

**John Adams's Views**  
**on Citizenship:**  
**Lessons for Contemporary America**

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## John Adams's Views on Citizenship: Lessons for Contemporary America

### Overview and goals of the lessons:

John Adams distrusted human nature and believed that the only government that could serve the interests of the public was one that checked and balanced the passions and ambitions of those in power. At the same time, he appealed to the public to act with virtue and for institutions to teach republican values. A republic, then as today, can thrive only with an informed and skilled citizenry.

The following resources aim to engage students in an exploration of John Adams's thinking about the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a republic. These lessons take up issues of current relevance that students might like to weigh in on - as John Adams certainly would have. Ideas for genuine service-learning experiences are then offered in which students, like Adams, may choose to make a difference.

### Comments regarding the use of these materials:

These "lessons" do not prescribe a specific method or routine for a teacher to follow. Rather, documents with a unifying theme are collected, accompanied by questions and suggestions for activities. The teacher is left to use these resources in a way that may work for their unique classroom situations.

For the most part, the documents presuppose a working understanding of the historical time period, though not the life of John Adams himself. Also, students will benefit from a familiarity with the basic political concepts of republicanism and the rhetoric of the revolution.

### The organization of the lessons:

Each lesson is divided into three parts:

1. *Documents* - After a short introduction, a set of primary source documents follows. These have been culled from a variety of John Adams's writings: his private and public letters, diaries, autobiography, essays and books. Additionally, there are a few points where other authors appear. Most documents are accompanied by questions that aim to help students focus on key points and make connections between the documents. Following three of the document sets are questions and activities that help students draw conclusions about particular issues and John Adams's views.
2. *Contemporary issues* - After students examine the documents, they may benefit from a consideration of how Adams might have viewed contemporary issues that resonate with concepts that the documents raise. Links to news stories, editorials and other documents are provided. Each collection contains questions and/or activities that will help students weigh in on the issues from both a personal perspective and the perspective of John Adams.
3. *Service-learning extensions* - Finally, students and teachers might choose to reach outside their four walls to make history matter. A set of service-learning ideas are provided.

### Acknowledgement:

I wish to thank the staff of the Massachusetts Historical Society, who, through an Adams Fellowship, provided me with the opportunity to spend several weeks browsing through their extensive resources. With their help and encouragement, I was able to explore the life and the mind of John Adams. I hope I have pieced together some documents and ideas in such a way that others might develop a similar respect and fascination for this exemplary American citizen.

## UNIT 1: LESSONS ON PROTEST AND DISSENT

### *A data-based question:*

John Adams walked the road to and through the Revolution. He was instrumental in tearing apart the bonds that had tied the colonies to tyranny, arguing convincingly in letters, articles and books that the colonies must protest and rebel against the British authority. He made a name for himself by encouraging protest against the Stamp Act in 1765. He was a radical. But years later, as president, his opponent labeled him a monarchist. While the label was unfair, many felt it only warranted when he signed the Alien and Sedition Acts, stamping out First Amendment rights for those who spoke out against his Federalist party.

The following documents examine Adams's (and some of his contemporaries') writing regarding five significant issues around which Americans rebelled. Together, they help to define Adams's views on dissent. Your goal is to discover and define this view. Then you will write a data-based essay that explains your findings.

You may want to consider the following questions as you examine each of the documents.

To Adams, what constitutes *legitimate* dissent? Consider:  
 what gave rise to the issue?  
 what type of government do the protesters live under?  
 how well does that government represent their interests?

To Adams, how is dissent legitimately *expressed*? Consider:  
 what are the means?  
 what responsibilities do citizens have in expressing their views?  
 what other avenues of protest are available to the protesters?  
 do the ends justify the means?

### *The Question:*

Use your understanding of the documents and the historical context in which each of these events took place to answer the following question:

*According to John Adams, what constitutes a **just cause** for citizens to rebel against authority and **by what means** may they legitimately express themselves?*

You may also want to make a chart like the following to help you organize your ideas:

The Event	The Context for the Event ( <i>what is the issue and how legitimate is the government's authority</i> )	Adams's view on the cause	Adams's view on the means
<i>Stamp Act</i>			
<i>Boston Massacre</i>			
<i>Tea Party</i>			
<i>Shays' Rebellion</i>			
<i>Sedition Acts</i>			

## **John Adams on the Stamp Act – 1765**

*In these documents Adams sings the praises of those who stand up to the crown, and publicly gives marching orders to all Americans colonists.*

*Adams wished to shed light on the habits of the British Parliament that he believed were un-republican and dangerous. These documents outline principles stating when government should be protested, when laws should be broken, and what responsibilities citizens have to right such wrongs.*

### ***Document 1***

#### **John Adams, *Instructions to Braintree’s Representative Concerning the Stamp Act*, 1765 [excerpt]**

“We should think ourselves Guilty of great Impiety to the Memory of our Fore fathers, of cruel Inhumanity to our Posterity and of great Injustice to our selves, nay We should dishonour the Name and Character of British subjects, in which we glory, and should even blush before our fellow subjects in great Britain if we tamely and silently saw our Rights and Liberties wrested from Us. –We cannot but recommend therefore the most clear and explicit Assertion and Vindication of our Rights [. . .] that the World may know [. . .] that with submission to divine Providence we can never be slaves”

John Adams, “Instructions to Braintree’s Representative concerning the Stamp Act,” [ante 24 September 1765] in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 1, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 136.

### ***Document 2***

#### **John Adams’s Diary, 18 December 1765 [excerpt]**

Braintree December 18<sup>th</sup>. 1765 Wednesday

The Year 1765 has been the most remarkable Year of my Life. That enormous Engine, fabricated by the british Parliament, for battering down all the Rights and Liberties of America, I mean the Stamp Act, has raised and spread, thro the whole Continent, a Spirit that will be recorded to our Honour, with all future Generations. In every Colony, from Georgia to New Hampshire inclusively, the Stamp Distributors and Inspectors have been compelled, by the unconquerable Rage of the People, to renounce their offices. Such and so universal has been the Resentment of the People, that every Man who has dared to speak in favour of the Stamps [. . .] has been seen to sink into universal Contempt and Ignominy.

The People, even to the lowest Ranks, have become more attentive to their Liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them, than they were ever before known or had occasion to be [. . .] The Crown Officers have every where trembled, and all their little Tools and Creatures, been afraid to Speak and ashamed to be seen.

John Adams diary 11, 18 - 29 December 1765 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

***Document 3***

**John Adams, *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, 1765 [excerpt]**

[Monday, 21 October 1765]

We have been afraid to think. We have felt a reluctance to examining into the grounds of our privileges, and the extent in which we have an indisputable right to demand them [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write. Let every order and degree among the people rouse their attention and animate their resolution. Let them all become attentive to the grounds and principles of government, ecclesiastical and civil. Let us study the law of nature; search into the spirit of the British constitution; read the histories of ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome; set before us, the conduct of our own British ancestors, who have defended for us, the inherent rights of mankind, against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers, against arbitrary kings and cruel priests, in short against the gates of earth and hell [ . . . ] Recollect the civil and religious principles and hopes and expectations, which constantly supported and carried them through all hardships, with patience and resignation! Let us recollect it was liberty! The hope of liberty for themselves and us and ours, which conquered all discouragements, dangers, and trials! In such researches as these let us all in our several departments cheerfully engage! But especially the proper patrons and supporters of law, learning, and religion.

Let the pulpit resound with the doctrines and sentiments of religious liberty. Let us hear the danger of thralldom to our consciences, from ignorance, extream poverty and dependence, in short from civil and political slavery. Let us see delineated before us, the true map of man. Let us hear the dignity of his nature, and the noble rank he holds among the works of God! that consenting to slavery is a sacriligious breach of trust, as offensive in the sight of God as it is derogatory from our own honor or interest or happiness; and that God almighty has promulgated from heaven, liberty, peace, and good-will to man!

Let the bar proclaim, “the laws, the rights, the generous plan of power” delivered down from remote antiquity, -- inform the world of the mighty struggles and numberless sacrifices made by our ancestors in defence of freedom. Let it be known, that British liberties are not the grants of princes or parliaments, but original rights, conditions of original contracts, coequal with prerogative, and coeval with government. - That many of our rights are inherent and essential, agreed on as maxims and establish’d as preliminaries, even before a parliament existed. Let them search for the foundations of British laws and government in the frame of human nature, in the constitution of the intellectual and moral world. There let us see, that truth, liberty, justice and benevolence, are its everlasting basis; and if these could be removed, the superstructure is overthrown of course [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] But it seems very manifest from the [Stamp Act] itself, that a design is form'd to strip us in a great measure of the means of knowledge, by loading the Press, the Colleges, and even an Almanack and a News-paper, with restraints and duties; and to introduce the inequalities

and dependences of the feudal system, by taking from the poorer sort of people all their little subsistence, and conferring it on a set of stamp officers, distributors, and their deputies.

John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law," No. 4 in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 1, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 123-128.

