



RADNOR TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Course Overview



Integrated Civics & Economics  
Course # 05990011

**General Information**

Credits: 2	Length: Full Year
Weighted: yes	Format: Meets Daily
Prerequisite: Gifted Status/Teacher Recommendation	Grade: 9th

**Course Description**

The United States of America can be viewed as a two hundred and fifty year long (and counting) experiment in governance. If her citizens know it or not, they are participating in a continuous process of revisiting questions about the social contract: What do we as individuals give up for what benefits? How do we distribute resources? What do we do about the less fortunate, the less moral, the less similar in our national mix? And an especially intriguing question is how have American social institutions, generation by generation, responded to new and unforeseen influences in an attempt to perfect society, while also allowing for individual liberty and human frailty? Therefore, a fundamental perspective of this course will be to evaluate how there was, is, and always will be a tension between human psychology and the systems we collectively create to circumscribe our behaviors and promote our aspirations—an acknowledgement that even though we are at but one point on the arc of history, which forever bends away from our field of vision, there is hope that we will collectively manage the changes that are certain to come.

In the study of civics, the key humanist concept is that of the individual, as 'citizenship' by definition assumes the idea of subordination, ideally, of course, for some sense of gain. As a result, all of the texts below have something to do with the compensations, the something from something, which are the natural consequence of two or more people getting together to form a society. The literature in this course is arranged in three arcs, which each will attempt to trace the development of a concept across texts and phases of history.

**Course Objectives:**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

- What is moral and who gets to define morality?
- Why is there inherent tension between the individual and society?
- What is a social contract?
- What is the idea of government?
- Does mass media assist, impede, or transform the political process?

## Common Assessments:

### Unit One: The Myth of the Individual

The class begins with a discussion of dissent through the analysis of a current issue in American culture, such as the NSA scandal or the protests in Ferguson, MO. These occurrences ask us to consider the question Thoreau poses in famous essay, *On Civil Disobedience*: At what point is a citizen obligated to disobey legal and social prescriptions in order to achieve justice? The Enlightenment thinking underpinning this investigation, set in motion by Hobbes and Locke, is that government is a mere idea that is subject to revision and reconsideration—that as Socrates explains in Plato's *Apology*, we have an obligation as citizens to reflect on the system in which we live and agitate when we find it wanting.

However, what is right is not so easy to determine, as at some point what we want as individuals is not what is morally justifiable. The second part of Plato's work, *The Crito*, presents the other side of necessary tension between the individual and society—that at some point the individual has to accept the construct, even if the consequences are absurd. The paradox Plato presents in his two works—the human mind is rational; the rational mind fails—is also explored in two other great Enlightenment era works: Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which considers the limitations of rational thought to account for justice, and Voltaire's *Candide*, which lampoons the Enlightenment view that we can employ scientific procedures to understand the apparent chaos and cruelty of the universe. And so it goes.

### Unit Two: The Revolutionary Ethos

The second unit picks up where the first leaves off, contemplating America as a continuing experiment in Enlightenment thinking—specifically by contemplating how the English constitutional tradition fed into the ethos that inspired the American Revolution. The effort to codify American agency can be seen in the triad of 'canonical' documents—the declaration of independence, the articles of confederation, and the constitution—which helped to establish in the culture the individualistic spirit that has percolated through American culture ever since, manifesting time and gain in the interweaving rugged individual/go west/pastoral illusion motifs. Returning to the constitution and amendments, we will look at how the power of the executive has evolved as a counterpoint to the legislative bodies, as well as how the institution of the Supreme Court evolved through the common law tradition. An emphasis will be placed on how laws and courts are human constructs and therefore subject to the whims of human psychology, and this will be explored through the concept of bias, the tendency all of us have to confirm the world view we have internalized and discount that which pushes back against our normed values. The students will dually assess this phenomenon, first through a reflection on self and then a reflection on the Supreme Court justices.

### Unit Three: The Otherness Within

The third quarter will begin by reviewing the advent of communism in Russia and the rise of totalitarian systems across Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, which inspired Orwell's dystopian classic, *1984*. It might seem strange to our libertarian sensibilities that our political system could become so abjectly hostile to the individual, where even the attempt to assert a mundane human need is transgressive—but then again perhaps not so impossible when we look more closely at our domestic reality and at how our own bureaucracies have the tendency to dehumanize. In the epilogue to *1984*, historian Eric Fromm warns of the insidiousness of totalitarian elements—intrusive domestic surveillance programs, total war, demagogue leadership—in western democracies. Students will examine and analyze striking empirical data to determine the degree to which totalitarianism infiltrates the American system of government. As American we are aware, at least on a subconscious level, the illusion of our relative freedoms. Why else would perhaps the most favorite genre in American literature

is the detective story, in which the antihero must pursue justice in the shadowlands outside of the official institutions. Unfortunately all too often this figure, like Phillip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, merely uncovers the unsettling truth that there is no mechanism for society to remedy the traumas we store in our individual psychologies, and we have to endure alone. However, individual agency is not entirely a myth either. The students will end the quarter by investigating how to make the impersonal systems of our local government meet the needs of its citizenry by creating special interest groups, which in essence are subversive organizations, in that they attempt to influence public institutions from outside the democratic process. But how else to do it? There is always a finite amount of resources and political will. How do we in practicality have a say about how it is used?

#### **Unit Four: What matters? Who matters?**

The students will read *Sirens of Titan* to appreciate how the individual is always to some extent on the outside looking in, and so is left to his own devices to manufacture a sense of meaning in an absurd universe, and *Freakonomics* to consider why we act the way we do in a world where there is never enough to go around. On their way to this point, the students will complete a series of projects that help them understand the more diffuse aspects of civic participation—like the regional fusions of food cultures caused by immigration, or the way our society incentivizes individuals to make economic choices, or how we can push on our public institutions from the outside through private special interest groups. The course will end with a study of economics in which we revisit the aspects of moral philosophy with which we began the year focusing on the key question that underpins any economic system: how do we determine who gets what?—that is gets access to scarce resources. Culture is always in flux and as a result there is always opportunity to influence. Throughout the course we encourage students to find ways to responsibly influence their world through participation in civil society.

### **Major Units of Study:**

**Unit One:** The Myth of the Individual

**Unit Two:** The Revolutionary Ethos

**Unit Three:** The Otherness Within

**Unit Four:** What Matters? Who Matters?

### **Materials & Texts**

#### **Textbooks**

- McClenaghan, William A., *Magruder's American Government*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013.
- *Economics: Concepts and Choices*. Holt McDougal, 2011.

#### **Materials:**

- *Justice*, Michael Sandel
- *Crime & Punishment*, Dostoevsky
- *Crito*, Plato
- *Candide*, Voltaire

- *The Big Sleep*, Raymond Chandler
- *Burning Chrome*, William Gibson
- *Sirens of Titan*, Kurt Vonnegut
- *The Republic*, Plato
- *1984*, George Orwell
- *The Nine*, Jeffrey Toobin
- *Freakanomics*, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner

### **Summer Assignment**

#### **SUMMER READING:**

- Picault, Jodi. *House Rules*
- *Issues in Contemporary Politics Portfolio*: Students will take some time over the summer to acquaint themselves with current issues in America government. This summer current event assignment entails reading selected articles from newspapers and magazines, annotating the articles, and compiling them in a portfolio of (either digitally or in print).