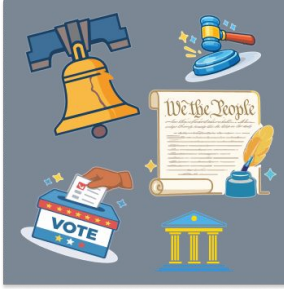
CIVICS school

Student Workbook

Course 1

Grades 6-8

The Big Questions: *What is* Self-Government?



The Big Question:
What is Self-Government?

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The Big Question:
What is Self-Government?

Jump In

1. Experiments Are Everywhere

You've probably seen or conducted a science experiment. You tested an idea like, "If I add heat to this liquid, it will turn green." Experiments are not only for science labs. People test ideas when they want to solve a problem or make something better.

Case Study

The Lunch Line Experiment

Lunch attendants and the principal noticed that students were spending too much time waiting in line for lunch. Many students didn't have enough time to eat before lunch ended and were missing their recess.

The principal decided to test a new idea. Instead of one lunch line, students could choose between two serving lines. The school tried the new system for one month to see if it would work better.

At the end of the month, teachers asked students for feedback. Most students said they had more time to eat, but some thought one line still moved much faster than the other.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

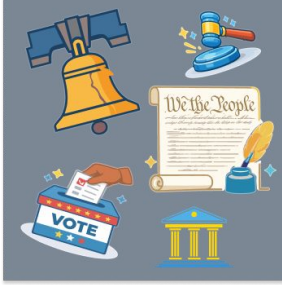
Read the case study on the left and answer the following questions in the response box below:

1. What idea was being tested?
Identify the main concept of the experiment.

2. Why did the school try something new?
Explain the problem that needed solving.

3. What did they learn?
Summarize the feedback and results.

4. What should they do next?
Propose the next logical step based on findings.



The Big Question:
What is Self-Government?

Jump In
2. Make a Prediction

A friend says: **“America is an experiment in liberty.”** Here is how other students across the country interpreted this sentence:

“They were the first people to actually introduce democracy as a full on country”

– Madison, WI

“It means trying something new and ending the power of the king.”

– Naples, FL

“It means testing a new freedom. Because liberty means freedom and an experiment is a test for something when you don't know the outcome”

– Phoenix, AZ

“An experiment of freedom for people to vote for their government.”

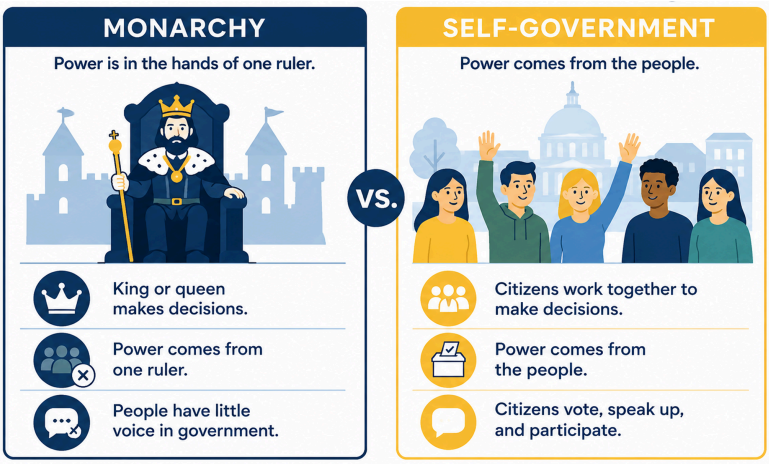
– Gallup, NM

Now it's your turn. What do you think **"America is an experiment in liberty"** means? Use the response box below to write 1 or 2 sentences.

Design Your Own Experiment in Liberty

Can Self-Government Really Work?

When the United States was founded, no one knew if self-government would succeed. It was an **experiment in liberty**—a new idea that gave power to the people instead of a king.



Your Challenge

Now it's your turn. Your school has decided to begin its own **experiment in self-government.**

Until now, teachers and administrators made all the rules and decisions. Beginning next year, students will help govern the school.

The principal says:

> **"Students will help shape school rules and decisions, but the system must remain fair, organized, safe, and accountable."**

Your job is to design a system that gives students freedom while making sure the school continues to work well.