### **John Adams on the Boston Massacre - 1770**

*Soldiers permanently quartered in Boston on the wintry, icy evening of March 5, 1770 became the focus of a small crowd's torment. Scuffles and fire broke out, leaving five colonists dead. Adams decided to defend the soldiers. To succeed, he would have to prove that the mob was a vicious and intimidating force, bent on inducing harm. Newspapers and fellow citizens alike vilified Adams.*

*These documents reveal why, seemingly without a second thought, Adams chose to defend the soldiers. His words about the trial and the incident itself reveal ideas about the ways citizens should behave even in the face of tyranny.*

#### ***Document 1***

#### **John Adams's Autobiography, 1770 [excerpt]**

The next Morning I think it was, sitting in my Office, near the Steps of the Town house Stairs, Mr. Forrest came in, who was then called the Irish Infant. I had some Acquaintance with him. With tears streaming from his Eyes, he said I am come with a very solemn Message from a very unfortunate Man, Captain Preston in Prison. He wishes for Council, and can get none. I have waited on Mr. Quincy, who says he will engage if you will give him your Assistance: without it possitively he will not. Even Mr. Auchmuty declines unless you will engage [ . . . ] I had no hesitation in answering that Council ought to be the very last thing that a ~~Council~~ an accused Person should want in a free Country. That the Bar ought in my opinion to be independent and impartial at all Times And in every Circumstance. And that Persons whose Lives were at Stake ought to have the Council they preferred: But he must be sensible this would be as important a Cause as ever was tryed in any Court or Country of the World: and that every Lawyer must hold himself responsible not only to his Country, but to the highest and most infallible of all Trybunals for the Part he should Act.

John Adams autobiography, part 1, "John Adams," through 1776, sheet 12 of 53 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society  
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

## ***Document 2***

### **John Adams's speech in *Rex v. Wemms*, 1770**

*[the second trial, in defense of the soldiers indicted in the Boston Massacre]*

This witness swears he saw snow-balls thrown close before the party, and he took them to be thrown on purpose, he saw oyster-shells likewise thrown [. . .] Forty or fifty people round the soldiers, and more coming from Quaker-lane, as well as the other lanes. The soldiers heard all the bells ringing and saw people coming from every point of the compass to the assistance of those who were insulting, assaulting, beating and abusing of them-what had they to expect but destruction, if they had not thus early taken measures to defend themselves?

[. . .] We have entertained a great variety of phrases, to avoid calling this sort of people a mob. Some call them shavers, some call them genius's. The plain English is gentlemen, most probably a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes, mullatoes, Irish teagues [nickname for an Irishman] and the out landish jack tarrs. – And why should we scruple to call such a set of people a mob, I can't conceive, unless the name is too respectable for them: -The sun is not about to stand still or go out, nor the rivers to dry up because there was a mob in Boston on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March that attacked a party of soldiers. –Such things are not new in the world, nor in the British dominions, though they are comparatively, rareties and novelties in this town [. . .] Soldiers quartered in a populous town, will always occasion two mobs, where they prevent one. –They are wretched conservators of the peace!

John Adams, *Legal Papers of John Adams*, vol.3, ed. L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1965), 263-267.

## ***Document 3***

### **John Adams's Diary, 5 March 1773**

*[reflecting on the third anniversary of the Massacre]*

1773. March 5<sup>th</sup>. Fryday.

Heard an Oration, at Mr. Hunts Meeting House, by Dr. Benja. Church, in Commemoration of the Massacre in Kings Street, 3 Years ago. That large Church was filled and crouded in every Pew, Seat, Alley, and Gallery, by an Audience of several Thousands of People of all Ages and Characters and of both Sexes.

I have Reason to remember that fatal Night. The Part I took in Defence of Captn. Preston and the Soldiers, procured me Anxiety, and Obloquy enough. It was, however, one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested Actions of my whole Life, and one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country. Judgment of Death ~~would have been~~



against those Soldiers would have been as foul a Stain upon this Country as the Executions of the Quakers or Witches, anciently. As the Evidence was, the Verdict of the jury was exactly right.

This however is no Reason why the Town should not call the Action of that Night a Massacre, nor ~~against~~, is it any Argument in favour of the Governor or Minister, who caused them to be sent here. But it is the strongest of Proofs of the Danger of standing Armies.

John Adams diary 19, 16 December 1772 - 18 December 1773 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

### **John Adams on the Tea Party and the Coercive Acts – 1773**

*Adams did not organize the Tea Party, but he strongly supported it as an effective and proper response to the Tea Act. He publicly supported protest over the Intolerable Acts as well.*

*These documents reveal a great deal about what Adams believed to be the appropriate response to injustice – what actions citizens are called to take, and what sacrifices they must make. They also reflect his views on the types of people that constitute society and which of these are most apt to take action. They are an interesting complement to the previous sets of documents.*

#### ***Document 1***

#### **John Adams's Diary, 17 December 1773 [excerpt]**

*[the morning after the Tea Party]*

1775. Decr. 17<sup>th</sup>.

Last Night 3 Cargoes of Bohea Tea were emptied into the Sea. This Morning a Man of War sails.

This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire. The People should never rise, without doing something to be remembered -- something notable And striking. This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I cant but consider it as an Epoque in History.

This however is but an Attack upon Property. Another similar Exertion of popular Power, may produce the destruction of Lives. Many Persons wish, that as many dead Carcasses were floating in the Harbour, as there are Chests of Tea: -- a much less Number of Lives however would remove the Causes of all our Calamities [. . . ]

What Measures will the Ministry take, in Consequence of this? Will they resent it? will they dare to resent it? will they punish Us? How? By quartering Troops upon Us? -- by annulling our Charter? -- by laying on more duties? By restraining our Trade? By Sacrifice of Individuals, or how.

The Question is whether the Destruction of this Tea was necessary? I apprehend it was absolutely and indispensably so [ . . . ] there was no other Alternative but to destroy it or let it be landed. To let it be landed, would be giving up the Principle of Taxation by Parliamentary Authority, against which the Continent have struggled for 10 years.

John Adams diary 19, 16 December 1772 -18 December 1773 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

### ***Document 2***

#### **Letter from John Adams to James Warren, 17 December 1773**

Dr Sir

The Dye is cast: The People have passed the River and cutt away the Bridge: last Night Three Cargoes of Tea, were emptied into the Harbour. This is the grandest, Event, which has ever yet happened Since, the Controversy, with Britain, opened!

The Sublimity of it, charms me!

[ . . . ] I believe it will take them 10 Years to get the Province to pay for it. If so, we shall Save 1o Years Interest of the Money. Whereas if it is drank it must be paid for immediately [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] Threats, Phantoms, Bugbears, by the million, will be invented and propagated among the People upon this occasion. Individuals will be threatened with Suits and Prosecutions. Armies and Navies will be talked of – military Execution – Charters annull'd – Treason – Tryals in England and all that – But – these Terrors, are all but Imaginations. Yet if they should become Realities they had better be Suffered, than the great Principle, of Parliamentary Taxation given up.

The Town of Boston, was never more Still and calm of a Saturday night than it was last Night. All Things were conducted with great order, Decency and *perfect Submission to Government*. No Doubt, we all thought the Administration in better Hands, than it had been.

Please to make Mrs. Adams's most respectfull Compliments to Mrs. Warren and mine.

I am your Friend,

John Adams

John Adams to James Warren, 17 December 1773, in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 2, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 1-2.

### ***Document 3***

#### **John Adams, *The Letters of Novanglus*, 1775 [excerpt]**

*[published in The Boston Gazette, Adams's letter reflects on the colonists' response to the Coercive Acts.]*

But most people in America now think the destruction of the Boston tea, was absolutely necessary, and therefore right and just. It is very true, they say, if the whole people had been united in sentiment, and equally stable in their resolution, not to buy or drink it, there might have been a reason for preserving it; but the people here were not so virtuous or so happy. The British ministry had plundered the people by illegal taxes, and applied the money in salaries and pensions, by which devices, they had insidiously attached to their party, no inconsiderable number of persons, some of whom were of family, fortune and influence, tho' many of them were of desperate fortunes, each of whom, however, had his circle of friends, connections and dependents, who were determined to drink tea, both as evidence of their servility to administration, and their contempt and hatred of the people. These it was impossible to restrain without violence, perhaps bloodshed, certainly without hazarding more than the tea was worth. To this tribe of the *wicked*, they say, must be added another, perhaps more numerous, of the *weak*; who never could be brought to think of the consequences of their actions, but would gratify their appetites, if they could come at the means. What numbers are there in every community, who have no providence, or prudence in their private affairs, but will go on indulging the present appetite, prejudice, or passion, to the ruin of their estates and families, as well as their own health and characters! How much larger is the number of those who have no foresight for the public, or consideration of the freedom of posterity? Such an abstinence from the tea, as would have avoided the establishment of a precedent, depended on the unanimity of the people, a felicity that was unattainable. Must the wise, the virtuous and worthy part of the community, who constituted a very great majority, surrender their liberty, and involve their posterity in misery in complaisance to a detestable, tho' small party of knaves, and a despicable, tho' more numerous company of fools?

John Adams, "The Letters of Novanglus," in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 2, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 298-299.

