, and other visual images.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into five lessons, with four cartoons per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

### **A BACKGROUND-INFORMATION SHEET**

This page provides brief summaries explaining the four illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY PAGES FOR EACH VISUAL DISPLAY**

Each page includes one image, and a sequence of questions is provided to help you plan an all-classroom discussion while examining the image. The questions take students step-by-step through an analysis of the visual. For students who require more support to answer the questions, you may hand them an entire discussion-activity page, reproducible in order to provide more visual support. For students who need less support to answer questions, keep the page yourself, and ask the questions of the class as a whole in order to provide a listening and response-writing activity. In addition to these questions, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. The instructions for these activities are directed to the student. Some are individual assignments while others work best as small-group or all-class activities. You may reproduce any of these pages for classroom use. Answers to factual questions are also provided on the inside back cover of the booklet.

### **CARTOONS AND OTHER VISUAL ART**

Images are printed alongside discussion questions and follow-up activities on reproducible pages, making them readily available to students. Stand-alone versions of all images, also reproducible, can be found in the appendix. Using images without the text may prove useful for testing or to encourage students to formulate their own analyses before consulting the text.

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## OBJECTIVES

1. Students will learn that no complex society can function without some kind of governmental authority.
  2. Students will appreciate the protections that limited and constitutional government offer individual citizens.
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# Civic Life, Politics, and Government

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*Use the ideas on this page to summarize the four key aspects of this lesson's theme. The rest of the Lesson 1 material will help you and your students discuss these points in greater detail.*

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***“Whenever Law ends,  
Tyranny begins.”***

—John Locke

## POINTS TO MAKE WITH YOUR STUDENTS

The focus of this lesson is on government in general. The cartoons are meant to raise questions about the purpose of government and the basic kinds of governments common throughout the world.

1. **What is the purpose of government?** Government is the part of society that makes and enforces laws, settles arguments about those laws, and manages other kinds of conflict. Government may not always be fair or just, but without some kind of governing authority, conflicts are hard to manage peacefully. The individual members of a society—and especially its weakest members—would almost certainly be less safe and secure without government.
2. **Why is it important to understand the difference between limited and unlimited government?** In any society, it is generally only the government that has the right to use force. Especially in modern history, this has given government enormous power. Unless limits are set on this power, government control over the individual can become unbearable. One check on government is civil society—the nongovernmental groups in society, such as the family, the church, businesses, and voluntary organizations. Another check is the rule of law, in which laws are binding on both leaders and those they lead.
3. **What is a constitution?** In some nations, the term “constitution” refers simply to a description of the form of government. In other nations, including the United States, a constitution is a set of higher laws that describe how the government is to be run and what limits are to be set on its powers.
4. **What are the main types of constitutional government?** Two types are most common: systems of shared powers and parliamentary systems. The national government of the United States is a system of shared powers. In it, power is divided up (but also shared) among three separate branches—legislative, executive, and judicial. In parliamentary systems, authority is held mainly by the legislative branch—the parliament. The political party in control of parliament generally also chooses the prime minister and other executive-branch officials.