

What is the Common Good? What is Civic Virtue? Why are they important?



Created by: The New Jersey Center for Civic Education, Rutgers University

Objectives: Students will:

- Describe the sources of conflicts and the ways they are often resolved
- Explain why respect for diverse perspectives is important in a democratic society
- Use active listening skills to engage in civil discourse

NJ Student Learning Standards for Social Studies:

6.1.8.HistorySE.3.a: Analyze how the leadership of George Washington during the American Revolution and as president allowed for the establishment of American democracy.

6.3.8.CivicsPR.5: Engage in simulated democratic processes (e.g., legislative hearings, judicial proceedings, elections) to understand how conflicting points of view are addressed in a democratic society

I. What is the “common good”?

Ask your students to tell you what they think the “common good” means. Their responses might be something like: actions or activities that are shared and beneficial for all or most members of a given community. Or, individuals acting for the benefit or interests of the larger society rather than one’s own selfish interests.

Acknowledge that these responses relate to the two directions or definitions of the “common good”:

1. Actions that governments take that are either shared or for the beneficial of the whole community; and

2. Actions that individuals take that are for the benefit of the community rather than simply their own self-interests.

II. Philosophical Background

The idea of the common good is based on philosophical concepts from the ancient Greek and Roman Republics as well as religious principles. Greek philosopher Aristotle explained that for individuals to lead a good life, they need to exercise virtue. The goal of a well-ordered state or government is to help individuals lead a good life. The common good refers to that which is attainable only by the community, yet individually shared by its members.

Thirteenth century Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas brought a religious approach to the concept of the common good. With “salvation” as the guiding principle, he wrote that the common good is a political and social organization that allows humans to seek God; that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members to achieve their own (spiritual?) fulfillment. This idea still exists in American democracy, although because the Constitution prohibits the establishment of religious beliefs, it takes a more secular form in the “pursuit of happiness” or establishing the conditions that allow all groups and individuals to seek what they consider to be a good or fulfilling life, without interfering with the rights of others.

A utilitarian philosophy of the common good as expounded by British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1876) focused more on the social justice aspect of the common good: everybody’s happiness counts equally. The utilitarian principle weighs the net balance of goodness and harm produced by a certain action on the larger society, including all groups of individuals. Utilitarians believed that they could calculate “the greatest good for the greatest number of people”.

III. Where do we find reference to “the common good” in our founding document—the U.S. Constitution?

“The common good” is the same as the “general welfare”. It is mentioned in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution as one of the goals or purposes for setting up the government of the United States: “in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty...”

It is also mentioned in Article I of the U.S. Constitution, which lays out the powers of the national government: “to lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and “General welfare.”

The Constitution makes clear that the purpose of government is to make decisions for the common good—to keep peace, provide economic stability and public safety – while also

ensuring fairness and protecting individual rights. The tension between guarding individual rights and interests and maintaining a strong sense of shared purpose and common destiny is inherent in our Constitution, has been debated over the past 230 years and continues to be debated today.

IV. How do we decide how the government should act for the common good?

- A. In a representative democracy, like the United States, basically, we vote. We elect representatives who are supposed to enact and carry out laws that improve society for the benefit of all.
- B. Although the United States economic system of capitalism protects an individual's use of private property, sometimes an individual's (or corporation's) use of his or her private property may be contrary to the environmental needs (air, water, transportation, safety) that affect all members of a community and requires a decision for the "common good". That's why we have regulations to help us try to keep our air or water clean.
- C. From the perspective of the government, the common good or general welfare does not mean that a law or policy is good for every person—that would be almost impossible—but rather that it is good for society—like building a road, or requiring taxes to pay for infrastructure improvements.

V. How do individuals act for the common good and why is it important?

- A. What is civic virtue?

Civic virtue describes the character of a good participant in a system of government —the personal qualities associated with the effective functioning of the civil and political order or the preservation of its values and principles. These personal qualities include justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation or self-discipline.

Background: The Founders designed the American republic with those qualities in mind and believed they were essential to upholding it. These civic virtues undergirded the Founders' conception of the constitutional structure. The Founders recognized the fragility of a system that depended on such values, and the need for all citizens, not just elected representatives to exercise civic virtue.

- B. What are some examples of civic virtue?

- 1. Cincinnatus, a skilled military leader and hard-working farmer, was asked by the government of Rome to help them as the leader during a crisis. He left his farm to

lead his country into battle, which was won. Cincinnatus could have remained as leader but returned to his farm, demonstrating civic virtue.

2. George Washington has been known to possess civic virtue. He, often times he showed up to help with the army, he ran the Continental Army, even though it wasn't something he had to do. He was asked to do it and he decided to do it for the good of the people. Later on they called him up to be the president. After serving two terms, he left the position of president, even though he was popular enough to have continued in that position. This was an important point in the growth of democracy in the United States.
 3. In many countries, leaders have not had the justice, wisdom and temperance to walk away from continuing to serve as leader of their country.
 4. Why does civic virtue matter? Public figures must model the values of civic virtue for the public. Otherwise, the public sees that it is okay for them to let loose bad characteristics, such as greed, fear, indulgence and thoughtlessness or foolishness. Without civic virtue and a concern for the common good, a society cannot function in a fair, prudent and wise manner.
- C. From the perspective of the individual, the common good asks us to recognize that each individual has a responsibility towards the betterment of the larger society. The common good requires placing the needs of the community above those of the individual: the need for each citizen to balance his or her self-interest with the common good. Democracy depends on ALL people—not just elected leaders—recognizing and supporting the common good.
- D. What are examples of individuals and groups supporting the common good?

Read and discuss children's literature about the common good:

1. *Letting Swift River Run* (Janet Yolen, 1992)--is a story about a place, about change, and most importantly about community decision making for "the common good". Residents of a town make a decision for the common good to let Swift River be dammed and turned into a reservoir to supply drinking water for the larger community.
2. *A River Ran Wild* (Lynne Cherry, 1992)--a true story about the pollution and ultimate cleaning of the Nashua River in MA when citizens took action.

3. *The Lorax* (Dr. Seuss, 1971)—The Bar-ba-loot bears the Swomee-Swans, the Humming-Fish and the Lorax remind us to appreciate that we are ALL responsible for the environment because we all breath the air and drink the water and need to take action to protect it. (See Mock EPA Hearing at)

E. What are examples of people who have contributed to the common good in the past?

Men and women like Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King, Jr., who took great risks to act on behalf of others, exemplify individuals who have contributed to the common good. Materials from the [Amistad Commission](#), the [Holocaust Commission](#) offer materials about individuals who have worked for the common good. The New Jersey Center for Civic Education has online lessons about outstanding New Jerseyans at <https://civiced.rutgers.edu/nj-lessons>.

VI. How can we balance their individual rights and the common good?

- Use the lesson, “[How can you decide among competing responsibilities](#)” from *Foundations of Democracy* by the Center for Civic Education.
- Conclude: Doing what is in the common good is not always so easy and often involves difficult decisions, but it is essential for government and for individuals to work for the common good in order for individuals and society to flourish.

VII. Assessment

- Have students identify a person (famous or from their own lives) who they believe demonstrates civic virtue and explain why is an oral and/or online presentation.
- Have students create a children’s book of their own about the concept of the common good.
- Have students debate or write an essay:
 - Is getting vaccinations a matter of individual rights or necessary for the common good?
 - Is curbing fossil fuels is a matter of individual property rights or necessary for the common good?