## **John Adams on Shays's Rebellion - 1786**

*By 1786, the colonies had cast off chains of tyranny, and the states were trying to live and relate with one another under the Article of Confederation. Adams was amongst those who supported the creation of a new constitution with a significantly strengthened central government. Shays's Rebellion provided the evidence, for many, that that step should be taken. John and Abigail Adams were in England throughout the course of the rebellion. Jefferson was in Paris. At some distance, they write about the rebellion. Adams seems to have written very little about the event. But here one can see four authors with varied perspectives on the event.*

*Consider the role might time and proximity may have played in these perspectives. Examine what each is suggesting about how justified the farmers are in taking up arms against the state.*

***Document 1*****Letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 30 November 1786 [excerpt]**

Grosvenor Square [London] Nov 30 1786

Dear Sir:

[. . .] Don't be alarmed at the late Turbulence in New England. The Massachusetts Assembly had, in its Zeal to get the better of their Debt, laid on a Tax, rather heavier than the People could bear; but all will be well, and this Commotion will terminate in additional Strength to Government

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 30 November 1786, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 156.

***Document 2*****Letter from Samuel Osgood to John Adams, 14 November 1786 [excerpt]**

*[written from America, most likely received after the above letter was written]*

The disturbances in Massachusetts seem most likely to produce some very important event [. . .] It is said that the insurgents have two objects in view: one, to reduce their state debt [. . .] ; the other, to annihilate private debts[ . . .] [Y]et, as it affords a fine opportunity for the restless enemies of this country to sow dissensions, we have too much reason to believe, that they are not only looking on as spectators, but that they are industrially employed in disseminating disaffection to the present form of government. If these enemies are British [. . .] their object must be something further than mere revenge.

Samuel Osgood to John Adams, 14 November 1786, in *The Works of John Adams : second President of the United States*, Vol. 8, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 420.

***Document 3*****Letter from Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 29 January 1787 [excerpt]**

London Janry. 29<sup>th</sup>. 1787

My Dear Sir:

With regard to the Tumults in my Native state which you inquire about, I wish I could say that report had exaggerated them. It is too true Sir that they have been carried to so allarming a Height as to stop the Courts of justice in several Counties. Ignorant,

wrestless desperadoes, without conscience or principals, have led a deluded multitude to follow their standard, under pretence of grievences which have no existance but in their immaginations. Some of them were crying out for a paper currency, some for an equal distribution of property, some were for annihilating all debts, others complaning that the Senate was a useless Branch of Government, that the Court of common pleas was unnecessary, and that the sitting of the General Court in Boston was a grievence. By this list you will see the materials which compose this rebellion, and the necessity there is of the wisest and most vigorus measures to quell and suppress it. Instead of that laudible spirit which you approve, which makes a people watchfull over their Liberties and alert in the defence of them, these mobish insurgents are for sapping the foundation, and distroying the whole fabrick at once.

Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 29 January 1787, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters.*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 168.

#### ***Document 4***

#### **Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 22 February 1787 [excerpt]**

Paris Feb 22. 1787.

Dear Madam

[T]he Malcontents [Shays and the rebels] make their submission on condition of pardon, and before the answer of government was known. I hope they pardoned them. The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere.

Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 22 February 1787, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* , ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 173.

#### ***Document 5***

**John Adams, *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States, 1787***  
*[though not written about Shays's Rebellion itself, these lines may shed light on how Adams later thought about the rebellion]*

A little junto of principal citizens concert a plan in secret among themselves [. . .] order the bells to be rung, and a little flock of their own creatures assemble in the piazza. There the junto nominate a dozen or a score of persons [. . .] to reform the state at their pleasure; no reasonable method of voting for them, no instructions given them; the people huzza, and all is over. What ideas are here of the rights of mankind? what equality is here among the citizens? what principle of national liberty is here respected? what method is this to obtain the national sense, the public voice?

John Adams, "Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States," in *The Works of John Adams : second President of the United States*, Vol. 5, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 179-180.

## **John Adams on the Sedition Act - 1798**

*As president, Adams did not advocate or request the Alien and Sedition Acts. But like the Federalist majority in Congress, he perceived a great threat from the French within the nation. Though Adams staunchly refused to wage war against the French government, he did sign these Acts in July 1798. Though tremendously unpopular at the time, and later seen as one of history's most egregious violations of First Amendment rights, years later Adams stood by his decision to sign them. The threat to the new nation from insurrection had been that great.*

*The Sedition Act unveils a strict standard for the level of dissent a republican government should tolerate. How might Adams himself have reconciled these thoughts on dissent with what he wrote about the Stamp Act over thirty years earlier?*

### ***Document 1***

#### **Letter from John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 25 December 1811, Quincy**

I have raised no clamors nor made any opposition to any of these measures. The nation approved them; and what is my judgment against that of the nation? On the contrary, he disapproved of the alien law and sedition law, which I believe to have been constitutional and salutary, if not necessary.

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 25 December 1811, in *The works of John Adams : second President of the United States*, Vol. 10, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 10.

### ***Document 2***

#### **The Sedition Act, approved 14 July 1798**

*An Act in Addition to the Act, Entitled "An Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes against the United States."*

*SECTION 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That if any persons shall unlawfully combine or conspire together, with intent to oppose any measure or measures of the government of the United States, which are or shall be directed by proper authority, or to impede the operation of any law of the United States, or to intimidate or prevent any person holding a place or office in or under the government of the United States, from undertaking, performing or executing his trust or duty, and if any person or persons, with intent as aforesaid, shall counsel, advise or attempt to procure any*

insurrection, riot, unlawful assembly, or combination, whether such conspiracy, threatening, counsel, advice, or attempt shall have the proposed effect or not, he or they shall be deemed guilty of a high misdemeanor, and on conviction, before any court of the United States having jurisdiction thereof, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding five thousand dollars, and by imprisonment during a term not less than six months nor exceeding five years; and further, at the discretion of the court may be holden to find sureties for his good behaviour in such sum, and for such time, as the said court may direct.

*SEC. 2. And be it farther enacted,* That if any person shall write, print, utter, or publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printed, uttered or published, or shall knowingly and willingly assist or aid in writing, printing, uttering or publishing any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States, or either house of the Congress of the United States, or the President of the United States, with intent to defame the said government, or either house of the said Congress, or the said President, or to bring them, or either of them, into contempt or disrepute; or to excite against them, or either or any of them, the hatred of the good people of the United States, or to stir up sedition within the United States, or to excite any unlawful combinations therein, for opposing or resisting any law of the United States, or any act of the President of the United States, done in pursuance of any such law, or of the powers in him vested by the constitution of the United States, or to resist, oppose, or defeat any such law or act, or to aid, encourage or abet any hostile designs of any foreign nation against the United States, their people or government, then such person, being thereof convicted before any court of the United States having jurisdiction thereof, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding two thousand dollars, and by imprisonment not exceeding two years.

*SEC. 3. And be it further enacted,* That if any person shall be prosecuted under this act, for the writing or publishing any libel aforesaid, it shall be lawful for the defendant, upon the trial of the cause, to give in evidence in his defence, the truth of the matter contained in the publication charged as a libel. And the jury who shall try the cause, shall have a right to determine the law and the fact, under the direction of the court, as in other cases.

*SEC. 4. And be it further enacted,* That this act shall continue and be in force until the third day of March, one thousand eight hundred and one, and no longer: Provided, That the expiration of the act shall not prevent or defeat a prosecution and punishment of any offence against the law, during the time it shall be in force.

"The Sedition Act of 1798," *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 1, 596 in *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1825*, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage>.

## THE ISSUE: SHADES OF PROTEST – ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

*Examine this progression. It reveals a continuum of reasons for and reaction to, dissent.*

- *In 1765, John Adams appeals to the British government to repeal the Stamp taxes and for colonists to educate themselves and prepare to resist.*
- *By 1773, John Adams is openly praising civil disobedience to an illegitimate authority.*
- *By 1775, John Adams supports the violent overthrow of that authority.*
- *In 1786, Adams sympathizes with rebels who believed the government had passed unjust, punitive laws, though, like his wife, he likely opposed their aggressive means.*
- *And by 1798, Adams uses his authority to squash opposition that he saw as threatening to the system he had worked so hard to realize.*

*It is part of our American tradition to speak out against unjust government policy and illegitimate authority. And it is part of our government's tradition to react to dissent in a variety of ways: from listening and eventually responding to public pressure (as in the civil rights movement of the 1960s) to silencing opposition by violating civil rights (as in the Sedition Act of 1918).*

*Civil rights activists of the 1960's advocated a variety of techniques to force an unresponsive government to respond. Today, too, a variety of methods are used by groups protesting a similar cause.*

*Here, you will look at methods used by environmental activists. You will consider each group's call to action and whether their methods are justified by the ends they seek.*

*Examine the following three environmental organizations through their websites, news articles, and other media:*

Earth Liberation Front (E.L.F.)

