

4.7

Leadership and the Qualities of Political Leaders

Political leadership is a quality people seek in those they choose for key roles in democratic systems of government. Activities explore the histories of women and men – straight and gay, Black and White – who demonstrated political leadership throughout their lives and then ask how can students become leaders in their schools and communities. A Media Literacy Connection explores the influence of celebrity's endorsements of politicians and political issues.

Standard 4.7: Leadership and the Qualities of Political Leaders

Apply the knowledge of the meaning of leadership and the qualities of good leaders to evaluate political leaders in the community, state, and national levels. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T4.7]

FOCUS QUESTION: What is Effective Political Leadership?



[Image from Pixabay](#)

Leadership involves multiple skills and talents. It has been said that an effective leader is **someone who knows "when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out of the way"** (the phrase is attributed to the American revolutionary Thomas Paine). In this view, effective leaders do much more than give orders. They create a shared vision for the future and viable strategic plans for the present. They negotiate ways to achieve what is needed while also listening to what is wanted. They incorporate individuals and groups into processes of making decisions and enacting policies by developing support for their plans.

Different organizations need different types of leaders. A commercial profit-making firm needs a leader who can grow the business while balancing the interests of consumers, workers, and shareholders. An athletic team needs a leader who can call the plays and manage the personalities of the players to achieve success on the field and off it. A school classroom needs a teacher-leader who knows the curriculum and pursues the goal of ensuring that all students can excel academically, socially, and emotionally. Governments—local, state, and national—need political leaders who can fashion competing ideas and multiple interests into policies and practices that will promote equity and opportunity for all.

The Massachusetts learning standard on which the following modules are based refers to the "qualities of good leaders," but what does a value-laden word like "good" mean in political and historical contexts? "Effective leadership" is a more nuanced term.

What is an effective political leader? In the view of former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be."

Examples of effective leaders include:

- [Esther de Berdt](#) is not a well-known name, but during the Revolutionary War, she formed the Ladies Association of Philadelphia to provide aid (including raising more than \$300,000 dollars and making thousands of shirts) for George Washington's Continental Army.
- **Mary Ellen Pleasant** was an indentured servant on Nantucket Island, an abolitionist leader before the Civil War and a real estate and food establishment entrepreneur in San Francisco during the Gold Rush, amassing a fortune of \$30 million dollars which she used to defend Black people accused of crimes. Although she lost all her money in legal battles and died in poverty, she is recognized today as the "[Mother of Civil Rights in California](#)."
- [Ida B. Wells](#), born a slave in Mississippi in 1862, began her career as a teacher and spent her life fighting for Black civil rights as a journalist, anti-lynching crusader and political activist. She was 22 years-old in 1884 when she refused to give up her seat to a White man on a railroad train and move to a Jim Crow car, for which she was thrown off the train. She won her court case, but that judgement was later reversed by a higher court. She was a founder of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Women.
- [Sylvia Mendez](#), the young girl at the center of the 1946 *Mendez v. Westminster* landmark desegregation case; [Chief John Ross](#), the Cherokee leader who opposed the relocation of native peoples known as the Trail of Tears; and [Fred Korematsu](#) who challenged the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II are discussed elsewhere in this book.

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger, and Harvey Milk - Three Examples of Political Leadership](#)
 - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Images of Political Leaders and Political Power
2. [UNCOVER: Benjamin Banneker, George Washington Carver and Black Inventors' Contributions to Math, Science, and Politics](#)
3. [ENGAGE: How Can Young People Become Civic Leaders in Schools and Society?](#)
 - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: [Celebrities' Influence on Politics](#)

1. INVESTIGATE: Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger, and Harvey Milk - Three Examples of Political Leadership

Three individuals offer ways to explore the multiple dimensions of political leadership and social change in the United States: one who was appointed to a government position, one who assumed a political role as public citizen, and one who was elected to political office.

- *Appointed:* An economist and social worker, **Frances Perkins** was appointed as Secretary of Labor in 1933, the first woman to serve in a President Cabinet.
- *Assumed:* **Margaret Sanger** was a nurse and political activist who became a champion of reproductive rights for women. She opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn in 1916.
- *Elected:* **Harvey Milk** was the first openly gay elected official in California in 1977. He was assassinated in 1978. By 2020, a LGBTQ politician has been elected to a political office in every state.

Frances Perkins and the Social Security Act of 1935

An economist and social worker, Frances Perkins was Secretary of Labor during the New Deal—the first woman member of a President's Cabinet. Learn more: [Frances Perkins, 'The Woman Behind the New Deal.'](#)



Portrait of Frances Perkins

["Frances Perkins"](#) by Jean MacLane | Public Domain

Francis Perkins was a leader in the passage of the [Social Security Act of 1935](#) that created a national old-age insurance program while also giving support to children, the blind, the unemployed, those needing vocational training, and family health programs. By the end of 2018, the Social Security trust funds totaled nearly \$2.9 trillion. There is more information at a [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page, [Frances Perkins and the Social Security Act](#).

