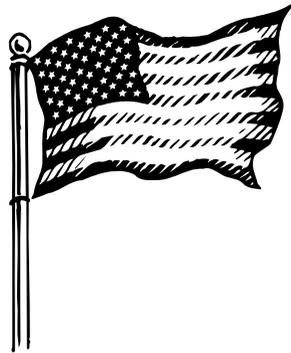


ACCOUNTABILITY



...IS AN AMERICAN VALUE®

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ACCOUNTABILITY

...IS AN AMERICAN VALUE

A DEMOCRACY IS ONLY AS EFFECTIVE AS ITS CITIZENS, WHICH IS WHY CIVIC EDUCATION IS ESSENTIAL TO PRESERVING OUR DEMOCRACY. ONLY BY ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN, AND HOW OUR COUNTRY WORKS, WILL OUR COUNTRY CONTINUE TO THRIVE IN THE FUTURE.

ONE WAY TO APPROACH CIVIC EDUCATION IS BY DISCUSSING “AMERICAN VALUES.” THESE ARE EXEMPLARY BEHAVIORS OR CHARACTER TRAITS THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN VALUED AS IDEAL FOR AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENSHIP. “AMERICAN VALUES” ARE SEPARATE FROM “HABITS.” HABITS ARE ACTIVITIES THAT AMERICANS MIGHT FALL INTO, BUT ARE NOT “VALUES.” BY DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE TWO, VALUES AND HABITS, DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERS WILL BE ABLE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT THEY APPRECIATE MOST ABOUT OUR DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM AND ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION AS RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS.



DEFINITIONS

Why definitions? Words are extremely powerful, and dictionaries are always very precise about what vocabulary they use in their definitions. Look at how the definition of accountability has evolved over time. Look over the definitions together as a group, and list out the words frequently used to define accountability. Make a separate list of how the definitions have changed. Are these changes substantial or subtle? Is government a central issue in the definitions, or not? As a group, come up with your own definitions for accountability, paying close attention to what the group wishes to include or exclude.

1. n. state of being accountable: accountableness; responsibility [a modern word but in good use]. (Worcester Dictionary of the English Language; Boston 1874)
2. n. the state of being accountable or answerable: responsibility for the fulfillment of obligation: liability to account for conduct, meet or suffer the consequences, etc... 'As to hold a trustee to his responsibilities, parents to children, men to God'. Century Dictionary, an Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language; New York 1911)
3. n. the state or quality of being accountable: liability to be called upon to account or answer for something ; responsibility. 'A power... to act independently of all reasons and motives... would disqualify him (man) for accountability and moral government.' (D.J. Gregory). (Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language; New York/ London 1931)
4. (accountable) a. Someone who is accountable is completely responsible for what they do and must be able to give a satisfactory reason for it. 'Recent tax reforms have made the government more accountable for its spending.' 'Politicians should be accountable to the public who elected them.' (Cambridge Dictionary of English , Cambridge University Press 1995)
5. (accountable) a. (of a person, organization, or institution) required or expected to justify actions or decision; responsible. 'Government must be accountable to its citizens.' (New Oxford American Dictionary, New York 2001)



VOICES IN HISTORY

Quotations can help to point out values that are important to American society. The following collection of quotes indicate that accountability has long been a part of our country's dialogue on government. Many other quotes can be found by encouraging group members to explore quotation sites on the Internet. Ask the group to discuss the relationship of accountability and democracy in light of these quotes.

"Government is not reason, it is not eloquence, it is force; like fire, a troublesome servant and a fearful master. Never for a moment should it be left to irresponsible action." - George Washington

"The problem of power is how to achieve its responsible use rather than its irresponsible and indulgent use of how to get men of power to live for the public rather than of the public." - Robert F. Kennedy

"I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with his freedom." -Bob Dylan

"The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, for they determine whether we use power, or power uses us."
-John F. Kennedy



HISTORICAL SOURCES & STUDY QUESTIONS

How does one decide what an American value might be? The soundest approach is by using core historical documents. Materials ingrained into American culture include the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, and the Constitution, as well as famous speeches, Supreme Court cases, and other sources documenting events or ideas from American history.

