



Lesson Plan: Examining the Role of Protest in a Democracy

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine the role of various forms of protest in a democracy. They will analyze the motivations and actions of those involved in a 1997 arson in Eugene, Oregon. Then, they will evaluate the effectiveness of this form of protest. Finally, students will describe how they would voice opposition to a specific event, policy or practice in their community.

The clips used in this lesson are from the film **If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front**, which shows how a group of activists used arson as a form of protest against companies they believed were threatening the environment. Note: This film contains profanity and images of whaling and of horses being processed in a meat-packing plant.

For more information on the Earth Liberation Front, please see the [Resources](#) section of this lesson.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from their initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Cite and evaluate various forms of protest.
- Discuss the role of protest in a democracy.
- Analyze the motivations and actions of government/police and activists who were involved in a 1997 protest in Eugene, Oregon.
- Determine whether property damage like arson is an acceptable form of protest.
- Describe how they would voice opposition to a specific community event, policy or practice.

GRADE LEVELS

9-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Civics, U.S. History, Social Studies, Language Arts, Current Events

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: “Protest in Downtown Eugene” (length 2:50)

The clip begins at 18:06 with the line “In the summer of ’97 . . .” It ends at 20:56 with someone saying, “June first was really the day that pissed off a lot of people in this town.”

Note: This clip includes scenes where police are pepper spraying protestors.

Clip 2: “Arson As a Form of Protest” (length 3:24)

The clip begins at 28:08 with a picture of Daniel McGowan in the snow. It ends at 31:32 with the phrase “. . . is unable to dump that waste tomorrow.”

Note: This clip includes scenes filmed inside a horsemeat-packing plant.

Clip 3: “Is It Terrorism?” (length 4:12)

The clip begins at 1:12:05 with McGowan saying, “I just wanted everyone to come so I can tell you . . .” It ends at 1:16:17 with the line “Is it terrorism? We’ll find out.”

ACTIVITY

1. Invite the class to brainstorm a list of ways that people can protest against an event, policy or practice. As students contribute to the list, they should give an example of each form of protest from history, current events or personal experience. For example, a student might say, “Sit ins, like when black students in the 1960s would ask to be served at segregated lunch counters and then sit there if they were refused.” Or, “Rebels in Libya protested the rule of Gaddafi by starting a revolution.” Or, “My family wrote letters to a company to protest an offensive advertising campaign.” Capture the forms of protest in a visual brainstorming map, or use an easy and free online tool like bubbl.us (<https://bubbl.us/>) to organize ideas and move them around. Examples of forms of protest could include:

- Letter writing
- Protest march
- Boycott
- Attaching oneself physically to something
- Picketing/demonstrating with signs while chanting slogans
- Singing protest songs
- Sit ins
- Petitions
- Attending and speaking up at governmental meetings
- Art

- Graffiti
- Wearing an armband or pin or T-shirt with a protest message
- Voting
- Letter to the editor
- Blog rant
- Political rally
- Hunger strike
- Setting oneself on fire
- Riot
- Revolution
- Suicide bombing
- Refusing to pay taxes
- Property damage
- Strike/lockout
- Lawsuit
- Conscientious objector

2. Once the class has brainstormed its list, ask students to suggest ways of sorting these forms of protest into subcategories (e.g., illegal and legal, violent and nonviolent, acceptable and unacceptable.) Discuss:

- Would you refuse to participate in certain forms of protest? Why?
- What role does protest play in a democracy?
- Are any of these forms of protest unacceptable in a democracy? Explain.

3. Tell the class members that they are going to watch and analyze a video clip of a protest that took place in Eugene, Oregon in 1997. Focus viewing by having students take notes on what was important to the activists and what was important to the government/police. Then, show Clip 1.

4. After watching the clip of the protest, discuss:

- What forms of protest did you observe in the clip?
- What do you think was important to the activists during this protest?
- What do you think was important to the government/police?
- What did activists do to escalate the conflict?
- What did government/police do to escalate the conflict?
- How might these actions affect future protests by environmental activists?
- What are some other ways that this situation could have been resolved?

5. Explain that some environmental activists who called themselves the Earth Liberation Front, or ELF, began using arson as a form of protest. First, they burned down a ranger station to protest the fact that the U.S. Forest Service was allowing timber companies to cut down trees in national forests. This arson attracted more environmental activists willing to commit crimes of protest, and the group went on to perform other similar actions. Then, show Clip 2 and ask students to listen for why the ELF felt that these crimes were justified.