Margaret Sanger and the Struggle for Reproductive Rights

[Margaret Sanger](#) was a women's reproductive rights and birth control advocate, who throughout a long career as a political activist, achieved many legal and medical victories in the struggle to provide women with safe and effective methods of contraception. She opened the nation's first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York in 1916.



[Margaret Sanger \(1921\)](#)

by Underwood & Underwood | Public Domain

Margaret Sanger's collaboration with Gregory Pincus led to the development and approval of the birth control pill in 1960. Four years later, in [Griswold v. Connecticut](#) (1965), the Supreme Court affirmed women's constitutional right to use contraceptives. There is more information at a *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page, [Margaret Sanger and Reproductive Rights for Women](#).

However, Margaret Sanger's political and public health views include disturbing facts. In summer 2020, Planned Parenthood of Greater New York said it would remove her name from a Manhattan clinic because of her connections to eugenics, a movement for selective breeding of human beings that targeted the poor, people with disabilities, immigrants and people of color.

Harvey Milk, Gay Civil Rights Leader

In 1977, [Harvey Milk](#) became the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California by winning a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the city's legislative body.



"CA Hall of Fame Harvey Milk Exhibit" by Jacob Rodriguez is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

To win that election, Harvey Milk successfully built a coalition of immigrant, elderly, minority, union, gay, and straight voters focused on a message of social justice and political change. He was assassinated after just 11 months in office, becoming a martyr for the gay rights movement. There is more information at a [resourcesforhistoryteachers](https://resourcesforhistoryteachers.com/wiki/Harvey_Milk,_Gay_Civil_Rights_Leader) wiki page, [Harvey Milk, Gay Civil Rights Leader](https://resourcesforhistoryteachers.com/wiki/Harvey_Milk,_Gay_Civil_Rights_Leader).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **State Your View**
 - What personal qualities and public actions do you think make a person a leader?
 - Who do you consider to be an effective leader in your school? In a job or organization in the community? In a civic action group?
- **Set a Personal Leadership Goal**
 - How can you become a leader in your school or community?

Online Resources for Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger, and Harvey Milk

- Frances Perkins
 - [Frances Perkins](#), FDR Presidential Library and Museum
 - [Her Life: The Woman Behind the New Deal](#), Frances Perkins Center
- Margaret Sanger
 - [Margaret Sanger Biography](#), National Women's History Museum
 - [Margaret Sanger \(1879-1966\)](#), *American Experience* PBS
- Harvey Milk
 - [Harvey Milk Lesson Plans using James Banks' Four Approaches to Multicultural Teaching](#), Legacy Project Education Initiative
 - [Harvey Milk pages](#) from the *New York Times*
 - [Teaching LGBTQ History and Why It Matters](#), Facing History and Ourselves
 - [Official Harvey Milk Biography](#)
 - [Harvey Milk's Political Accomplishments](#)
 - [Harvey Milk: First Openly Gay Male Elected to Public Office in the United States](#), Legacy Project Education Initiative.

Media Literacy Connections: Images of Political Leaders and Political Power

Look at the portraits of John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (1794), and Sandra Day O'Connor, the first Woman Supreme Court Justice (1983).



Portrait of [John Jay](#) | Public Domain



Portrait of [Sandra Day O'Connor](#) | Public Domain

What do the images make you think about who the person is and what role they play in law, government, and politics?

What assumptions might you make about the individual?

What conclusions were you able to draw about their historical significance and political power based on the images?

Throughout history, political leaders have gained importance and power through imagery, including paintings, portraits, and sculptures. U.S. citizens often instantly recognize figures in U.S. history from artistic renderings, such as George Washington on the dollar bill, Abraham Lincoln seated at the Lincoln Memorial, and the [iconic 2008 Hope poster](#) for Barack Obama's first campaign for President. The staging and framing of these works of art convey lasting messages about each person as a historically significant agent of change.

In these activities, you will explore and design imagery of political leaders and political power.

- [Activity 1: Curate a Digital Collection of Images of Political Figures](#)
- [Activity 2: Design an Artistic Representation of a Political Leader](#)

2. UNCOVER: Benjamin Banneker, George Washington Carver and Black Inventors' Contributions to Math, Science, and Politics

Back in 2007 and 2008, Sam Wineburg and a group of Stanford University researchers asked 11th and 12th grade students to write names of the most famous Americans in history from Columbus to the present day ([Wineburg &](#)

[Monte-Sano, 2008](#)). The students could not include any U.S. Presidents on the list. The students were then asked to write the names of the five most famous women in American history. They could not list First Ladies.

