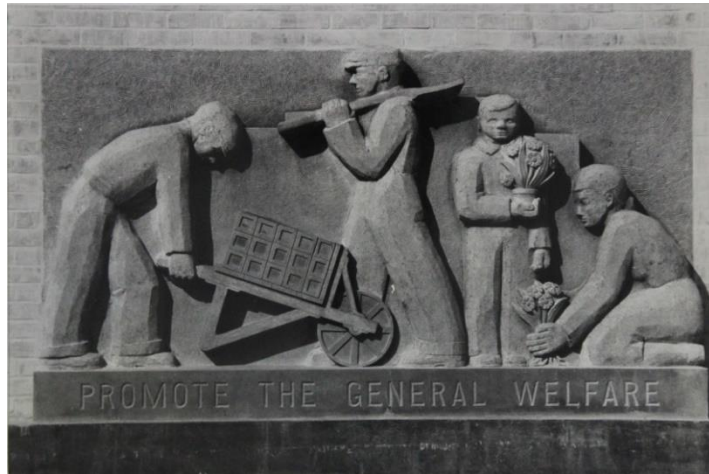


What does “promote the general welfare” mean?



Photograph of bas relief by Arthur Rothstein at Boca Raton Museum of Art

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Grade Level: 6-8

Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Explain what “promote the general welfare” means
- Give examples of governmental actions that promote the general welfare
- Engage in a simulated legislative hearing

What does “promote the general welfare” mean?

The Preamble to the United States Constitution lists as one of the purposes for creating our government: “...to promote the General welfare”. Article I of the U.S. Constitution, which lays out the powers of the national government, reiterates this language in greater specificity: “to lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and “General welfare.” What is the “General welfare”?

In listing the purposes for establishing the government of the United States of America, the Constitution makes clear that a main purpose is to make decisions for the common good—to improve our society for the benefit of all of its members. The general welfare, also sometimes referred to as the “public welfare” or the “public good” or the “common good”, is the concern of the government for the health, peace, and safety of its citizens.

How has “promote the general welfare” been defined historically?

General national welfare pertains to purposes and policies states could not achieve on their own due to lack of coordination among the states. For example, centralizing power over tariffs in the national government eliminated the lack of coordination by the states regarding ports under the Articles of Confederation, allowing revenues to be raised from tariffs on imports.

Historically, promoting the general welfare has meant improving transportation, promoting agriculture and industry, protecting health and the environment, and seeking ways to solve social and economic problems.

The idea that the government should be working for the “general welfare” or benefit of all has been repeatedly stated. In 1914, before he became the 23rd president, Calvin Coolidge explained this idea concretely to the Massachusetts Senate: “We are all members of one body. The welfare of the weakest and the welfare of the most powerful are inseparably bound together. Industry cannot flourish if labor languishes. Transportation cannot prosper if manufactures decline. The general welfare cannot be provided for in any one act, but it is well to remember that the benefit of one is the benefit of all, and the neglect of one is the neglect of all.”

More recently, Harvard historian Jill Lepore described the connection between providing for the general welfare and taxes: “Taxes are what we pay for civilized society, for modernity, and for prosperity. The wealthy pay more because they have benefitted more. Taxes, well laid and well spent, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, and promote the general welfare. Taxes protect property and the environment; taxes make business possible. Taxes pay for roads and schools and bridges and police and teachers. Taxes pay for doctors and nursing homes and medicine. During an emergency, like an earthquake or a hurricane, taxes pay for rescue workers, shelters, and services. For people whose lives are devastated by other kinds of disaster, like the disaster of poverty, taxes pay, even, for food.”

Checking for understanding: Have students give examples of actions that the government might take to promote the common good.

Simulated Congressional Hearing activity: Have students use their understanding of the general welfare by engaging in a simulated Congressional hearing about funding the National Endowment for the Arts.

Divide your class into three groups:

- Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee which is considering funding for the National Endowment for the Arts
- Members of the National Endowment for the Arts, an independent federal agency which funds, promotes, and strengthens the creative capacity of diverse communities nationwide
- Members of a group opposed to some of the art that has been exhibited at venues funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and believes that using tax money for art projects is not something that promotes the general welfare.

Have the students playing the role of staff of the National Endowment for the Arts argue why funding diverse arts programs around the country promotes the general welfare.

Have the group opposed to funding the National Endowments for the Arts argue why funding diverse arts programs and projects does not promote the general welfare.

Have the members of the Senate Appropriations Committee listen to the arguments, publicly deliberate and decide whether the National Endowment for the Arts promotes the general welfare and should be funded, supporting their conclusions with reasoning.