UNDERSTANDING VALUES AND TENSIONS

LESSON PLAN

CLOSE UP®
WASHINGTON DC

LESSON PLAN: UNDERSTANDING VALUES AND TENSIONS

Goal: Students will understand that competing values and goals animate American public policy deliberations and will begin to understand why it is so difficult for the public to reach agreement on political issues. Finally, students will identify and begin to evaluate values that are frequently in tension in U.S. political debates.

Teacher Note: It is important to know that the meanings of the values listed here are contested. For example, there are people who debate what freedom/liberty means. Some people think this term refers to freedom from government coercion; others believe it relates to freedom from coercion by private institutions. The common good is also highly contested, as people argue over the role of environmental versus economic concerns and over who should be included in the vision of "common" good. Finally, it is important to know that although six values are listed here, there are a broad range of values that could also be included. For example, democracy, unity, and individualism are values that are often relevant in U.S. political debates. The six listed here are intended to be useful starting points, and also to show the ways that values can come into conflict with each other. As your students become more comfortable with this set of values, you may look to expand the list of values that you bring into classroom discussions.

Time: 50 minutes

Materials: Attachments 1A and 1B (one copy per group); Values in Tension: Private Interests vs. The Common Good (for one-third of the class); Values in Tension: Equality vs. Equity (for one-third of the class); Values in Tension: Liberty vs. Security (for one-third of the class). (Note: If you're doing the homework/extension, all students need one copy of each tension sheet.)

Procedures:

Warm Up (10 minutes)

1. As students enter the room, direct their attention to a posted question:

   Why is it so hard for people to agree about political issues?

2. Ask students to write a short answer and then to share that answer with a partner. If students struggle, remind them of a few political issues that have recently been in the news to help them get started.
3. Take answers from a few pairs of students. Key in on answers that get at ideas related to:
   - Values or beliefs
   - Ideologies
   - Priorities
4. Use student answers to help explain that most people do not start from scratch when deciding how they feel/think about a political issue.
5. Define "value." In social and political terms, a value is an idea or ideal that a person believes is important. For example, if a person thinks that it is very important to help the poor, that person may value charity. Values can come from many different sources. In the United States, many political values come from the founding documents. For example, equality, liberty, and order are all mentioned in the Preamble to the Constitution. Values may also come from family, religion, literature, or other sources.
6. Most people have some values and priorities that help them make sense of new issues as they emerge.

7. If an example is helpful, explain:
    - Prior to the 2016 presidential election, most people did not have an opinion about the policy of banning or restricting people from predominantly Muslim countries from traveling to the United States because the idea had not received public debate in Congress or in the media.
    - Once it was proposed, people had to decide whether or not they supported the idea. To do this, most people drew on their understanding of two ideas that are sometimes in tension: equality and security.
    - Those who prioritize equality were concerned that it was unfair to treat all people from one country or religion as a potential terrorist; therefore, they tended to oppose the travel restrictions.
    - Those who prioritize security were concerned about additional terrorist attacks and extremist activity; therefore, they tended to support the travel restrictions.
8. Remind students that security and equality are only two values, and that other values, such as diversity and liberty (i.e., freedom of religion/conscience) were likely involved in people's decision-making about the travel ban. Explain that students will now explore a set of key values that shape many political debates. These are not the only values that exist, but it is useful to focus on these in order to better understand how these values might conflict.

Introduce Key Values (20 minutes)

1. Place students in groups of 3-5 and give each group a set of value cards (see attached; cut into individual cards). Ask the groups to discuss each card separately. As they look at each card, they should answer two questions:
    - How would we explain this value in our own words?
    - Why is this value important?
2. It may help to do one value together as a class.
3. Take a few responses about each value; if it is clear that students understand each value (i.e., that they have an easy time putting the value in their own words), focus on the question of why each value is important.
4. Distribute a set of match cards to each group. Tell them that each of the actions/decisions described in the card relates most closely to one of the six values the students are learning about.
5. Tell students that it is their job to match each value to one (and only one) of the scenarios. Circulate to guide students as they get off track. (Note: The scenario cards are in the same order as the value cards. Liberty, which is in the second row of the left column, corresponds to the seatbelt scenario that is also in the second row of the left column.)
6. Discuss one or two scenarios as a whole class to make sure that students have a thorough understanding of the six values.

Connecting Tensions to Issues (15 minutes)

1. Distribute the Values in Tension handouts and assign each group one of the tensions to examine.
2. Ask students to read the explanation of how these values are in tension.
3. When all students in a group have finished reading, they should work together to list examples of issues where these values are in tension; the examples can be historical or contemporary. They should record their responses in the space provided.
4. After listing several issues, students should discuss which value they hold to be more important; they do not need to reach an agreement, but they should trade ideas and arguments to support their positions.
5. If there is time, ask for each group to share out an important idea they discussed.

