



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2021 Volume III: Democracy and Inequality: Challenges and Possible Solutions

Introduction

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It was once widely believed that democracy and equality went hand in hand, a belief that frightened wealthy elites and heartened the poor as the franchise expanded. In fact, democracies often coexist with high and even increasing levels of inequality – as we have seen in the United States and many other democracies over the past half century. The units written in this seminar were motivated by the desire to understand this puzzle and explore possible responses to it.

Among the topics discussed in the seminar that are reflected in the units the teachers wrote were:

- the ways in which the economy and political system affect one another
- the role of electoral systems and political parties
- differences among types of democracies, historical and contemporary
- the role of courts
- why attempts to address different kinds of inequalities, (such as those involving class, race, and gender), often fare differently from one another in democratic politics
- the impact of inequality on education and that of education on democracy and inequality.

An enduring concern about democracy since the time of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill has been the possibility that the majority might tyrannize over minorities. A number of the units focused on disadvantaged minorities in the U.S. Brittany Zezima Dilworth focuses on prejudice against Asian Americans, and the ways in which it has been embodied in legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Supreme Court decisions like *Korematsu v. US* which (1944) upheld as constitutional the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, calling into question whether courts can be relied on to protect vulnerable minorities when majority-sentiment is strongly against them.

The role of courts is explored in relation to efforts at school desegregation by Lisa Yau and Emma Kessler, both of whom develop units focused on the failures to desegregate American schools during the decades since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1944), and possible responses to this failure. Part of the reason these inequalities are so difficult to tackle is that they are trenchantly embedded in and reinforced by forces in the broader economy and society. As Debra Jenkins shows in her unit on the ways in which comparatively unhealthy foods are successfully marketed to minority students for school meals, corporate America can be a significant source of unequal treatment. And while women are not a numerical minority, historically they have been systematically disadvantaged in the political, legal, and economic systems – as Cinde Berkowitz explores in her unit on the failed attempt to enact and Equal Rights Amendment and its consequences.

An additional source of inequality among schools can be traced to the decentralized character of public school

funding out of local property taxes, aggravated – as Mark Hartung explores – by the anti-tax movement spawned by the passage of Proposition 13 in California in 1978. This is a cautionary tale about the role of social movements, which many people embrace uncritically as a good response to the failures of the political system to deliver reforms benefitting minorities. The civil rights movement and (failure of the ERA notwithstanding) the women’s movement have been effective social movements, but so has the anti-tax movement and the Tea Party since 2009 – much more so than Occupy Wall Street that arose at around the same time. Laura Grisham’s unit digs into these issues, examining the conditions under which social movements can be effective instruments of change. Among other factors, they need to be linked to the agendas of major political parties if they are to endure.

If quick fixes that bypass politics are few and far-between, how might the political system be reformed to operate more effectively for the benefit of all? One major obstacle here is voter suppression as Jenny Kim and Tiffany Robinson explore in their units, both of which examine aspects of the history of voter suppression as well as current battles over it, and suggest strategies to ameliorate it by empowering voters. Robinson also brings to bear a comparative lens by looking at democracies elsewhere, a theme Brandon Barr expands on by comparing contemporary American democracy with that of ancient Greece and Rome.

In 1788 James Madison wrote in *Federalist #51* that “in framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” Most of the units developed in this seminar are primarily concerned with the first of Madison’s challenges. Raven Sisco takes up the second in her unit centered on George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, supplemented by excerpts from his writings on politics and economics – notably his book on the Spanish civil war, *Homage to Catalonia*.

Taken together, the units offer a variety of lenses on the promise of and challenges to American democratic politics. They will be a helpful resource to teachers who want to teach their students about America’s failure to live up to that promise, but also to educate them about the shortcomings of ineffective solutions and give them a better understanding of those that are more likely to result in enduring improvements.

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