Why do we need government?

Objectives:

- Appreciate what life might be like in a state of nature
- Explain why government is necessary and the purposes government should serve

NJ Student Learning Standards for Social Studies

6.3.8.CivicsPL.1: Evaluate, take, and defend a position on why government is necessary, and the purposes government should serve.

Time required: One class period

Focus questions:

- What might life be like in a state of nature?
- Why do we need government, rules and laws and someone to enforce them?

I. ASK STUDENTS AND DISCUSS: What might life we like in a state of nature?

This is the question that John Locke asked. So, like Locke, have your students imagine that they live on an island far away. Or look at Student Handout One from the We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution textbook for middle school.
Background

In the state of nature, we have absolute rights, since nothing has yet been banned or made illegal, including the right to take whatever we want and to even kill.

One of the reasons for the chaos and conflict in the state of nature is a basic economic concept - scarcity. People have unlimited wants, but there are limited resources and (probably violent) competition is inevitable.

If you are not getting sufficient on-point responses, you might want to have students work in small groups to respond to more specific questions about living in a state of nature (Student Handout Two):

- What might be some advantages and disadvantages of living in a state of nature?
- What rights, if any, might you expect to have in a state of nature?
- What might people who are weaker or less skilled than others try to do? Why?
- Would anyone have the right to govern you? Would you have a right to govern anyone else? Why?
- Who would make the rules?

After class discussion, conclude what life might be like in a state of nature with no rules or laws or government. Conclusions should include a focus on both the lack of safety and the inability of the weak to protect themselves.

- There would be chaos.
- The strong would take advantage of the weak.
- There would be constant fighting.
- Many people would get hurt or even killed.

II. ASK STUDENTS AND DISCUSS: Why do we need rules, laws and government?

After students have made their arguments and class discussion, students should appreciate that we need rules, law and someone to enforce them (government):

- To protect the weak from the strong
- To protect individual rights
- To keep us safe
- To help us keep order
- To settle arguments
- To ensure the burdens and benefits are fairly shared
- And the purpose of a government should be to carry out the functions of safety and order, protecting individual rights, settling arguments and ensuring fairness.
Student Handout One: WHAT MIGHT LIFE BE LIKE IN A STATE OF NATURE?

From *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution*, Level 2 (Center for Civic Education, 2017)
What might be some advantages and disadvantages of living in a state of nature?

What rights, if any, might you expect to have in a state of nature?

What might people who are weaker or less skilled than others try to do? Why?

Would anyone have the right to govern you? Would you have a right to govern anyone else? Why?

Who would make the rules?
Student Handout Three: WHY DO WE NEED RULES, LAWS AND GOVERNMENT?

- To protect the weak from the strong
- To protect individual rights
- To keep us safe
- To help us keep order
- To settle arguments
- To ensure the burdens and benefits are fairly shared