6. After watching the clip, discuss:

- What kinds of companies did the ELF target?
- If you owned a business, would it be acceptable for others to burn down your business because they did not like what it did? Explain.
- Why did the ELF think that its crimes of arson were justified?
- Do you believe that property damage such as arson is an acceptable form of protest? Why or why not?

7. Explain that eventually the perpetrators of these arsons were caught and faced life in prison for their crimes. Many received reduced prison sentences in exchange for providing information about friends who committed the crimes with them.

8. Conclude the lesson by asking each student to write about a community event, policy or practice that he or she finds objectionable, outline what he or she believes to be the best way to voice opposition to it and explain why that would be the most effective approach.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

1. Examine the definition of “terrorism.” Begin by having each student write a definition of terrorism. Ask students to share their definitions with partners, and then invite a few pairs to share their definitions with the class. Discuss the similarities and differences among the definitions. Then, tell students that the arsons committed by members of the ELF were considered acts of terrorism by the U.S. government. Not everyone agrees, however, that such a label fits the crimes. Show the class Clip 3, explaining that the video begins by showing Daniel McGowan, a former ELF arsonist, as he talks to his family about his legal case. After the clip, organize debate teams and have them research and debate the question “Were the ELF arsons acts of terrorism?”

2. Evaluate methods for bringing about social change. In the film **If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front**, former ELF arsonist Daniel McGowan says, “I think people have a very Pollyanna viewpoint about social change. No real social change is happening without pressure, without force, without, some would say, intimidating governments and corporations into changing their behavior.” Have students write essays on whether they agree or disagree with this statement.

3. Explore the online video, resources and lesson plans for other PBS and POV films relating to protest and the response of the government:

- **Better This World** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/betterthisworld/>) shows events surrounding the arrest of two young men at the 2008 Republican National Convention for making and possessing firebombs.
- **The Camden 28** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/camden28/>) tells the story of activists who raided a draft board office to protest the Vietnam War.
- **Freedom Riders** (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>) traces the

work of a band of activists who challenged segregation in the American South in 1961.

- **Revolution '67** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/revolution67/>) studies the six-day black urban rebellion in Newark, New Jersey.
- **Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/sierraleone/>) shows a band of refugees fighting back against its circumstances with music.
- **Soldiers of Conscience** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/soldiersofconscience/>) follows the stories of both conscientious objectors and those who criticize them.
- **Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/twelvedisciples/>) traces the history of a small group of men who go into exile in order to raise public awareness about South African apartheid.
- **William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe** (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/>) depicts historic protests, including Wounded Knee massacre and the Attica prison riot, from the perspective of an attorney who defended participants.

4. Compile a collection of protest stories. Ask each student to contribute two write-ups of actual protests to a class wiki (<http://www.wikispaces.com/>) — one protest from the last year and one from an earlier historical period. Potential protests include the Boston Tea Party, the Declaration of Sentiments, the civil rights March on Washington, the grape boycott in the 1960s, Arab Spring demonstrations and protest art from Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/ai-wei-wei/>). When possible, students should include images and video clips in their wiki entries.

5. Compare and contrast the leaders of various protest movements. Have students research the philosophies, activities, and results of leaders, such as Gandhi, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., Chico Mendes, César Chávez, Nelson Mandela and Eldridge Cleaver. Then, have them choose two of these leaders and summarize their similarities and differences in a Venn diagram. Students should then evaluate which leader they think was more effective and why.

RESOURCES

Background on *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front*

Holden, Stephen. “Movie Review: *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front*.” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2011.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/06/22/movies/if-a-tree-falls-documentary-on-earth-liberation-front.html>

This review touches on the key events in the film and describes how they are addressed by the filmmaker.

POV. “If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front.”

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/ifatreefalls/>

The *POV* website for the film provides information about the Earth Liberation Front and some people who committed arson under the ELF banner.

Earth Liberation Front: Photo Gallery

<http://www.earthliberationfront.org/photogallery.html>

These images of property damage claimed by the ELF depict some of the sites mentioned in **If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front**, including the Cavel West meat-packing plant and the resort in Vail, Colorado.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL, 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, text and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL, 9-10.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.

SL, 11-12.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

W.9-10, 11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.

W.9-10, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.1 Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the **development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.**

Content Knowledge: (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Behavior Studies, Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions.

Civics, Standard 3: Understands the sources, purposes and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good.

Civics, Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity.

Civics, Standard 25: Understands issues regarding personal, political and economic rights.

Civics, Standard 26: Understands issues regarding the proper scope and limits of rights and the relationships among personal, political and economic rights.

Civics, Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Geography, Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth's surface.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

United States History, Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and northern Virginia.