Promises and Power

Compare civic principles across three national documents

USH.P.2.1.A "Evaluate various significant documents from the United States of America and other nations to compare civic virtues and principles of political systems."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one phrase about who holds political power in each paragraph, circle a phrase showing a commitment to equality in each paragraph, and write 1 beside two claims from different paragraphs that you could compare.

Who Counts in a Democracy?

1. In 1776, the U.S. Declaration of Independence argued that people have equal rights and that governments get their "just powers from the consent of the governed." It said a people may change or replace a government that destroys their rights. The document was a public argument for separating from Britain, not a plan for elections or a set of courts. Its claims made public consent a test of legitimate power. Yet in the new United States, slavery continued, and most women could not vote. The gap between the declaration's claim of equality and political practice raises a question: whose consent counted?

2. In 1789, France's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen announced that people are born and remain free and equal in rights. It located sovereignty in the nation rather than in a monarch. It also said law expresses the general will and that citizens may help make laws in person or through representatives. Freedom, however, was not unlimited: the declaration said liberty could not harm others. Although the document used broad language about equality, France did not grant women equal political rights. Its ideas challenged inherited rank while leaving open disputes about who qualified as a citizen.

3. South Africa's 1996 Constitution emerged after apartheid, a system that had denied political rights to most Black South Africans. Its founding values include human dignity, equality, nonracialism, and nonsexism. Unlike a declaration of reasons for breaking away, this constitution establishes rules for a continuing government. It requires universal adult voting rights, regular elections, and a multiparty democracy. It also makes equality a right that courts can enforce. These provisions offer ways to act on civic commitments, not just announce them. Still, no document alone can guarantee fair treatment. Citizens and officials must decide whether government practice lives up to its stated principles.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the U.S. and French declarations each describe the source of legitimate political power?

2. Compare the gap between equality and political practice described for the early United States with the commitments in South Africa's Constitution.

3. How does each document from France and South Africa describe a way for people to shape government? What does the South African document specify about elections?

4. How does the purpose of the U.S. Declaration of Independence differ from that of South Africa's Constitution, and why does that difference matter for putting principles into practice?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a town writing a charter after some residents were barred from voting. In one paragraph of 70 to 100 words, propose one rule about political participation and one about rights, use at least two different documents from the passage to explain your choices, and explain how the town could keep its promises in practice.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USH.P.2.1.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one phrase about who holds political power in each paragraph, circle a phrase showing a commitment to equality in each paragraph, and write 1 beside two claims from different paragraphs that you could compare. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the U.S. and French declarations each describe the source of legitimate political power?	**The U.S. declaration says governments get their just powers from the consent of the governed. The French declaration places sovereignty in the nation rather than a monarch.**
2	Compare the gap between equality and political practice described for the early United States with the commitments in South Africa's Constitution.	**The U.S. declaration claimed equal rights, but slavery continued and most women could not vote. South Africa's Constitution names equality, nonracialism, and nonsexism as values and requires universal adult voting rights.**
3	How does each document from France and South Africa describe a way for people to shape government? What does the South African document specify about elections?	**The French declaration says citizens may help make laws in person or through representatives. South Africa's Constitution provides for universal adult voting rights and regular elections in a multiparty democracy.**
4	How does the purpose of the U.S. Declaration of Independence differ from that of South Africa's Constitution, and why does that difference matter for putting principles into practice?	**The U.S. declaration argues for separation and states principles but does not set up elections or courts. South Africa's Constitution establishes government rules, including elections and a right to equality that courts can enforce.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Our charter should give every adult resident an equal vote in regular elections, as South Africa's Constitution requires universal adult voting rights. It should also protect equal treatment through a local review board that can hear complaints and order remedies. France's 1789 declaration says people are equal in rights, but its promise did not include equal political rights for women. To keep our rules from becoming empty promises, the town should publish election access data and the board's decisions each year, so residents can challenge unfair treatment.

Accept other accurate comparisons supported by the passage. For Part 3, look for two distinct rules, references to at least two documents, and a concrete way to check whether the rules are followed.