Greenpeace

League of Conservation Voters

*As you examine these organizations, consider the following questions:*

1. *What are their goals?*
2. *What methods do they employ to achieve these goals?*
3. *How do they justify the use of these methods?*
4. *What sort of reasoning and appeals to republican principles do you see that Adams, too, used to justify his actions?*
5. *What organizational tactics or structures might Adams have found appropriate or not?*
6. *Which organizations, tactics, and causes do you find most legitimate?*



## SERVICE-LEARNING CONNECTIONS: PROTEST AND DISSENT

*The following list contains ideas that teachers and students might like to pursue as service learning extensions for this lesson. Students might employ methods of protest listed in 198 Methods of Nonviolent Protest and Persuasion, several of which John Adams advocated. (See Gene Sharp, "198 Methods of Nonviolent Action," *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), <http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations/org/198-methods.pdf> (accessed 12 December 2007).*

*The teacher should make certain students have ample time and prompting to reflect on the significance of their service and how John Adams might have considered their work. Students and teachers could:*

- Assess the extent to which students have meaningful input into school policy. Does the Student Council deal with policy issues, or just school spirit? Are there avenues through which students express, and administration seeks, input in decision-making? Design a proposal that offers improvements, making your school more democratic. Share this proposal with the student body, school board and administration.
- Survey the student handbook to find a school policy that students believe is unjust. Propose a change. Choose a form of protest or persuasion and appeal to republican principles to advocate for change.
- Research codes regarding students' first amendment rights in the school. Could these rights be better protected or expanded? Redraft the language of the codes and choose a form of protest or persuasion to voice the student body's concerns with the issue.
- Research unethical practices of a local, national or international company. Educate fellow students about the issue and apply pressure through the means that students find most appropriate.
- Research a variety of environmental organizations (or another cause) and choose one that appears to reflect the methods and goals that students agree with most. Join the organization and work on their behalf.

## UNIT 2: LESSONS ON COMMUNITY AND THE INSTITUTIONS THAT SUSTAIN THEM

John Adams possessed a rather negative view of human nature and aimed to establish governments that channeled ambition and passion away from decision making and power. Governments could not rely on man's inherent virtue to defend the public good. But virtue must be taught, and institutions must do this teaching. They must buttress republican society at every turn. And government must play a role in supporting these institutions.

As our nation has grown, so has the number of institutions that guard the general welfare and shape the public good. Through funding and legislation, government continues to play a role in supporting them. But this relationship, seen vividly in issues of separation of church and state, often creates tension.

What institutions did Adams define as the most essential to this mission? What unique role did each have in shaping the ideology of citizens? What is the proper relation between government and these institutions, then and now?

### *Document 1*

*In this letter to Abigail, John Adams reflects upon the institutions and factors that make a community strong, and have helped New England communities, in particular, thrive and sustain the spirit of liberty, despite the oppressive force of British rule.*

*Which of these institutions seems most important? How do they all complement each other? "English blood" tops his list. Why? Adams isn't racist is he? How might having a common heritage help to keep a community tightly knit?*

### **Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 October 1775**

There is, in the human Breast, a social Affection, which extends to our whole Species. Faintly indeed; but in some degree. The Nation, Kingdom, or Community to which We belong is embraced by it more vigorously. It is stronger still towards the Province to which we belong, and in which We had our Birth. It is stronger and stronger, as We descend to the County, Town, Parish, Neighbourhood, and Family, which We call our own. -- And here We find it often so powerfull as to become partial, to blind our Eyes, to darken our Understandings and pervert our Wills.

It is to this Infirmary, in my own Heart, that I must perhaps attribute that local Attachment, that partial Fondness, that overweening Prejudice in favour of New England, which I feel very often and which I fear sometimes, leads me to expose myself to just Ridicule.

New England has in many Respects the Advantage of every other Colony in America, and indeed of every other Part of the World, that I know any Thing of.

1. The People are purer English Blood, less mixed with Scotch, Irish, Dutch, French, Danish, Sweedish &c. than any other; and descended from Englishmen too who left Europe, in purer Times than the present and less tainted with Corruption than those they left behind them.
2. The Institutions in New England for the Support of Religion, Morals and Decency, exceed any other, obliging every Parish to have a Minister, and every Person to go to Meeting &c.
3. The public Institutions in New England for the Education of Youth, supporting Colledges at the public Expence and obliging Towns to maintain Grammar schools, is not equalled and never was in any Part of the World.
4. The Division of our Territory, that is our Counties into Townships, empowering Towns to assemble, choose officers, make Laws, mend roads, and twenty other Things, gives every Man an opportunity of shewing and improving that Education which he received at Colledge or at school, and makes Knowledge and Dexterity at public Business common.
5. Our Laws for the Distribution of Intestate Estates occasions a frequent Division of landed Property and prevents Monopolies, of ~~Lands~~ Land.

But in opposition to these We have laboured under many Disadvantages. The exorbitant Prerogatives of our Governors &c. which would have overborn our Liberties, if it had not been opposed by the five preceding Particulars.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 October 1775, "There is, in the human breast. . ." [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

## **Document 2**

*Eleven years later, with the war against the British behind him and the ratification of a new constitution ahead, Adams wrote again about four of the most influential institutions that helped Massachusetts lead and win the fight against the British. The letter was written to a Frenchman who was considering writing about United States history.*

*How does Adams suggest that these institutions are exceptional to Americans? What role did each of these institutions play in shaping a revolutionary society? In what ways might each serve as "foundations of the liberty, happiness, and prosperity of the people?" in any republic, or in any community? Under what conditions might any of these institutions serve to undermine the success of a republic?*

**John Adams, *Letter to the Abbe de Mably, on the Proper Method of Treating American History, 1782* [excerpt]**

Permit me, sir, before I finish this letter, to point at a key to all this history. There is a general analogy in the governments and characters of all the thirteen states; but it was not till the debates and the war began in Massachusetts Bay, the principal province of New England, that their primitive institutions produced their first effect. Four of these institutions ought to be amply investigated and maturely considered by any person who wishes to write with correct information upon this subject; for they have produced a decisive effect, not only in the first determinations of the controversies in writing, and the first debates in council, and the first resolutions to resist in arms, but also by the influence they had on the minds of the other colonies, by giving them an example to adopt more or less the same institutions and similar measures. The four institutions intended are:

1. The towns or districts.
2. The congregations.
  
3. The schools.
4. The militia.

The towns are certain extents of country, or districts of territory, into which Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, are divided. These towns contain upon an average, say, six miles or two leagues square. The inhabitants who live within these limits are formed by law into corporations, or bodies politic, and are invested with certain powers and privileges, as, for example, to repair the great roads or highways, to support the poor, to choose their selectmen, constables, collectors of taxes, and above all, their representatives in the legislature; as also, the right to assemble, whenever they are summoned by their selectmen, in their town halls, there to deliberate upon the public affairs of the town, or to give instructions to their representatives in the legislature. The consequences of these institutions have been, that the inhabitants, having acquired from their infancy the habit of discussing, of deliberating, and of judging of public affairs, it was in these assemblies of towns or districts that the sentiments of the people were formed in the first place, and their resolutions were taken from the beginning to the end of the disputes and the war with Great Britain.

2. The congregations are religious societies, which comprehend the whole people. Every district contains a parish or religious congregation. In general, they have but one, though some of them have several. Each parish has a temple for public worship, and a minister, maintained at the public expense. The constitutions of these congregations are extremely popular, and the clergy have little influence or authority beyond that which their own piety, virtues, and talents naturally give them. They are chosen by the people of their parishes, and receive their ordinations from the neighboring clergy. They are all married, have families, and live with their parishioners in an intimate and perfect friendship. They visit the sick; they are charitable to the poor; they solemnize marriages and funerals, and preach twice every Sunday. The smallest imputation on their moral character would destroy their influence, and ruin them forever. They are, therefore, wise, virtuous, and pious men; their sentiments are generally conformable to those of their people, and they are jealous friends of liberty.

3. There are schools in every town, established by an express law of the colony. Every town containing sixty families, is obliged, under a penalty, to maintain constantly a school and a schoolmaster, who shall teach his scholars reading, writing, arithmetic, and the rudiments of the Latin and Greek languages. All the children of the inhabitants, the rich as well as the poor, have a right to go to these public schools. There, are formed the candidates for admission as students into the colleges at Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, and Dartmouth. In these colleges are educated future masters for these schools, future ministers for these congregations, doctors of law and medicine, and magistrates and officers for the government of the country.

4. The militia comprehends the whole people. By virtue of the laws of the country, every male inhabitant between sixteen and sixty years of age, is enrolled in a company, and a regiment of militia completely organized with all its officers. He is enjoined to keep always in his house, and at his own expense, a firelock in good order, a powder horn, a pound of powder, twelve flints, four-and-twenty balls of lead, a cartridge box, and a knapsack; so that the whole country is ready to march for its own defence upon the first signal of alarm. These companies and regiments are obliged to assemble at certain times in every year, under the orders of their officers, for the inspection of their arms and ammunition, and to perform their exercises and manoeuvres.

Behold, sir, a little sketch of the four principal sources of that prudence in council and that military valor and ability, which have produced the American Revolution, and which I hope will be sacredly preserved as the foundations of the liberty, happiness, and prosperity of the people.

John Adams to the Abbe de Mably, 1782, in *The Works of John Adams : Second President of the United States*, Vol. 5, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 494-496.

### **Document 3**

*Shortly before becoming president, John Adams wrote these short lines about Christianity in his diary. In what ways is Adams suggesting that Christianity is uniquely suited to transmit values essential to citizens of a republic?*

#### **John Adams's Diary, 14 August 1796**

August 14. 1796. Sunday.

The Weather hot and dry.

One great Advantage of the Christian Religion is that it brings the great Principle of the Law of Nature and Nations, Love your Neighbour as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you, to the Knowledge, Belief and Veneration of the whole People. Children, Servants, Women and Men are all Professors in the science of public as well as private Morality. No other Institution for Education, no kind of political

Discipline, could diffuse this kind of necessary Information, so universally among all Ranks and Descriptions of Citizens. The Duties and Rights of The Man and the Citizen are thus taught, from early Infancy to every Creature. The Sanctions of a future Life are thus added to the Observance of civil and political as well as domestic and private Duties. Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude, are thus taught to be the means and Conditions of future as well as present Happiness.

