

Inquiry Blueprint

In Pursuit of Freedom and Democracy: A US History Inquiry

Compelling Question: How can we make real the ideals of democracy and freedom?

Staging the Compelling Question

Students will use their lived experiences to reflect on the complexities of democracy and freedom through a Four Corners activity.

Supporting Question 1

What can freedom mean in the United States?

Formative Task

Draw and label a “Freedom of . . .” or “Freedom from . . .” sign.

Featured Sources

Handout: [What Can Freedom Mean?](#)
Images: [Four Freedoms by Norman Rockwell \(1945\)](#)
Images: [For Freedoms: Four Freedoms by Hank Willis Thomas and Emily Shur \(2018\)](#)
Handout: [“Freedom from . . .”](#)
Handout: [“Freedom of . . .”](#)

Supporting Question 2

What can democracy mean in the United States?

Formative Task

Create a headline that addresses the meaning of democracy in the United States.

Featured Sources

Handout: [Definition of “Democracy” from Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary](#)
Reading: [What Is Democracy?](#)
Handout: [Working Definition of “Democracy”](#)

Supporting Question 3

How have people used the tools of democracy to fight for their freedoms in the United States?

Formative Task

Draw, label, and explain a democratic tool from the sources that would be most useful to enact change.

Featured Sources

Video: [Fannie Lou Hamer Risked Her Life for the Right to Vote](#)
Reading: [Excerpts from “Board of Education: Chinese Mother Letter,” Daily Alta California, 1885](#)
Reading: [Excerpts from “Andrew G. Imutan 1965–1974,” Essays by UFW Volunteers](#)
Handout: [Introduction to Levers of Power Graphic Organizer](#)

Summative Performance Task

ARGUMENT “How can we make real the ideals of democracy and freedom?” In a format of your choice (e.g., digital presentation, poster, paragraph, short essay), discuss freedom and democracy in the United States. Think about one or all of the following:

- How freedom and democracy have been defined in the United States
- How freedom and democracy relate to one another in the United States
- How people have used the tools of democracy to fight for freedom

Taking
Informed
Action

UNDERSTAND As noted in the video about the life and activism of Fannie Lou Hamer, voting rights have been contested since the founding of the United States. In the pursuit of expanding democracy, many people throughout US history have taken individual and collective action to gain access to the ballot box. Students will research contemporary organizations that use democratic tools to continue the pursuit of equitable voting access. Some examples of nonpartisan organizations currently dedicated to voting access are:

- **The Voting Rights Alliance**
- **League of Women Voters**
- **When We All Vote**
- **HeadCount**

ASSESS Identify one organization that works to ensure voting access in the United States today.

ACT Using a format of your choice, educate your school or local community about how your chosen organization uses democratic tools to secure equitable voting access in the United States.

This might include:

- Inviting experts and/or community members to speak to the school about voting access efforts in the local community
- Creating a digital or paper pamphlet or poster about an organization that works to expand voting access in the languages most used in the local community
- Interviewing community members who work with voting rights groups—or who are members of a voting rights group—and publishing your interviews in a podcast or on social media in the languages most used in the community

Inquiry Description

In this inquiry, students explore the compelling question, “How can we make real the ideals of democracy and freedom?” This resource engages students in an exploration of the ideals of democracy and freedom, the central theme of Facing History’s US history program. While this inquiry provides a snapshot of the voices and stories students will encounter in a US history course, it is not designed to be a comprehensive study of one historical era or event. Students will further explore the meanings of democracy and freedom as they go deeper into the resources aligned with our US history program, including inquiries and units on the history of the US founding, the era of Reconstruction, and Asian exclusion through our nation’s earliest immigration laws.

This inquiry draws from students’ lived experiences by asking them to think critically about what democracy and freedom mean in US history and in their own lives. Students reflect on

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complexities within the concept of freedom, exploring how meanings of freedom have evolved over time and the differences between positive and negative freedom. They also consider the meaning of democracy both inside and outside of the government, examining government actions along with the ways their schools and communities function as microcosms of democracy.

As political philosopher Danielle Allen points out, “‘Democracy’ refers to a set of procedures; it doesn’t ‘govern’ anything or anybody. Democratic citizens govern. The question is, are American citizens¹ up to the task of governing themselves democratically?” Allen’s question emphasizes an understanding of democracy as among the most fragile of human enterprises, one that could only be pursued through the active, thoughtful, and responsible participation of its citizens.

For this reason, this inquiry highlights individuals and groups struggling for freedom and self-determination as pillars for achieving and expanding a healthy democracy. Students examine, for instance, the story of Mary Tape, a Chinese American who fought in court for her children to go to school with white children. They also explore the activism of Fannie Lou Hamer and farmworkers from the California farmworkers movement, both of whom used the tools of democracy in pursuit of their own freedoms and rights to “life, liberty, and happiness.”

¹In the context of this Danielle Allen quotation, Facing History interprets the phrase “American citizen” to mean a person living in the United States.