Before moving on to the historical sources and study questions listed here, consider starting a group discussion by asking how the group might identify an American “value.” Have the group make a list of what it considers to be “American values” and why. See if the values group members come up with are similar to those used in these study guides.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/declaration_transcript.html)

(for Constitution, click on ‘read transcript’, for amendments, click on amendment buttons)

In the body of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson wrote:
“...Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” This new idea of a government existing only with the consent of the governed was one of the central concepts of the Declaration of Independence, and a forming principle of the United States of America.

Jefferson and the founding fathers believed that a government can only exist so long as it is accountable for its actions to the people it governs, and it is the right of the people to overthrow any government that fails in this regard. This was their main argument for withdrawing from the British Empire, and declaring their independence in this famous charter.

1) What does the group believe makes the government accountable to American citizens? Does the group believe the government has always been accountable in the past? Does the group think it continues to be accountable? Why or why not? Does the group believe that the American government currently lives up to the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not?

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HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

2) In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson lists many grievances that the Colonies had against the British Crown. These were the ways in which the British monarchy was unaccountable to its citizens. Go over the list as a group, and talk about how American democracy limits or eliminates the problems facing the colonists. Some examples from the list to help start discussion: military superiority to civil authorities, taxation without representation, executive dissolution of legislative bodies – none of these remain in the American government. Why were these viewed as grievances? Does the group have additional changes or reforms it would propose for government today? Why or why not?



THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/constitution.html

The Constitution of the United States of America is the supreme law of our country, and the oldest existing written Constitution in the world. The Articles of the Constitution explicitly state what the government can and can not do.

1) Have the group read over the first three Articles of the Constitution and as a group discuss how the articles relate to accountability. How do they limit the power of the government? What powers do they provide for? (Note especially Articles 1.1, 1.8, 1.9, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2. For example, you will see that specific powers are given to all of the branches, and terms are imposed on the executive and legislative branches that make them accountable to the citizens who elect them.)

2) The Constitution has also been called a “living document,” because of its flexibility. It is adaptable because many of its concepts are open to interpretation. After looking over the Articles, can the group think of any powers currently exercised by any of the branches of government that are not specifically provided for nor specifically prohibited in the constitution? Consider having them make a list, and think over the implications of an adaptable constitution.

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HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

FEDERALIST PAPER #70 <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed70.htm>

The Federalist Papers were written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay in an effort to encourage the citizens of New York to ratify the newly drafted United States Constitution. These founding fathers were Federalists, or supporters of a strong central government, and therefore strong supporters of the Constitution itself. The papers are some of the most famous works in American history, both in their effectiveness as campaigning material, use of elegant prose, and in how they explain nearly every aspect of the Constitution. (For a longer summary of the Federalist Papers: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_papers)

1) Federalist Paper #70 is a long argument in support of a strong executive branch. It elaborates on ideas such as an “energetic” president and it supports the idea of a single executive. But in order to support such an idea, it must also distinguish the president from the king that Americans had just separated from. The distinction identified by the author is the degree to which the ruler is accountable to those governed: *“In England, the king is a perpetual magistrate; and it is a maxim which has obtained for the sake of the public peace, that he is unaccountable for his administration, and his person sacred. ...”* The paper also notes that a king can appoint an executive council but it is only for show, as the king can ignore it at a whim. He is unaccountable. But, in contrast, *“...in a republic, where every magistrate ought to be personally responsible for his behavior in office the reason which in the British Constitution dictates the propriety of a council, not only ceases to apply, but turns against the institution.”* Simply put, Hamilton is arguing that because the president is directly accountable to the people for his actions, there should be no hesitation in accepting the idea that he is a sole executive. Hamilton clearly had a great deal of confidence in the executive branch, and the powers it is given. Does the group share his confidence? Why or why not?

2) Using the previous discussion about the powers granted by the Constitution, talk about the powers of the presidency (Article 2), and also amendments (for example, amendment 22) that serve to limit the president’s power and hold him accountable. Does the group feel the presidency today is as accountable as it was intended to be? Why or why not?

