

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.