Homework/Extension (5 minutes)

1. Ensure that all students have copies of all three of the Values in Tension handouts.
2. Explain that they will read each tension description and do what they did as a group in class: list historical and current examples of the tension and write a 4-5 sentence explanation of why they prioritize one of the values over the other.

ATTACHMENT 1A: VALUE CARDS

EQUALITY Equality means that all people should be treated the same; it means that what the government does to or for one person, it must do to or for everybody.	**EQUITY** Equity mean that various factors, such as age, race, gender, or income, should be considered when policy decisions are made. It means that the government can provide assistance to one person or group that most needs it without providing the same assistance to other people.
LIBERTY Liberty means the freedom to act without constraint or interference. In political debates, it means the ability to act without government interference. In other words, as long as people are not directly hurting others, they should be able to do what they want.	**SECURITY** Security means that government needs to provide order and stability. In political debates, security means that government needs the authority to encourage people to behave in certain ways and to stop people from behaving in other, harmful ways.
PRIVATE INTERESTS Private good means that the government's responsibility is to protect each person's private property and other interests. This means that the government should protect the interests of businesses and individuals.	**COMMON GOOD** Common good means that the government should act in the interests of the entire citizenry (this can be a town, county, state, or the national government). This means that, sometimes, governments will act in ways that harm one or a few people but are good for many.

ATTACHMENT 1B: VALUE CARD SCENARIOS

A. The state legislature creates sentencing guidelines to ensure that people convicted of similar crimes get similar sentences.	B. The county creates a special fund to provide health care for elementary students who qualify for free school lunches.
C. A state decides to abolish its law that all people must wear seatbelts while in a moving vehicle.	D. A series of protests in the community causes the city council to vote to create a temporary curfew; groups of six or more people gathered in public spaces after 10 PM will be arrested.
E. The owner of a petting zoo is upset because the city introduced new health codes that harm her business, even though there is no evidence that her zoo poses a public health concern. She sues the city and wins.	F. The city forces three homeowners to sell their homes and relocate in order to build a new hospital.

VALUES IN TENSION: EQUALITY VS. EQUITY

What Do We Mean by Equality? Equality is the idea that all people should be treated the same; what the government does for one person, it must do for everybody.

What Do We Mean by Equity? Equity is the idea that people should be treated differently on the basis of various factors, such as age, race, gender, or income. Under this idea, the government can provide assistance to a person or a group that most needs it without providing the same assistance to others.

Why Is this Tension Important? Equality has always been an important part of American democracy—one that is apparent in the structure of U.S. government. Every citizen gets one vote, every citizen has two senators and one representative in Congress, and every citizen has the same rights by law.

However, the "American Dream"—the ideal that every citizen can achieve success through hard work—has also played a sizable role in U.S. history. Those most concerned with equity argue that because some groups have been historically disadvantaged, they deserve special assistance from the government to level the playing field. Those most concerned with equality argue that it is only right and fair for the government to treat all citizens the same. This tension between equality and equity frames many important debates about taxes, the minimum wage, social welfare programs, and education.

Tension in Action: Affirmative Action

Affirmative action is a term that refers to a range of policies intended to improve opportunities for groups that have historically been excluded, marginalized, or discriminated against. In higher education, for example, some colleges have affirmative action policies that give preference to African Americans, Latinos, or other groups that have been subject to discrimination in the past.

Affirmative action is an excellent example of the tension between what is fair (or equal) and what is just (or equitable). Supporters of affirmative action in college admissions argue that the only way to reverse generations of discrimination is to intentionally create programs that attempt to mitigate the effects of past mistakes. As President Lyndon Johnson argued, "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."

But opponents of affirmative action argue that such policies are merely a new form of racial discrimination—this time against non-minorities. They argue that each and every applicant should be admitted or rejected on the basis of merit, and not on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. Just as it was, and is, wrong to discriminate against minorities, it is wrong for schools to discriminate against students who have worked hard, made good grades, and been active in their communities simply because they are not minorities.

What Are Some Historical Examples of this Tension?

- **Title IX and Athletics (1972):** In order to meet the federal requirement of equal access and funding for women's athletics, some colleges had to eliminate certain men's intercollegiate athletic teams.

- **Americans with Disabilities Act (1990):** Under the ADA, businesses must make "reasonable accommodations" to enable employees with disabilities to perform essential job functions, such as modifying work schedules, acquiring or modifying equipment, and providing qualified readers or interpreters. Rather than treating everyone equally, employers must prioritize equity in recognition of some employees' specific needs.

VALUES IN TENSION: LIBERTY VS. SECURITY

What Do We Mean by Liberty? Liberty is the freedom to act without constraint. In the realm of politics, liberty is the freedom to act without government interference. In short, liberty allows individuals to do as they please, as long as they are not directly harming others.

What Do We Mean by Security? Security refers to the order, stability, and safety of a society. In the realm of politics, the government maintains security by using its authority to encourage people to behave in certain ways and stop people from behaving in other, harmful ways.