John Adams diary 46, 6 August 1787 - 10 September 1796, 2 July - 21 August 1804 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

#### ***Document 4***

*In the Massachusetts State Constitution, which he penned, Adams stated the mission of schools. His aim is high. In what ways do schools, according to Adams, support republican values? To what extent does this reflect your experience?*

#### ***The Massachusetts State Constitution. Chapter V, Section II. The Encouragement of Literature, etc., 1780***

Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools and grammar schools in the towns; to encourage private societies and public institutions, rewards and immunities, for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.

*Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, Chap. V, Sec. II, "The Encouragement of Literature, etc.", [www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm](http://www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm).

#### ***Document 5***

*Adams had written about the historical abuse of power by the clergy; the laws of the European churches (especially the Catholic Church) had too often cast individuals into servitude. Despite this historical lesson, Article III of the state constitution clearly indicates Adams's commitment to religion as a transmitter of knowledge and values. To more clearly draw a line between church and state, however, the state Constitution was*

*later amended to dissolve the financial and legal relationship between the state and the parishes.*

*Why is Adams so emphatic that the people – through their legislature – have the ability to establish and fund churches? What might have been gained or lost when this capacity was taken from the legislature?*

***The Massachusetts State Constitution. Part the First. A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Article III, 1780***

As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality; and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community, but by the institution of the public worship of God, and of public instructions in piety, religion and morality: Therefore, to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality, in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.

And the people of this commonwealth have also a right to, and do, invest their legislature with authority to enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid, at stated times and seasons, if there be any on whose instructions they can conscientiously and conveniently attend.

Provided, notwithstanding, that the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, shall, at all times, have the exclusive right of electing their public teachers, and of contracting with them for their support and maintenance.

And all moneys paid by the subject to the support of public worship, and of the public teachers aforesaid, shall, if he require it, be uniformly applied to the support of the public teacher or teachers of his own religious sect or denomination, provided there be any on whose instructions he attends; otherwise it may be paid towards the support of the teacher or teachers of the parish or precinct in which the said moneys are raised.

Any every denomination of Christians, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law: and no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law.

*Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Part the First, "A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," Article III, [www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm](http://www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm).*

## Putting it all together

1. *Consider some of the key institutions that these documents refer to – schools, churches, local governments, and militias – how does each of these serve to strengthen the bonds of a community, its citizens to each other? How could they serve to undermine a community?*
2. *What responsibilities is Adams suggesting – implicitly or explicitly – that these institutions have to society? What responsibilities might Adams say that individuals have toward these institutions?*
3. *In what way does Adams suggest that these healthy, republican-minded American institutions are especially within the grasp of Americans because of their country's unique history and place in the world? What do you know about the nation's history that supports or refutes this?*
4. *Adams suggests that homogeneous citizens help to unify a community – having a common religion or ethnicity, for instance. Indeed, New England in Adams's time was a relatively homogenous society. In what ways might strong institutions serve to mitigate any potential divisiveness of a heterogeneous community?*
5. *How does the way institutions serve a community differ from how they serve a larger republic?*
6. *What other institutions would you say are essential to shaping an individual and preparing him or her for citizenship?*



## THE ISSUE: TOWN MEETING

*Adams stressed the importance of local government in New England. Because of this institution, including its unique town meetings, the public “acquired from their infancy the habit of discussing, of deliberating, and of judging of public affairs.” Of course, town meetings still exist in most of New England and in other parts of the nation.*

*But when only ten percent of a town’s population turns up for town meeting, one may question how well it functions to create the public debate of issues, investment in community, and disposition that supports republican governments.*

*Examine the following sources:*

“The New England Town Meeting” New Rules Project, Institute for Local Self-Reliance, <http://www.newrules.org/gov/townmtg.html>

Christopher Shea, “Real Democracy.” *The Boston Globe*. 25 January 2004.  
[accessed 12 December 2007]  
[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/01/25/real\\_democracy\\_1075225901](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/01/25/real_democracy_1075225901)

Robert I. Rotberg, “For democracy, smaller is better.” *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 February 2004, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0203/p16s01-bogn.html>

*Use these sources to help answer the following questions:*

1. *What seem to be the inherent strengths and weaknesses of town meeting?*
2. *In what ways are these weaknesses a function of contemporary, industrial life – factors that a town may not have faced at the turn of the eighteenth century?*
3. *How do the articles support Adams’s claim that such institutions create a public that “acquire(s) from their infancy the habit of discussing, of deliberating, and of judging of public affairs”?*
4. *Adams at once praised the deliberative nature of town meeting and distrusted unicameral bodies because of the ability of the few to sway “the weak.” What might he have said about Bryan’s views and the state of town meeting today?*
5. *What do you think about Rotberg’s assertion that Iraq and Afghanistan could use a good dose of New England town meeting? What institutions and historical traditions in those two nations might be at odds with the values that Adams trusted town meetings to inculcate?*

## **SERVICE-LEARNING CONNECTIONS: COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONS**

The following list contains ideas that teachers and students might like to pursue as service learning extensions for this lesson. Teachers should make certain students have ample time and prompting to reflect on the significance of their service and how John Adams might have considered their work. Students and teachers could:

- Study the Town Warrant and the issues at stake in the next election. Then, sponsor a public forum on particular issues, to be televised on local cable.
- Publish a booklet - *Town Meeting for Dummies* - that explains how town meeting works and the issues at stake at the next town meeting. These could be distributed to students and citizens. Publish these booklets in another language if this is identified as a need.
- Examine the school's mission statement, student handbook and curriculum to assess the extent to which the school, in Adams's words, "inculcate(s) the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings." Report these findings to the student body, administration, or school board.
- Help the school or an elementary school sponsor a *Day of Cultural Understanding*. Diversity and cultural awareness workshops could serve to build a closer community. As a central theme, stress that building community through education "among the different orders of the people," is "necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties."
- Research President Bush's "Faith-Based Initiative" bearing in mind local community needs. Advise a local religious organization on the initiative and how they might use funding to help meet this local need.

## UNIT 3: LESSONS ON THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MASSACHUSETTS CITIZENS

Massachusetts was the last of the newly independent states to ratify a constitution. Authored primarily by John Adams in the fall of 1779, it was altered little before its passage in 1780. The state government, therefore, was set up very much in his image. It established a detailed plan for a government with three branches and a system of checks and balances. Adams, it would turn out, had penned what would become the longest continuously operating written constitution in the world.

In its preamble, Adams eloquently expressed the purpose of the government. Many of these principles could be found in other state constitutions and, later, the United States Constitution, the ratification of which Adams supported. After the preamble, Adams listed the rights that all Massachusetts citizens were guaranteed. It is these two sections that are to be examined here.

Today, a discouragingly small percentage of Americans can name the rights that even just the First Amendment guarantees them. Even fewer Massachusetts residents know or have ever seen our state constitution.

“The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people,” wrote Adams in the preamble. The government exists to protect individual rights, and because the government is an agreement among the people, Adams would agree that individuals have responsibilities that correspond with these rights.

What are the basic principles of republicanism that Adams wants Massachusetts citizens to recognize and live by? What are the responsibilities that correspond to our rights? How does the U.S. Constitution compare to the Massachusetts Constitution, written seven years earlier?

### Document 1

*What is Adams saying about the purpose of republican government in the preamble? Where do you see these principles reiterated in the Declaration of Rights? Does the list of rights appear to be at all redundant? Where? What does the document reveal about Adams’s (and Massachusetts citizens who subscribe to its principles) view of human nature? Why do you imagine Adams placed the list of rights toward the start of the document?*

### Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1780

#### PREAMBLE

The end of the institution, maintenance, and administration of government, is to secure the existence of the body politic, to protect it, and to furnish the individuals who compose it with the power of enjoying in safety and tranquillity their natural rights, and the blessings of life: and whenever these great objects are not obtained, the people have a right to alter the government, and to take measures necessary for their safety, prosperity and happiness.

The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good. It is the duty of the people, therefore, in framing a constitution of government, to provide for an equitable mode of making laws, as well as for an impartial interpretation, and a faithful execution of them; that every man may, at all times, find his security in them.

We, therefore, the people of Massachusetts, acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the goodness of the great Legislator of the universe, in affording us, in the course of His providence, an opportunity, deliberately and peaceably, without fraud, violence or surprise, of entering into an original, explicit, and solemn compact with each other; and of forming a new constitution of civil government, for ourselves and posterity; and devoutly imploring His direction in so interesting a design, do agree upon, ordain and establish the following *Declaration of Rights*, and *Frame of Government*, as the **Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts**.

**PART THE FIRST**  
*A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants  
of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*  
[*excerpted*]

Article I. All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.

Article II. It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe. And no subject shall be hurt, molested, or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience; or for his religious profession or sentiments; provided he doth not disturb the public peace, or obstruct others in their religious worship.

Article III. As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality [. . .] to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require [. . .] the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality [. . .] And every denomination of Christians, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law: and no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law [. . .]