To the surprise of the researchers, girls and boys from across the country, in urban and rural schools, had mostly similar lists: Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and Benjamin Franklin were the top five selections. Even more surprising, surveys of adults from an entirely different generation produced remarkably similar lists.

The researchers concluded a broad “cultural curriculum” conveyed through media images, corporate advertising, and shared information has a far greater effect on what is learned about people in history than do textbooks and classes in schools. Assuming Wineburg’s study were repeated today, it is likely that while one or two names might change, the responses of students would still be based largely on media images and stereotypes.

Omitted from the lists are highly consequential African American inventors and political leaders as well as leaders from other marginalized groups in U.S. history and society. Benjamin Banneker and George Washington Carver are two Black leaders who deserve wider recognition for their achievements.

Benjamin Banneker

[Benjamin Banneker](#) was a free Black astronomer, mathematician, surveyor, author, and farmer who was part of the commission which made the original survey of Washington, D.C. in 1791.



"Benjamin Banneker statue at the National Museum of African American History and Culture" by Frank Schulenburg is licensed under CC BY SA 4.0

Benjamin Banneker was "a man of many firsts" ([Washington Interdependence Council, 2017, para. 1](#)). In the decades before and after the American Revolution, he was the first to track the 17-year locust cycle, and he was among the first farmers to employ crop rotation to improve yield.

Between 1792 and 1797, Banneker published a series of annual almanacs of astronomical and tidal information with weather predictions, doing all the mathematical and scientific calculations himself ([Benjamin Banneker's Almanac](#)). He has been called the first Black Civil Rights leader because of his opposition to slavery and his willingness to speak out against the mistreatment of Native Americans.

George Washington Carver

Born into slavery in Diamond, Missouri around 1864, [George Washington Carver](#) became a world-famous chemist and agricultural researcher. It is said that he single-handedly revolutionized southern agriculture in the United States, including researching more than 300 uses of peanuts, introducing methods of prevent soil depletion, and developing crop rotation methods.



Statue of the young George Washington Carver
["George Washington Carver National Monument, Missouri"](#)
National Park Service | Public Domain

A monument in Diamond Missouri of Carver as a young boy was the first ever national memorial to honor an African American ([George Washington Carver National Monument](#)).

Benjamin Banneker and George Washington Carver are just two examples from the long history of Black Inventors in the United States. Many of the names and achievements are not known today - Elijah McCoy, Granville Woods, Madame C J Walker, Thomas L. Jennings, Henry Blair, Norbert Rillieux, Garrett Morgan, Jan Matzeliger - but with 50,000 total patents, Black people accounted for more inventions during the period 1870 to 1940 than immigrants from every country except England and Germany ([The Black Inventors Who Elevated the United States: Reassessing the Golden Age of Invention](#), Brookings (November 23, 2020).

You can learn more details about these innovators at our [African American Inventors of the 19th Century](#) page on the resourcesforhistoryteachers wiki.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design 3D Artifacts**
 - Create 3D digital artifacts (using [TinkerCad or another 3D modeling software](#)) that represent Banneker's and Carver's contributions to math, science, and politics.
 - Bonus Points: Create a board (or digital) game that incorporates the 3D artifacts and educates others about Banneker and Carver.
- **Write a People's History**
 - Using the online resources below and your own Internet research findings, write a people's history for Benjamin Banneker or George Washington Carver.

Online Resources for Benjamin Banneker, George Washington Carver, and Black Inventors

- Benjamin Banneker
 - [Benjamin Banneker](#) from *Mathematicians of the African Diaspora*, University of Buffalo
 - [Mathematician and Astronomer Benjamin Banneker Was Born November 8, 1731](#), Library of Congress
 - [Benjamin Banneker, African American Author, Surveyor and Scientist](#), *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page
- George Washington Carver
 - [George Washington Carver from National Peanut Board](#)
 - [George Washington Carver](#), State Historical Society of Missouri
 - [16 Surprising Facts about George Washington Carver](#), National Peanut Board

3. ENGAGE: How Can Young People Become Civic Leaders in Schools and Society?

What does it mean to be a leader? It is widely assumed that a leader is the person in charge of a group or organization -- a manager is the leader of a retail store; a principal is the leader of a school; a CEO is the leader of a corporation. In this view, the leader is the person who makes the final decisions, as in the famous "The Buck Stops Here" sign on President Harry Truman's desk. Watch former President Truman discuss ["The Buck Stops Here" in the video below](#).



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Truman's sign reflects the predominant view of leadership as centered around a person (or small group) -- at the top of an organizational chart -- with power and authority over people, budgets, and setting the policies which everyone else is expected to follow.

Not everyone agrees with this view. Nor are all decisions in our society made by an individual leader. Everywhere there are large and small groups making decisions collectively and democratically (e.g., a town meeting, a vote to change company by-laws, a jury decision in a court case, an election for public office).