Why Is this Tension Important? The tension between liberty and security is embedded in the founding documents of the United States. The Preamble to the Constitution promises to "insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense," as well as to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Today, this tension arises in debates over gun control, domestic surveillance, law enforcement tactics, the right to protest, and the right to assemble.

Those most concerned with liberty argue that freedom—the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the freedom of religion, and the freedom to think and act as one wishes—is the most important idea of American democracy. Those most concerned with security argue that without order, safety, and security, the government is powerless to protect the freedoms and rights of its citizens.

Tension in Action: The Right to Protest

In recent years, communities across the United States have witnessed the rise of several high-profile protest movements. In 2011, the Occupy movement began in New York City, as demonstrators established camps to protest inequality and engaged in both peaceful and violent confrontations with police. In 2014, Black Lives Matter became a nationwide movement with the shooting of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, sparking a series of peaceful demonstrations and violent riots. In response to these and other protest movements, lawmakers in at least 19 states proposed bills in 2017 to restrict the right to protest, arguing that restrictions are necessary to counter the actions of unlawful protesters and dangerous rioters.

Advocates of liberty argue that the government has no right to limit a citizen's ability to make his or her voice heard, so long as he or she does not cause harm or incite violence. They insist that new laws restricting protest will pave the way for mass arrests, the use of excessive police force, and the trampling of the First Amendment.

Advocates of security argue that a protester's right to assemble is not a right to block traffic, to make loud noises in populated areas, to destroy property, or to disrupt public events. They insist that large protests, particularly angry protests, can devolve into incidents of vandalism, property destruction, and mob violence.

What Are Some Historical Examples of this Tension?

- **The American Revolution:** Colonists who were loyal to Great Britain were willing to submit to increased restrictions of their freedom, such the Stamp Act and the Tea Act, in order to maintain the protection and security offered by British rule.

- **The Sedition Act of 1918:** In the midst of World War I, Congress outlawed any statements expressing disrespect for the U.S. government, the Constitution, or the American flag, thus limiting the freedom of speech in an attempt to show unified support for the war effort.

- **Military Draft (1940-1973):** During World War II and much of the Cold War, American men could be required to join the military, giving up their personal freedom in the name of national security.

VALUES IN TENSION: PRIVATE INTERESTS VS. THE COMMON GOOD

What Do We Mean by Private Interests? Private interests refer to the ability of individuals and businesses to decide what is best for them. The government can work to defend private interests by protecting private property, protecting the interests of businesses and individuals, and enforcing contracts.

What Do We Mean by the Common Good? The common good refers to the interests of the entire citizenry (a town, a county, a state, or the whole country). When the government works to protect the common good, it may act in ways that harm a few people or groups but help many others.

Why Is this Tension Important? The tension between private interests and the common good is hardly a novel debate. When Thomas Jefferson wrote of the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," he was arguing that citizens must be free to make personal decisions about what will benefit their lives. Yet the Preamble to the Constitution also makes clear that promoting "the general welfare" is a vital aim of U.S. government.

Today, the debate over the appropriate balance between private interests and the common good touches issues such as public education, energy and the environment, and laws regarding seatbelts and curfews. Those most concerned with protecting private interests argue that individuals must be allowed to freely pursue goals that will boost the economy and create wealth (and thus help the common good). Those most concerned with protecting the common good argue that such policies protect citizens, lift them out of poverty, and create a better society.

Tension in Action: Energy Production and Environmental Protection

A major challenge facing policymakers is how to address environmental concerns while still protecting the interests of businesses that produce fuels such as oil, natural gas, and coal. Recent events, such as the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the 2017 Keystone Pipeline oil spill, and reports of water contamination related to the fracking of natural gas, demonstrate that energy production poses risks to the environment. Some Americans have advocated for additional regulations to limit where and how energy companies operate, but the government has made several recent decisions to support the energy industry's independence. In 2017, for example, the federal government approved the route of the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Environmental Protection Agency eased restrictions that require coal mines to guard against pollution.

Supporters of energy companies' private interests argue that the government has no right to limit the abilities of individuals and businesses to make decisions in their own best interests. They argue that laws dictating their operations are burdensome, expensive, unnecessary, and disruptive to energy companies' attempts to create another benefit for the common good—plentiful sources of affordable energy.

Advocates of protecting the environment for the common good argue that the government must be allowed to limit the actions of businesses in order to defend natural resources that are vital for everyone. They argue that government regulations of energy companies help combat pollution, improve public health, and avoid lasting damage to the environment.

What Are Some Historical Examples of this Tension?

- **Eminent Domain:** Since the 1870s, the Supreme Court has ruled that the federal government has the authority to seize private property for the sake of public use, thus prioritizing the common good over private interests. Some significant events that dealt with eminent domain include the construction of the Interstate Highway System from 1956-1973 and the establishment of several national parks in the 1930s.

- **The Labor Movement:** Labor advocates have long argued that the government should regulate private business for the common good of working people. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, for example, established the minimum wage, required businesses to pay overtime, and outlawed child labor.