Article V. All power residing originally in the people, and being derived from them, the several magistrates and officers of government, vested with authority, whether legislative, executive, or judicial, are their substitutes and agents, and are at all times accountable to them.

Article VI. No man, nor corporation, or association of men, have any other title to obtain advantages, or particular and exclusive privileges, distinct from those of the community, than what arises from the consideration of services rendered to the public; and this title being in nature neither hereditary, nor transmissible to children, or descendants, or relations by blood, the idea of a man born a magistrate, lawgiver, or judge, is absurd and unnatural.

Article VII. Government is instituted for the common good; for the protection, safety, prosperity and happiness of the people; and not for the profit, honor, or private interest of any one man, family, or class of men: Therefore the people alone have an incontestable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to institute government; and to reform, alter, or totally change the same, when their protection, safety, prosperity and happiness require it.

Article VIII. In order to prevent those, who are vested with authority, from becoming oppressors, the people have a right, at such periods and in such manner as they shall establish by their frame of government, to cause their public officers to return to private life; and to fill up vacant places by certain and regular elections and appointments [ . . . ]

Article X. Each individual of the society has a right to be protected by it in the enjoyment of his life, liberty and property, according to standing laws. He is obliged, consequently, to contribute his share to the expense of this protection; to give his personal service, or an equivalent, when necessary: but no part of the property of any individual can, with justice, be taken from him, or applied to public uses, without his own consent, or that of the representative body of the people [ . . . ] And whenever the public exigencies require that the property of any individual should be appropriated to public uses, he shall receive a reasonable compensation therefor.

Article XI. Every subject of the commonwealth ought to find a certain remedy, by having recourse to the laws, for all injuries or wrongs which he may receive in his person, property, or character. He ought to obtain right and justice freely, and without being obliged to purchase it; completely, and without any denial; promptly, and without delay; conformably to the laws.

Article XII. No subject shall be held to answer for any crimes or offence, until the same is fully and plainly, substantially and formally, described to him; or be compelled to accuse, or furnish evidence against himself [ . . . ] And no subject shall be arrested, imprisoned, despoiled, or deprived of his property, immunities, or privileges, put out of the protection of the law, exiled, or deprived of his life, liberty, or estate, but by the judgment of his peers, or the law of the land [ . . . ]

Article XIV. Every subject has a right to be secure from all unreasonable searches, and seizures, of his person, his houses, his papers, and all his possessions. All warrants, therefore, are contrary to this right, if the cause or foundation of them be not previously supported by oath or affirmation [ . . . ]

Article XV. In all controversies concerning property, and in all suits between two or more persons, except in cases in which it has heretofore been otherways used and practiced, the parties have a right to a trial by jury [ . . . ]

Article XVI. The liberty of the press is essential to the security of freedom in a state: it ought not, therefore, to be restrained in this commonwealth

Article XVII. The people have a right to keep and to bear arms for the common defence. And as, in time of peace, armies are dangerous to liberty, they ought not to be maintained without the consent of the legislature; and the military power shall always be held in an exact subordination to the civil authority, and be governed by it.

Article XVIII. A frequent recurrence to the fundamental principles of the constitution, and a constant adherence to those of piety, justice, moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality, are absolutely necessary to preserve the advantages of liberty, and to maintain a free government. The people ought, consequently, to have a particular attention to all those principles, in the choice of their officers and representatives: and they have a right to require of their lawgivers and magistrates, an exact and constant observance of them, in the formation and execution of the laws necessary for the good administration of the commonwealth.

Article XIX. The people have a right, in an orderly and peaceable manner, to assemble to consult upon the common good; give instructions to their representatives, and to request of the legislative body, by the way of addresses, petitions, or remonstrances, redress of the wrongs done them, and of the grievances they suffer [ . . . ]

Article XXI. The freedom of deliberation, speech and debate, in either house of the legislature, is so essential to the rights of the people, that it cannot be the foundation of any accusation or prosecution, action or complaint, in any other court or place whatsoever [ . . . ]

Article XXVI. No magistrate or court of law, shall demand excessive bail or sureties, impose excessive fines, or inflict cruel or unusual punishments

Article XXVII. In time of peace, no soldier ought to be quartered in any house without the consent of the owner; and in time of war, such quarters ought not to be made but by the civil magistrate, in a manner ordained by the legislature [ . . . ]

Article XXIX. It is essential to the preservation of the rights of every individual, his life, liberty, property, and character, that there be an impartial interpretation of the laws, and

administration of justice. It is the right of every citizen to be tried by judges as free, impartial and independent as the lot of humanity will admit. It is, therefore, not only the best policy, but for the security of the rights of the people, and of every citizen, that the judges of the supreme judicial court should hold their offices as long as they behave themselves well; and that they should have honorable salaries ascertained and established by standing laws.

Article XXX. In the government of this commonwealth, the legislative department shall never exercise the executive and judicial powers, or either of them: the executive shall never exercise the legislative and judicial powers, or either of them: the judicial shall never exercise the legislative and executive powers, or either of them: to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men.

*Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, "Preamble," "Part the First,"*  
[www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm](http://www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm)

## ***Document 2***

*How can you tell that the U.S. Constitution drew from the Massachusetts Constitution (as well as others)? How are the principles in its preamble evident in the Massachusetts Constitution? How are they different? Compare the Bill of Rights to the Declaration of Rights. How are they similar? Different?*

## ***The Constitution of the United States of America [excerpt]***

### **Preamble (1787)**

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

*Constitution of the United States of America, "Preamble,"* [www.achives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution\\_transcript.html](http://www.achives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution_transcript.html)

### **Bill of Rights (1789)**

#### **Amendment I**

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.

#### **Amendment II**

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

**Amendment III**

No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

**Amendment IV**

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

**Amendment V**

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

**Amendment VI**

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

**Amendment VII**

In Suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise re-examined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

**Amendment VIII**

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

**Amendment IX**

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

**Amendment X**

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

*Constitution of the United States of America, "Bill of Rights," [www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/bill\\_of\\_rights\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html)*

**Putting it all together**



1. *Choose ten Articles from the Declaration of Rights. For each, list the right that it says the government must protect. Then, consider what responsibilities citizens have that correspond with each of these. For instance, any citizen that wishes to have his right to a trial by jury has the corresponding duty to serve on a jury when called. Compile students' ideas and produce a Declaration of Responsibilities.*
2. *Both of these documents have been altered since they were first written. Research the ways that they have been changed. How do these changes reflect the changing attitudes and experiences of citizens? How do they reflect a changing understanding of republicanism? How might Adams judge these changes?*

## **THE ISSUE: WHO CAN GET MARRIED? EQUAL PROTECTION FOR WHOM?**

*In November 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision that expanded the right to marry to partners of the same sex. Its decision included an order to government officials to pave the way toward issuing marriage licenses within 180 days.*

*Some citizens, like the judges in the majority, believe the decision was merely the logical extension of the state's guarantee of equal rights to its citizens, as stated in Article I of the Declaration of Rights in the state constitution. But in Article XXX, the principle of separation of powers is strongly and plainly expressed. The court overstepped these boundaries and delved into the business of legislation, others believe.*

*The debate rumbles on. And while the state now allows same-sex partners to marry, people are still at work to change the constitution to limit this right. Moreover, other states have and will explicitly ban gay marriage by passing constitutional amendments.*

*Examine the following documents:*

“Excerpts: The Majority Opinion,” *The Boston Globe*, 19 November 2003  
*[Excerpt from majority opinion of Supreme Judicial Court decision on same-sex marriage, written by Chief Justice Margaret H. Marshall.]*

“Excerpts: The Dissenting View,” *The Boston Globe*, 19 November 2003  
*[Excerpt from dissenting opinion of Supreme Judicial Court decision on same-sex marriage, written by Justice Francis X. Spina.]*

*Note: Boston Globe articles published before 2004 are not freely available on the internet. They are accessible to Boston Globe subscribers from its website, from any Boston Public Library branch or remotely using a Boston Public Library card, and as a part of many electronic databases available through local public and school libraries.*

Jeannette Batz Cooperman, “Missouri to Vote on Gay Marriage Ban” *The Boston Glob*, 2 August 2004 [accessed 12 December 2007]  
[http://boston.com/news/specials/gay\\_marriage/articles/2004/08/02/missouri\\_to\\_vote\\_on\\_gay\\_marriage\\_ban/](http://boston.com/news/specials/gay_marriage/articles/2004/08/02/missouri_to_vote_on_gay_marriage_ban/)

*Use the documents listed above to answer the following questions:*

1. *For what reason does the court say that same-sex partners must be free from government interference and free to marry?*
2. *How does the court address the several concerns of those who don't support the rights of same-sex partners to marry?*
3. *What does the court say and suggest about the evolving nature of government and society?*
4. *The dissenting opinion states that the court is overstepping its boundaries. How?*
5. *Which articles in the state constitution must the justices have drawn from to base their opinions?*
6. *As the issue is playing out in Missouri, how do arguments there compare to those used by Massachusetts justices?*

## **SERVICE-LEARNING CONNECTIONS: MASSACHUSETTS STATE CONSTITUTION**

The following list contains ideas that teachers and students might like to pursue as service- learning extensions for this lesson. Teachers should make certain students have ample time and prompting to reflect on the significance of their service and how John Adams might have considered their work. Students and teachers could:

- Visually depict a *Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities* for Massachusetts citizens, and then post it around their school to educate fellow students about the state constitution and the responsibilities of citizenship.