Given these competing views of leadership, how can young people act as civic leaders in schools or society? What power, resources, or social capital do they have to influence events or make change? They are certainly not in charge of any organization nor are they voting to make educational policy or community-based decisions. Yet, every member of a democracy is expected to be actively involved in their local, state, and national community. That is what is known as one's civic duty and responsibility.

For young people, becoming a civically-minded leader involves developing a **Civic Leadership Mindset** by considering new approaches to existing practices, taking risks, making mistakes, learning from those experiences, and continuing to experiment to find better ways to achieve results. It involves seeing yourself as a part of a wider group, organization, and community in which your actions matter -- not just to yourself but to all those around you.

For example, Siobhan, one of our former students, demonstrated her Civic Leadership Mindset as Assistant Director of outdoor summer camps for young kids at a historical ranch in Colorado. She arrived to find already established learning plans from past years which she found rather dull and uninspiring. Using a Civic Leadership Mindset, she reached out to her professional learning network for new ideas and began blending what she learned with existing plans and the mission of the ranch to create new natural history and environmental awareness learning experiences for youngsters. Did everything go perfectly? No, but Siobhan remained willing to experiment, reflect, redesign, and try again.

Siobhan's leadership came not from her title as Assistant Director or the amount of money she was being paid or her role as a supervisor of other camp employees, but from a mindset of how to approach her role, relationships, and activities. Siobhan did not simply follow the traditional learning plans that had been done before at the camp, but she

did not reject all those plans as well. She chose to redesign the camp experiences to encompass local history and environmental awareness, sharing her ideas and plans with the young campers and the camp Director and staff. She actively shaped and reshaped her role with a mindset toward ways to make the camp impactful for all (campers, families, the ranch organization, staff, and herself).

Becoming a leader as a young person starts with and is sustained by a Civic Leadership Mindset -- a set of dispositions and values and practices that can be applied to any role in any organization, including one's civic role in a school and the larger society. **What is your plan for developing and implementing a Civic Leadership Mindset? How might you become a civic leader in school and society?**

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Compare and Contrast**

- As a class or with a group of friends, write individual lists of the 10 most famous or influential Americans in United States history?
- Explore similarities and differences across the lists.
- How many women or people of color were on the lists
- Investigate the reasons for the similarities and differences.

- **State Your View**

- Returning to the Sam Wineburg study, "Why were Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and LGBTQ individuals left of the lists?" (see the full study here: ["Famous Americans": The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes](#))

- **Learning Plan**

- Research an individual's work and contributions, and in 200-250 words describe who they are, why you selected them, and what aspect of their work is important to the field. Within your description, include at least 2 links relevant to this individual ([Plan from Royal Roads University](#)).

Media Literacy Connections: Celebrities' Influence on Politics

During elections, celebrities might endorse a political candidate or issue in hopes that their fans will follow in their footsteps. Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama for President in 2008 has been cited as the most impactful celebrity endorsement in history ([U.S. Election: What Impact Do Celebrity Endorsements Really Have?](#) *The Conversation*, October 4, 2016).

Do celebrity endorsements make a real difference for voters? Researchers are undecided. In 2018, 65,000 people registered to vote in Tennessee after Taylor Swift (who had 180 million followers on Instagram) endorsed two Democratic Congressional candidates - one candidate won and the other lost. Swift's endorsement was followed by more than 212,000 new voter registrations across the country, mostly among those in the 18 to 24 age group. Perhaps what celebrities say has more impact on younger voters?

Can you think of some examples of celebrities who have shared their political views or endorsements on social media? Who are these celebrities? In what ways did they influence politics?

In these activities, you will analyze media endorsements by celebrities, and then develop a request (or pitch) to convince a celebrity to endorse your candidate for President in the next election.

- [Activity 1: Analyze Celebrity Endorsements in the Media](#)
- [Activity 2: Request a Celebrity Endorsement for a Presidential Candidate](#)



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Standard 4.7 Conclusion

Effective political leadership is an essential ingredient of a vibrant democracy. Unlike dictators or despots, effective leaders offer plans for change and invite people to join in and help to achieve those goals. Effective leaders work collaboratively and cooperatively, not autocratically. **INVESTIGATE** looked at three democratic leaders who entered

political life in different ways: Frances Perkins who was appointed to a Presidential Cabinet; Margaret Sanger who assumed a public role as an advocate and activist; and Harvey Milk who was elected to political office. **UNCOVER** reviewed the life and accomplishments of Benjamin Banneker and George Washington Carver. **ENGAGE** asked who people think are the most famous Americans in United States history.



["Benjamin Banneker statue at the National Museum of African American History and Culture"](#) by Frank Schulenburg is licensed under CC BY SA 4.0



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