

Perspectives on American Government

OVERVIEW

Americans clash on many political issues due to their different normative assumptions about the scope and powers of their government—that is, how they believe things “ought to be.” Some of these disagreements are inherent to representative government, and they form the foundation for people’s political affiliations, social perceptions, and even their individual civic identity. Understanding what people value helps clarify why they disagree. Students, however, are often unaware of which assumptions they hold or the possibility that other people’s views might be valid even if different from their own.

This exercise uses a gallery walk and discussion to help students understand some of their own assumptions about government and introduce them to how others answer the same questions.

PROCEDURES

Part 1

- Write out each category on a separate piece of flipchart paper; include the choices under each category as they appear on “Perspectives on American Government.” Then place each flipchart on a different wall or on a different table in the room.
- Divide the students into seven groups, one for each flipchart. Place one group at each flipchart and distribute to every student the worksheet, “Perspectives on American Government.”
- Explain the gallery walk format: each group will visit a station at which they will have three minutes to review the options. Each student will indicate (by initials, dots, post-its, so on) which position on the flipchart most closely reflects their own view. After three minutes, the groups will rotate one position and repeat the activity until they have stopped at each flipchart in the “gallery.”
- Two points to emphasize before beginning the gallery walk:
 - These are *some* of the common assumptions people hold about American government. The list is not comprehensive nor is it presented as the most important. Simply note that these assumptions appear consistently in American attitudes and debates about their government—since before the Constitution was drafted.
 - Whatever students choose represents only their view for today. They may change their opinion in the future (perhaps by the end of the exercise!).
- Rotate the groups through the gallery according to the instructions. Ask students to mark their choices on their worksheets for their own reference (these will not be collected).
- When students have returned to their original flipchart, conduct a gallery walk: ask the groups to review the flipcharts until they return to their “home” flipchart.

Part 2

- Once the gallery walk is completed, ask students to reflect on their personal selections and select their three most important choices. They can rank them or simply mark them with a star.
- Ask students to gather by their first most important choice or, if they cannot decide which is most important, one of their three most important selections. (Distribution may be uneven, and some stations might have no students at all.) Ask students to discuss with everyone at their station why this is their most important selection.
- After three minutes, repeat again for each of the other two student choices.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What did you learn about the views of your classmates? About your own views?
- Did you notice any patterns or inconsistencies in what people reported?
- What, if anything, surprised you during this activity?