Your Design Challenge

Your student government **must**:

- ✓ Give students a voice
- ✓ Keep the school fair and safe
- ✓ Prevent any one person or group from becoming **too powerful**
- ✓ Allow rules to change when needed

Use the 3 steps on the next page to design a self-government system for your school.

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Build Your Government

Choose Leaders → Give Students a Voice → Limit Power + Build Trust

Reflect: **Will Your Experiment Succeed?**

Step 1 – CHOOSE LEADERS

Every government must decide **who has authority** and **how that authority is earned.**

Design Your System

- **Who should have leadership roles?**
- **How should leaders be chosen?**
- **How long should leaders stay in charge?**

Consider Challenges

What If...One student stayed president forever? OR A small group of popular students made every decision. **How would your system prevent this?**

Step 2 – GIVE STUDENTS A VOICE

Self-government only works when people believe their voices matter and there are clear structures for collaborative participation.

Design Your System

- **How can students share ideas?**
- **How can students vote or participate?**
- **How can students suggest new rules or changes?**
- **What should happen when students disagree?**

Consider Challenges

What If...Some students feel ignored because only a few people make decisions. **How would your system make sure everyone's voice can be heard?**

Step 3 – LIMIT POWER & BUILD TRUST

Good governments don't just create power—they also limit it. This means creating systems for accountability for the leaders.

Design Your System

- **How will leaders be held accountable?**
- **What happens if leaders abuse their power?**
- **Who makes sure leaders follow the rules?**

Consider Challenges

What If...A leader refuses to listen to students or breaks the rules. **What happens next?**

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TEST YOUR GOVERNMENT

Even good systems face problems. Choose **ONE** situation.

- ☐ Very few students vote.
- ☐ A leader refuses to listen.
- ☐ Students strongly disagree about a new rule.
- ☐ One club gets special treatment.

Explain how your government would solve the problem. **Respond in 2–3 complete sentences.** Use examples from your government design to explain your thinking.

FINAL REFLECTION

America's founders called self-government an **experiment in liberty** because no one knew whether it would succeed.

Do you think your government would succeed? Why or why not?

What is more difficult—creating freedom or protecting fairness over time?

Respond in 2–3 complete sentences. Use examples from your government design to explain your thinking.

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SELF-ASSESSMENT

As you complete this learning task, think about how you demonstrated the qualities of a responsible citizen.

- ☐ I considered different perspectives.
- ☐ I designed fair solutions.
- ☐ I explained my thinking with evidence.
- ☐ I thought about how citizens help governments succeed.
- ☐ I reflected on how self-government depends on active participation.

SCORING RUBRIC

CRITERIA	3 CIVIC LEADER	2 ACTIVE CITIZEN	1 EMERGING CITIZEN
Understanding of Self-Government	Clearly explains how power, participation, fairness, and accountability help a self-government system succeed. Shows strong understanding of the lesson concepts.	Shows general understanding of self-government, but some explanations may be unclear or incomplete.	Shows limited understanding of self-government or key lesson ideas.
Quality of Ideas & Solutions	Creates thoughtful and realistic ideas for leadership, rules, participation, and accountability. Strongly connects ideas to fairness and protecting citizens' rights.	Creates reasonable ideas, but some explanations or connections to fairness and accountability may need more detail.	Ideas are unclear, incomplete, unrealistic, or missing important parts of the task.
Reflection & Reasoning	Reflection clearly explains ideas using thoughtful reasoning and strong examples from the activity or lesson.	Reflection answers the question but may need more explanation, examples, or deeper thinking.	Reflection is incomplete, unclear, or lacks reasoning and supporting details.

Score Guide

8–9 Points → Civic Leader: strong understanding, thoughtful reasoning, and responsible civic thinking

5–7 Points → Active Citizen: good understanding and participation, with opportunities to deepen your explanations and analysis

3–4 Points → Emerging Citizen: beginning to develop your civic thinking and should continue building your understanding and reasoning skills

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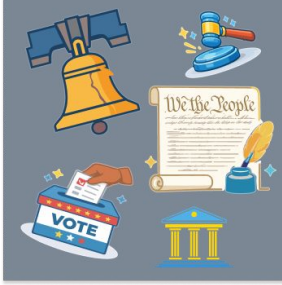

The Big Question:
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Jump In

Speaking Up: Turning Ideas into Change

Think of a time when **people tried to change a rule or decision** that affected them. This could be at school, in your community, on social media, or on a sports team. **In 2-3 sentences, describe what happened in the space below. *What helped people make their voices heard?***

Here is what other students have said from around the country. As you read these examples, think about how people influence decisions and why participation matters in a democracy.

