

Lesson 1.1: State of Nature vs. Social Contract

Approximate Time: 45 minutes

Learning Goal: Introduce students to the overall course goals and learn and discuss political science concepts to set up the framework for understanding human motivations for establishing governing systems and civil society.

Materials: Unit 1 Power Point; Declaration of Independence (annotated)

Welcome

Hello and Welcome to your Kentucky Youth Assembly class. The goal of this course is to prepare you to participate fully as bill sponsors, debaters, and delegates in the practical, hands-on exercise in self-government that is the KYYMCA Kentucky Youth Assembly model state government conference. At the conference you will participate as State lawmakers who are proposing, debating, and ultimately voting on the passage of laws to govern the Commonwealth of Kentucky. We will be doing a lot of direct preparation in bill-writing, debate, and public-speaking skills later in the semester. The course will also combine elements of history, political science, government, and civics, so that you have a rich and extensive context in which to engage with the conference's goals and aims.

To get us started, I want you to respond to the following question:

Opening Prompt: (5-10 minutes): Display and prompt students to respond in writing (in class folder or notebook) to the following question: "What would life be like if everyone had TOTAL FREEDOM and there was no government, no laws, no police, and no enforcement systems whatsoever?"

After allowing a few minutes to respond ask students to share out some answers. Anticipate one or more of the following possibilities:

- *It would be AWESOME, you could do whatever you wanted whenever you wanted.
- *Various pop culture references: The Purge films, zombie apocalypse scenarios, etc.
- *It would be awful and dangerous until eventually somehow order was restored.

New Vocabulary: (20-25 minutes)

Display and have students write in their notebooks the following vocabulary term and definition:

State of Nature: A condition of unrestricted freedom (chaos) in which there are no recognized constraints on anyone's behavior beyond what can be compelled by force.

Ask students if they can think of anytime in recent memory where a country or community has slipped into a State of Nature type existence for some amount of time. Possible examples: Somalia; New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, Puerto Rico after Hurricane. Often areas impacted by natural disaster, even in well-developed countries, are left to fend for themselves in the absence of critical support systems and infrastructure.

Explain that ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle as well as Enlightenment thinkers and certainly the group of Americans known as the Founding Fathers all believed that Humankind naturally tended

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towards this “State of Nature” and that one or another kind of governing system was required to establish order.

Ask the students: Do you agree? (allow 5-10 minutes for general discussion)

To alleviate the dangers of a State of Nature existence, humans form one kind or another of what is known as a “Social Contract”. Have students write in their notebooks the vocabulary term and definition:

Social Contract: A written or unwritten arrangement in which members of society give up a certain amount of freedom in exchange for safety and order.

Explain that the US Constitution and the Kentucky State Constitution, and all the laws that have arisen out of those systems, are examples of social contracts.

Conclusion (5-10 minutes): Ask students the following question and allow for discussion: Is a monarchy (a system with a king or queen) an example of a social contract? What about a straight up dictatorship like North Korea?

*Some students may object that those systems are not fair and do not protect rights. Point out to students that “fairness” or what they understand as justice is NOT a defining factor of a Social Contract. A dictatorship is a social contract, just a very lopsided one where a very few people have status, power, and material security. Social contracts can fray and tear, become strained, and sometimes collapse.

Ask: The early settlers of the Original Thirteen Colonies had an overall social contract that we could call “The British Monarchy.” What happened to that Social Contract?

Encourage discussion as time allows but end on the idea that The Founding Fathers and the entire Revolutionary War generation were very actively and self-consciously debating the pros and cons of the social contract of the British Monarchy. That generation of people, who will come to be called “Americans,” decided to reject their existing social contract and establish new ones that they hoped would serve them better.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT (5-10 minutes): Tell students that the Declaration of Independence can basically be summed up or paraphrased as saying: “We no longer accept the social contract that we have been living under and have decided to make our own that no longer accepts the authority of the British Monarch.”

Distribute to each student an annotated Declaration of Independence. The document has been divided into 10 sections:

*Preamble

*Rights

*Grievances 1-7 (seven sections that consist of the list of grievances against the King of England)

*Independence Declaration

Depending on class size, assign to each student one numbered section; ideally each section will have at least two students assigned to it, with perhaps a few trios. Students will meet in these groupings the

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next day so some record should be kept of who is assigned to which section. Their homework is to read the entire document, and to “translate” their assigned section into their own words, i.e., say what the given section is saying as if you were explaining it to a friend.