3) The first and longest article of the Constitution addresses the legislative branch. What does this indicate about its importance to the Framers? What branch does the group believe is now the most important in the country today? Why?



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HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

MARBURY V. MADISON (FEBRUARY 24, 1803)

http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0005_0137_ZO.html

1) Marbury v Madison is one of the most important Supreme Court cases in the history of the institution. (A longer summary of the case can be found at Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marbury_v._Madison).

Chief Justice Marshall delivered the opinion, in which he concluded that: *“Certainly all those who have framed written constitutions contemplate them as forming the fundamental and paramount law of the nation, and consequently, the theory of every such government must be, that an act of the legislature, repugnant to the constitution, is void.”*

This opinion instituted “judicial review,” or the power of the Supreme Court to declare laws unconstitutional, and helped shape our current American political landscape. Talk about this power of the Supreme Court with the group. How is it related to accountability?

2) Ask the group to think again about the Articles of the Constitution. Is there any provision for this power of the Supreme Court, or is it a power inferred from those explicitly listed?

3) Supreme Court justices are appointed by the President, and approved by Congress. They are not directly responsible to citizens. What factors constrain judicial decision making? What does the group think about a non-elected body having the power to override an elected one and in what circumstances? Why? How does this relate to accountability?



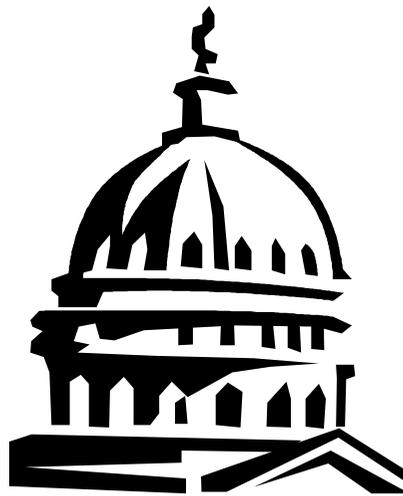
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HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

THE LEGISLATOR AS TRUSTEE—JOHN F. KENNEDY

This account was given by John F. Kennedy in his book *Profiles in Courage*. This famous book may be easily found at your local public library.

1) John F. Kennedy served as a US Senator from Massachusetts before becoming President, and gave his own account on the role of a legislator in government. How does a legislator remain accountable to his constituents? Is it by, as Kennedy puts it, to “*vote as they would vote were they in his place?*” In Kennedy’s mind, it is not. A legislator’s best role is to “*exercise judgment from a position where we [legislators] could determine what were their [the constituents] best interests, as part of the nation’s interests. This may mean that we must on occasion lead, inform, correct, and sometimes even ignore constituent opinion, if we are to exercise fully that judgment for which we were elected.*” This role — that officials are elected because constituents trust in them to make the best decisions that hopefully serve the entire nation based upon their own consciences — is known as being a “trustee.” What does the group think about this role of a legislator? Why? What do they expect of their own legislators? Does the group think a legislator is more responsible to his district or his country? Or both? Why?



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HISTORICAL SOURCES AND STUDY QUESTIONS CONTINUED

WATERGATE—1971-1974

<http://www.watergate.info/>

The Watergate Scandal is one of the most infamous events in American history, and resulted in reform to make the government more accountable. In 1972, the office of the Democratic National Committee was burglarized at the Watergate Hotel and Business Complex in Washington, D.C.. Out of that unfolded an investigation into the actions of the executive branch, ultimately leading all the way to the president himself. (For a concise timeline, see provided link.) The investigation uncovered a complex web of secrecy and abuse of power that suppressed political enemies in order to improve partisan goals. In the end, Richard M. Nixon became the first U.S. President ever to resign from office.