- Sponsor a public forum on the issue of gay marriage, or other issues involving the rights of citizens in Massachusetts (such as student speech, death penalty, religious liberty, or voting rights).
- Identify an issue of particular interest to individual students that involves the rights of Massachusetts citizens, and write to public officials or lobby on behalf of the issue.
- Teach lessons to younger students about the state constitution, John Adams's role in its creation, and its relation to the U.S. Constitution.

#### **UNIT 4: LESSONS ON VOTING RIGHTS, REPRESENTATION, AND NATURAL INEQUALITIES**

John Adams thought extensively and continuously about how to structure a government that accounted for the natural tendencies and qualities of man. He believed that there are natural distinctions amongst men, and that a functioning republic must manage these distinctions. He opposed “leveling” more than others, for instance. The notion that everybody should have the same say in all government matters was absurd, he held, as not everybody has the capacity or the desire to make informed decisions that will benefit the general welfare. Those who do, he contended, should rule with the consent of the ruled. They form an aristocracy of talent that must be tapped, if not fully trusted.

Today, while voting rights are far more leveled than they were at the founding of the republic, relatively few people exercise this right, and most commentators believe that the public is not nearly as well-informed about candidates and political issues as they should be.

Where did John Adams stand on voting rights? What did he believe about the relationship between the legislative branch and its constituents? What might he have to say about some of these issues set in our contemporary context?

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### ***Document 1***

*Knowing that a Declaration of Independence would soon be written, John Adams's wife, Abigail, felt compelled to express her views on the position of women in the new republic. She raised the issue more than once in her letters to John, who was in Philadelphia at the Continental Congress.*

*What is the tone of her letter? To what extent might John Adams agree that "all men would be tyrants if they could"? Abigail is making quite a radical proposition and employing the rhetoric of the revolution to appeal to her husband's reason. Why might or might not this reasoning work?*

#### **Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776 [excerpt]**

Braintree March 31, 1776

[. . .] I long to hear that you have declared an independency -- and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in immitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness . . .

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

### ***Document 2***

*In his response to Abigail, John Adams dismisses her plea as laughable. What is the tone of his letter? What about this note suggests that, though he mocks her suggestion, he actually is concerned about man's tendency to abuse power? Do you think men are more apt to "abuse" power than women?*

#### **Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776 [excerpt]**

Ap. 14, 1776 [Philadelphia]

[. . .] As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.

But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. -- This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight.

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

### **Document 3**

*The following response to a letter from James Sullivan reveals much more of John Adams's thinking about extending voting rights. Sullivan was a Massachusetts judge who stood poised to help craft a new state government once independence was declared. Although Adams flippantly dismissed his wife's suggestion of extending suffrage, true to his character, he actually considered it in great detail. As this letter was written after his exchange with Abigail, perhaps his consideration actually grew out of Abigail's prompting.*

*What reasons does Adams provide for not extending suffrage to those without property, women, and children? In what ways does he hold that these three categories are analogous? Adams suggests that the only way to maintain a "balance of power" is to make as many people land owners as possible. Explain his logic. What does Adams mean by maintaining a "balance of power" and why is this so important? Does it imply, necessarily, maintaining the status quo? Adams seems to be concerned about extending the right for two practical reasons: the disruptions it might cause and the natural distinctions amongst men. Explain these. To what extent, given the historical context, is his reasoning compelling?*

### **Letter from John Adams to James Sullivan – May 26, 1776, Philadelphia**

Dear Sir

Your Favours of May 9th. and 17th. are now before me; and I consider them as the Commencement of a Correspondence, which will not only give me Pleasure, but may be of Service to the public, as, in my present Station I Stand in need of the best Intelligence, and the Advice of every Gentleman of Abilities and public Principles, in the Colony which has seen fit to place me here.

Our worthy Friend, Mr. Gerry has put into my Hand, a Letter from you, of the Sixth of May, in which you consider the Principles of Representation and Legislation, and give us

Hints of Some Alterations, which you Seem to think necessary, in the Qualification of Voters [ . . . ]

It is certain in Theory, that the only moral Foundation of Government is the Consent of the People. But to what an Extent Shall We carry this Principle? Shall We Say, that every Individual of the Community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every Act of Legislation? No, you will Say. This is impossible. How then does the Right arise in the Majority to govern the Minority, against their Will? Whence arises the Right of the Men to govern Women, without their Consent? Whence the Right of the old to bind the Young, without theirs.

But let us first Suppose, that the whole Community of every Age, Rank, Sex, and Condition, has a Right to vote. This Community, is assembled - a Motion is made and carried by a Majority of one Voice. The Minority will not agree to this. Whence arises the Right of the Majority to govern, and the Obligation of the Minority to obey? from Necessity, you will Say, because there can be no other Rule. But why exclude Women? You will Say, because their Delicacy renders them unfit for Practice and Experience, in the great Business of Life, and the hardy Enterprises of War, as well as the arduous Cares of State. Besides, their attention is So much engaged with the necessary Nurture of their Children, that Nature has made them fittest for domestic Cares. And Children have not Judgment or Will of their own. True. But will not these Reasons apply to others? Is it not equally true, that Men in general in every Society, who are wholly destitute of Property, are also too little acquainted with public Affairs to form a Right Judgment, and too dependent upon other Men to have a Will of their own? If this is a Fact, if you give to every Man, who has no Property, a Vote, will you not make a fine encouraging Provision for Corruption by your fundamental Law? Such is the Frailty of the human Heart, that very few Men, who have no Property, have any Judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by Some Man of Property, who has attached their Minds to his Interest.

Upon my Word, sir, I have long thought an Army, a Piece of Clock Work and to be governed only by Principles and Maxims, as fixed as any in Mechanicks, and by all that I have read in the History of Mankind, and in Authors, who have Speculated upon Society and Government, I am much inclined to think, a Government must manage a Society in the Same manner; and that this is Machinery too . . .

. . . Power always follows Property. This I believe to be as infallible a Maxim, in Politicks, as, that Action and Re-action are equal, is in Mechanicks. Nay I believe We may advance one Step farther and affirm that the Ballance of Power in a Society, accompanies the Ballance of Property in Land. The only possible Way then of preserving the Ballance of Power on the side of equal Liberty and public Virtue, is to make the Acquisition of Land easy to every Member of Society: to make a Division of the Land into Small Quantities, So that the Multitude may be possessed of landed Estates. If the Multitude is possessed of the Ballance of real Estate, the Multitude will have the Ballance of Power, and in that Case the Multitude will take Care of the Liberty, Virtue, and Interest of the Multitude in all Acts of Government.

I believe these Principles have been felt, if not understood in the Massachusetts Bay, from the Beginning: And therefore I Should think that Wisdom and Policy would dictate in these Times, to be very cautious of making Alterations. Our people have never been very rigid in Scrutinizing into the Qualifications of Voters, and I presume they will not now begin to be so. But I would not advise them to make any alteration in the Laws, at present, respecting the Qualifications of Voters.

Your Idea, that those Laws, which affect the Lives and personal Liberty of all, or which inflict corporal Punishment, affect those, who are not qualified to vote, as well as those who are, is just. But, So they do Women, as well as Men, Children as well as Adults. What Reason Should there be, for excluding a Man of Twenty years, Eleven Months and twenty-seven days old, from a Vote when you admit one, who is twenty one? The Reason is, you must fix upon Some Period in Life, when the Understanding and Will of Men in general is fit to be trusted by the Public. Will not the Same Reason justify the State in fixing upon Some certain Quantity of Property, as a Qualification.

The Same Reasoning, which will induce you to admit all Men, who have no Property, to vote, with those who have, for those Laws, which affect the Person will prove that you ought to admit Women and Children: for generally Speaking, Women and Children, have as good Judgment, and as independent Minds as those Men who are wholly destitute of Property: these last being to all Intents and Purposes as much dependent upon others, who will please to feed, cloath, and employ them, as Women are upon their Husbands, or Children on their Parents [ . . . ]

Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise. Women will demand a Vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their Rights not enough attended to, and every Man, who has not a Farthing, will demand an equal Voice with any other in all Acts of State, It tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate all Ranks, to one common Levell.

John Adams to James Sullivan, 26 May 1776, *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 4, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1979), 209-213

#### ***Document 4***

*In his essay, “Thoughts on Government,” written in 1776, Adams aimed to influence how the newly independent states organized their governments. He defined the function and formulation of a legislative branch.*

*Consistent with his letter to Sullivan, Adams suggests that there be limits on voting rights. Why might he not wish to define these limits? Why does he, again, suggest not changing current voting standards? Adams says that a representative body should be the exact portrait of the entire society, but in miniature. Is such a composition possible? What responsibilities follow for those in government and for citizens? Is Adams contradicting his views as stated in his letter to James Sullivan?*

#### ***Thoughts on Government, 1776 [excerpt]***

As good government, is an empire of laws, how shall your laws be made? In a large society, inhabiting an extensive country, it is impossible that the whole should assemble, to make laws: The first necessary step then, is, to depute power from the many, to a few of the most wise and good. But by what rules shall you chuse your Representatives? Agree upon the number and qualifications of persons, who shall have the benefit of choosing, or annex this priviledge to the inhabitants of a certain extent of ground.