"We got new water fountains right outside our classroom so we had a class meeting to change our rules. A lot of kids like getting water breaks and now we can just go whenever we need to."

"At my school a bunch of kids thought the dress code wasn't fair because it seemed like some rules were for some people and not others. Some kids brought it up in student council and told the principal how they felt. I think it worked because they were nice about it and didn't just complain, they actually talked it out."

"People where I live wanted a new basketball court because the old one was falling apart and kind of dangerous. Kids and parents got people to sign a petition and went to talk at a city meeting about why it mattered. I think it worked because they kept trying and showed that a lot of people actually cared."

"On my soccer team some kids felt like the same players always got to play more even though everybody tried hard at practice. A couple people talked to the coach and then we all talked about it as a team so it could be more fair."

Share Your Thinking your turn! Share your answer below.

How People Create Change

Participation Powers Democracy

Directions:

A government doesn't succeed just because people have rights—it succeeds when people choose to use them. These case studies show how ordinary people take action to solve problems, speak up, and create change in their communities.

On the next page, choose **one** case study to read closely.

As you read, think about how people are participating in their community or government. Answer the reflection questions in the handout using complete sentences and specific examples from the case.

Be ready to discuss: What does this show about how change actually happens?

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Case Study #1

Students Speak Up for Mental Health

Based on real student advocacy across U.S. school districts

At a middle school, many students notice their classmates are stressed and overwhelmed. Some students begin talking about how hard it is to focus, sleep, and manage schoolwork, but there are very few counselors available. A small group of students decides this isn't fair.

They start by talking with classmates and collecting stories (with permission). Then they write a letter to the principal and school board explaining the problem and asking for more mental health support. Some students speak at a school board meeting, even though they are nervous. Others create posters and a short video explaining why mental health matters for learning.

The school does not change things right away, but the issue stays on the agenda. Eventually, the district adds more counseling hours and creates a student wellness committee.

Think about it and reflect:

- What risks did the students take?
- How did they participate in self-government without voting?
- What made their actions effective?

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Case Study #2

A Community Pushes for Safer Streets

Inspired by real "safe streets" campaigns led by parents and neighbors

In one neighborhood, cars often speed past a park where children play. Several residents are worried someone will get hurt. At first, people complain to each other, but nothing changes.

A few neighbors decide to act. They track how fast cars are going and take photos of unsafe crossings. They start a petition and bring it to a city council meeting. Some people write emails. Others speak publicly, even though they have never done that before.

It takes time, but the city eventually installs speed bumps and clearer crosswalks near the park.

Think about it and reflect:

- How did ordinary people influence government decisions?
- What responsibilities came with their freedom to speak up?
- Why did this change take time?

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Case Study #3

Young People Organize for Climate Action

Inspired by global youth climate movements

Students around the world are worried about climate change. Many are too young to vote, but they feel the issue affects their future. Some students organize walkouts, write to elected leaders, and share information online. Others create clubs to educate their schools and communities.

Not everyone agrees with their methods. Some adults say students should stay out of politics. Still, the students continue peacefully, believing their voices matter.

Their actions help bring climate issues into public conversations and influence laws in some places.

Think about it and reflect:

- What does this show about who can participate in civic life?
- How does this connect to the idea that democracy is an “experiment”?
- What challenges do young people face when trying to create change?

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Big Idea Check

Rate yourself on each statement:

Statement	Not Yet	Almost	Yes
I understand that citizens can create change in many ways besides voting.	☐	☐	☐
I understand that democracy depends on participation.	☐	☐	☐
I understand that creating change often takes time, effort, and persistence.	☐	☐	☐
I can explain how ordinary people can influence decisions in a democracy.	☐	☐	☐

Exit Reflection

In 1–2 sentences: What is one thing this case study taught you about how change happens in a democracy?

_____

_____

Confidence Score: *Circle one.*

A. I could teach this to someone else.
B. I understand it pretty well.
C. I still have a few questions.
D. I need more support.

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