- 1) Does the group believe that the president is expected to keep secrets while in office? Why or why not? What separates acceptable and unacceptable conduct and who should decide? Why?
- 2) Does the group believe that the president must always follow the same laws as the citizens of the country, or are there situations where he should be allowed to go beyond the law? Why? What does this mean for the country? Should any other entity (Congress, the judiciary, citizen groups, etc.) monitor such actions? Why or why not?
- 3) Ask the group if they have any personal memories of the Watergate Scandal. What do they remember about their reactions or those of other people at the time?
- 4) In 2005, the identity of an important informant (Deep Throat) in the Watergate investigation was revealed. What did the group think about this? Was the informant generally portrayed as patriotic or unpatriotic? What does this mean about patriotism in America? Consider having the group explore web sites that have articles on this event. Contrast these modern reactions to those they actually remember from the early 1970s.
- 5) The media, especially *The Washington Post* with “Deep Throat,” was a central player in the Watergate investigations. What role does the group think that the media plays with respect to government accountability? Discuss the First Amendment, especially freedom of press, petition, and speech, and how it helps enforce accountability in the government.

CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES

Accountability continues to be a focal point of our national dialogue. Nearly every day issues related to accountability are reported, debated, and discussed in the media and the government.

As a group, go through a stack of newspapers or magazines, or browse the Internet, and have group members point out articles that reflect concerns they have about accountability. Discuss these in the context of the ideas and concepts already pointed out from the definitions and historical sources. Ask group members how their own views were shaped by their personal experiences with accountability and the government. Ask them to consider if the article or report is promoting a particular point of view. What is being reported and what is not? Why? What additional information would the group like to have?

The following example could help begin discussion.

THE SENATE FILIBUSTER DEBATE

<http://news.ft.com/cms/s/825841ee-caea-11d9-9abe-00000e2511c8.html>



A filibuster is a long-time Senate tradition that allows unlimited debate, which in turn prevents voting on an issue unless an extra-majority, or 60 senators, vote to end it. The issue was brought into the spotlight in 2005 because of Democratic filibustering related to judicial nominees from President Bush. The Democrats argued that the filibuster helps protect one of the central ideals of democracy—minority rights. Without it, a party majority could sweep every vote in the Senate with a simple majority vote, essentially silencing the opposition. The Republicans argued that the filibuster was being abused, and the Democrats were harming the spirit of the Senate by refusing to do what Senators are elected to do—vote on issues.

- 1) Ask the group how this issue relates to government accountability? Why does the group think that this Senate tradition developed? Should one party alone have the authority to change it? Why or why not?
- 2) Were Democrats ignoring their responsibilities by interfering with Senate progress through frequent filibusters? How might they have been fulfilling democratic ideals through the use of the filibuster? Alternatively, would an eradication of the filibuster by a single party make that party less accountable? Why or why not? Have the group members explore many perspectives.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Below are links to websites and resources that deal with accountability.

Factcheck.org

<http://www.factcheck.org>

The Government Accountability Office

<http://www.gao.gov>

GAP – Government Accountability Project

<http://www.whistleblower.org>

Government Accountability – George Mason University

<http://www.mercatus.org/governmentaccountability/>

OMB Watch –

<http://www.ombwatch.org>

You might want to use this guide with the guide “Mendacity...is not an American Value.” The following are some resources that address mendacity.

Open the Government.org

<http://www.openthegovernment.org>

The Mendacity Index (Washington Monthly Opinion):

<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0309.mendacity-experts.html>

Harry Frankfurt’s Book (On Bullsh*t):

<http://www.pupress.princeton.edu/titles/7929.html>

Harper’s Magazine Online Mendacity Page:

<http://www.harpers.org/Mendacity.html>

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SECONDARY SOURCES CONTINUED

In order to fully understand issues surrounding government accountability and mendacity, it is important that the group members understand the system of checks and balances in the United States government. Below are some links to various guides that can help explain how the system works. Also, now would be a good time to review our Internet research guide in our Other Resources page on the website.

Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checks_and_balances

Boston Globe Editorial:

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/05/04/checks_and_balances/

USconstitution.net

http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_cnb.html

Factmonster.com

<http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0777009.html>

Cyber Learning

<http://www.cyberlearning-world.com/lessons/oct6usg.htm>



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