The principle difficulty lies, and the greatest care should be employed in constituting this Representative Assembly. It should be in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them. That it may be the interest of this Assembly to do strict justice at all times, it should be an equal representation, or in other words equal interest among the people should have equal interest in it. Great care should be taken to effect this, and to prevent unfair, partial, and corrupt elections. Such regulations, however, may be better made in times of greater tranquility than the present, and they will spring up themselves naturally, when all the powers of government come to be in the hands of the people's friends. At present, it will be safest to proceed in all established modes, to which the people have been familiarised by habit.

John Adams, "Thoughts on Government," in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 4, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1979), 86-93.

### **Document 5**

*In 1787, Adams again wished to influence the way government was structured. This time, he wrote a three-volume book that, in effect, supported the proposed United States Constitution through an extensive examination of the history of governments. Here, Adams wrote about the purpose of and need for a "lower house" of representatives.*

*What assumptions does Adams make of the common man? To what extent are these assumptions consistent with his thought in the prior documents? Why does Adams hold that frequent elections are needed? To what extent do you agree with Adams's characterization of the nature of the common man?*

### **Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, 1787-1788 [excerpt]**

It is often said, too, that farmers, merchants, and mechanics, are too inattentive to public affairs, and too patient under oppression. This is undoubtedly true, and will forever be so; and, what is worse, the most sober, industrious, and peaceable of them, will forever be the least attentive, and the least disposed to exert themselves in hazardous and disagreeable efforts of resistance. The only practicable method, therefore, of giving to farmers, &c. the equal right of citizens, and their proper weight and influence in society, is by elections, frequently repeated, of a house of commons, an assembly which shall be an essential part of the sovereignty [. . .] The moral equality that nature has unalterably established among men, gives these an undoubted right to have every road opened to



them for advancement in life and in power that is open to any others. These are the characters which will be discovered in popular elections.

John Adams, "Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America," in *The works of John Adams : second President of the United States*, Vol. 5, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 457.

### ***Document 6***

*In the same work, Adams took up human nature and the need for an "upper house" or Senate. While he felt that the legislature would benefit from the leadership of elite and educated men, the more prestigious Senate also would naturally attract those most likely to abuse power.*

*What seems to be the primary purpose of a Senate, according to Adams? Again, what does this tell us about how the will of the people is best represented? To what extent do you agree with Adams's characterization of the "rich, well-born." Do you agree with Adams that a Senate can both benefit from the elite and restrain their ambition?*

### ***Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, 1787-1788 [excerpt]***

The rich, the well-born, and the able, acquire an influence among the people that will soon be too much for simple honesty and plain sense, in a house of representatives. The most illustrious of them must, therefore, be separated from the mass, and placed by themselves in a senate; this is, to all honest and useful intents, an ostracism. A member of a senate, of immense wealth, the most respected birth, and transcendent abilities, has no influence in the nation, in comparison of what he would have in a single representative assembly. When a senate exists, the most powerful man in the state may be safely admitted into the house of representatives, because the people have it in their power to remove him into the senate as soon as his influence becomes dangerous. The senate becomes the great object of ambition; and the richest and the most sagacious wish to merit an advancement to it by services to the public in the house. When he has obtained the object of his wishes, you may still hope for the benefits of his exertions, without dreading his passions; for the executive power being in other hands, he has lost much of his influence with the people, and can govern very few votes more than his own among the senators.

John Adams, "Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America," in *The works of John Adams: second President of the United States*, Vol. 4, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 290-291.

### ***Document 7***

*At the dawn of Washington's presidency, revolution had taken over France. In "Discourses on Davila", Adams argued that the French had taken the idea of democracy too far. It was too populist, he claimed, subject to the whims, ambitions, and human frailty of the masses. A government that intended to "level" everyone was doomed. The*

*best form of government would recognize and account for the “natural distinctions” among people.*

*What does Adams mean by his assertion that no men are equal, but all are subject to equal laws of morality and a right to equal laws? How might he square this with his assertions that some people shouldn't vote? Do you believe in the natural distinctions amongst people? In what sense? What is your evidence? To the extent that there are, how should that impact who makes decisions in our society or who votes? That is, should those who are not “qualified” not vote or be decision makers?*

### **John Adams, *Discourses on Davila*, 1790**

Nature, which has established in the universe a chain of being and universal order, descending from Arch Angels to microscopic animalcules, has ordained that no two objects shall be perfectly alike, and no two creatures perfectly equal. Although among men, all are subject by nature to *equal laws* of morality, and in society have a right to *equal laws* for their government, yet no two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue, or ever can be made so by any power less than that which created them; and whenever it becomes disputable between two individuals, or families, which is the superior, a fermentation commences, which disturbs the order of all things, until it is settled, and each one knows his place in the opinion of the public.

John Adams, *Discourses on Davila: a series of papers on political history*. Written in the year 1790, and then published in the *Gazette of the United States*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973, c1805), 20-21.

## **Putting it all together**

*1. In the whirlwind of uncertainty that preceded the Declaration of Independence and the ratification of the Constitution, people became very interested in what sort of republic would replace the old system. We must note that Adams lived at a time when most men, and almost all women, were not formally educated. Students at Harvard College were all male and there was not a compulsory, publicly funded system of education. Adams appealed to the notion that there are natural distinctions among people, and that government shouldn't try to meddle with this nature. What is at work in Adams's thinking is not bigotry, but the need for an informed citizenry, and a government that will carry out the will of the people, for the good of the people.*

*So, what about the role of education, which Adams holds as essential to the health of a republic? How might education allay any of Adams's worries about “leveling”?*

*2. Adams seems on all accounts, to be distrustful of human nature. Where do you see this in the documents and how did it affect his thinking about representation and voting rights? How does it affect yours?*

3. *What might Adams say to a proposal that property be redistributed to give men an equal footing and interest in the common welfare?*
4. *Make a case to Adams for lowering the voting age.*
5. *Argue that by the 1920's (or earlier) Adams would have welcomed women's suffrage.*

## **THE ISSUE: WHO VOTES AND WHO SHOULD VOTE?**

*Enfranchisement has expanded significantly since Adams wrote about the need for stability and the dangers of expanding suffrage. Some Americans are making efforts to extend voting rights as well as ensure that more eligible citizens are registered to vote.*

*Examine the following documents:*

“Why don’t Americans vote?” *Digital History* (accessed 11 August, 2004),  
[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/con\\_voting.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/con_voting.cfm).

“Voter Registration and Turnout by Age, Gender and Race 1998,” *Federal Election Commission* (accessed 11 August 2004) <http://www.fec.gov/pages/98demog/98demog.htm>.

*Use the documents listed above to consider these questions:*

1. *Why don’t Americans vote?*
2. *What might we do about this trend?*
3. *How significant are the race and gender differences in voter turnout?*
4. *To what extent would this trend worry John Adams or validate his beliefs?*

*Examine the following documents:*

Jonathan Finan, “Voter Registration Drive Targets the Homeless in 16 States, D.C.,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 2004 (accessed 12 December 2007)  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A7534-2004Jul22.html>

Ed Fletcher, “14-Year Olds Would Rock Under This Plan.” *The Sacramento Bee*, 9 March 2004 (accessed on 12 December 2007)  
<http://www.sacbee.com/content/politics/ca/story/8460626p-9389735c.html>

“Measure to Deny Voting Rights for Prisoners Is a Step Back for Massachusetts, ACLU Warns,” American Civil Liberties Union., 2 October 2000 (accessed 12 December 2007)  
<http://www.aclu.org/VotingRights/VotingRights.cfm?ID=8139&c=167>

*Use the documents above to consider these questions:*

1. *What are the arguments for and against enfranchising these three groups? (the homeless, 14-17 year olds, and incarcerated felons)*
2. *Consider what Adams held should be the criterion that one weighs when considering who should vote (ex. their ability to vote in an informed way, their investment in the public good) What would he think of enfranchising each of these groups? And why?*
3. *Where do you stand?*

*Examine the following document:*

Josh London, "The Non-Voting Way of Life," *The American Partisan*. 1 February 2000 (accessed 12 December 2007) <http://www.american-partisan.com/cols/london/020100.htm>.

*Use the document above to answer these questions:*

1. *For what reasons does the author suggest that the numbers of voters that take part in elections now is sufficient?*
2. *To what extent do you agree with his point of view?*
3. *With what elements of this author's reasoning might John Adams agree? What might he find disagreeable?*

## **SERVICE-LEARNING CONNECTIONS: VOTING**

The following list contains ideas that teachers and students might like to pursue as service learning extensions for this lesson. Teachers should make certain students have ample time and prompting to reflect on the significance of their service and how John Adams might have considered their work. Students and teachers could:

- Set up a voter registration drive at the school. Several organizations have websites that contain instructions on how to set up a drive. See the *League of Women Voters*, *Vote Smart*, and *Rock The Vote*.
- Research important issues in an upcoming election and create public displays that outline the details of the issues.
- Develop profiles of Senators and Representatives, documenting their stances on issues and their voting records. Distribute pamphlets to the community.
- Conduct a public issues forum with other students or local candidates for public office.
- Assist immigrants with the process of obtaining citizenship and educate them about election issues and the voting process.

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