



Unit

Topic

WWII

Fascism vs. 'Democracy'

*The teacher may use the word 'republic' in place of 'democracy,' but note that in contemporary political discourse students will hear 'democracy' more often as, for example, in the common phrase 'threat to democracy.'

Lesson Plan

Aim

Students will be able to differentiate between the core principles of fascism and democracy, and critically evaluate the use of the term "fascist" in contemporary political discourse.

Rationale

This lesson addresses the importance of clearly defining fascism and the term "fascist," as the careless use of these words today is causing students to be gravely misled and conclusions to be drawn that dangerously undermine America's place as the beacon of freedom in the world. Some educational organizations are claiming that the United States is showing signs akin to fascism, which could convince students that the nation known for its commitment to freedom is turning toward something sinister. This lesson was developed to challenge such narratives by helping students understand the real differences between fascism and democracy, so they can better discern when the term "fascist" is being misused in political banter and when it might genuinely apply.

Student Learning Objectives

Students will be able to interpret primary source documents to evaluate the political ideologies of fascism and democracy.

Students will be able to critically contrast fascism and democracy by analyzing key features, values, and practices articulated in foundational texts widely considered representative of each system, alongside contemporary sources.

Students will be able to critically analyze the use of the term "fascist" in America as it is used by contemporary critics.

Civics Connection

How have people in power affected political, social, and economic developments regarding the freedom and protection of their people?

How do the values of a nation unite its citizens?



Vocabulary

*Note: This lesson uses the term “**democracy**” as it is used more widely in contemporary discourses. Students must know the difference between a **republic** and **democracy**.

Fascism	Natural Rights
Benito Mussolini	‘The Doctrine of Fascism’
Democracy	‘Declaration of Independence’
Republic	Thomas Jefferson
John Locke	Rule of Law

Materials and Resources

“From John Adams to John Taylor, 17 December 1814,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6371>. [This is an [Early Access document](#) from [The Adams Papers](#).]

Sandberg, E. Michael. "President’s Message—The Constitution Liberates Us: The Rule of Law and How It Enables Equal Protection, Justice, and an Enduring Freedom for All." Federal Bar Association, 1 Sept. 2021, <https://www.fedbar.org/blog/presidents-message-the-constitution-liberates-us/>

Mussolini, Benito. "The Doctrine of Fascism." 1932. San José State University, faculty.wooda, <https://sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/2B-HUM/Readings/The-Doctrine-of-Fascism.pdf>

National Archives. "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." 2025. National Archives and Records Administration, 23 July 2025, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

Lempinen, Edward. "Fascism Shattered Europe a Century Ago — and Historians Hear Echoes Today in the U.S." *Berkeley News*, 9 Sept. 2024, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2024/09/09/fascism-shattered-europe-a-century-ago-and-historians-hear-echoes-today-in-the-u-s/>.

[Perplexity was used as a resource to help revise and improve the language in some of the lesson materials. *Perplexity*. (2023). *Perplexity.ai* (AI Chatbot) [Large language model]. <https://www.perplexity.ai/>]

Procedure

1. **Do Now:** Students will analyze and interpret the meaning of several quotes related to natural rights. (Teachers may select one, some, or all quotes to introduce the lesson as appropriate.) This approach facilitates critical engagement with the foundational ideas of natural rights and their role in historical and political contexts. See supporting resource below.

2. **Mini-Lesson:** Introduce students to Benito Mussolini and Fascism by identifying the key aspects of his rule including, for example, dictatorship (Mussolini made himself the most powerful person in Italy); no freedom (people couldn’t speak freely or join other political groups, secret police watched people to stop opposition); propaganda (Mussolini controlled newspapers, radio and schools, making people think he was a great leader); expansion (Mussolini wanted Italy to be bigger and more powerful, he tried to take over other countries like Ethiopia). Next, remind students of the tenets of America’s form of government including the ideal that all people are created equal, the meaning of inalienable rights, the government’s role in protecting these rights, and that power comes from the consent of the people. ****Review the difference between a democracy and a republic. Note that this lesson uses the term “democracy” as it is used more widely in contemporary discourses, but constitutional republic is a more accurate description of America’s form of government.***



3. Independent/Collaborative Work: Students will analyze the tenets of fascism according to Benito Mussolini's "The Doctrine of Fascism" using the handout provided with excerpts for guidance. Students will analyze the tenets of democracy/republicanism according to the "Declaration of Independence" using the handout provided with excerpts for guidance.

4. Review: Identify at least 3 to 5 major differences between fascism and democracy/republicanism on the handout provided.

HOMEWORK: Read the 'President's Message – The Constitution Liberates Us: The Rule of Law and How It Enables Equal Protection, Justice, and an Enduring Freedom for All' by W. West Allen from the Federal Bar Association. Complete the questions pertaining to the article.

Closure: Quiz (Two quizzes are provided. One is a multiple-choice quiz to explicitly identify the differences between fascism and democracy. The other quiz presents scenarios which students will identify as being characteristic of fascism or democracy. Note: The use of the term 'democracy' is used in the quiz reflecting its wider use in broader discussions.)

Modifications

- The teacher may reduce the number of paragraphs to interpret from each document (leaving in place the primary source language) for time sensitivity.
- Teachers may provide a vocabulary sheet with defined words to help students interpret the language and meaning of the document excerpts.
- The teacher may incorporate the extension as part of the main procedure if altered for time sensitivity.
- The teacher may assign additional readings for homework in preparation for the lesson plan or extension, and/or allow students to conduct additional research.
- The teacher may use the word 'republicanism' in place of 'democracy,' but note that in contemporary political discourse students will hear 'democracy' more often as, for example, in the common phrase 'threat to democracy.'

Extension

Prepare for a Socratic Seminar using the highly controversial UC Berkeley article [*Fascism shattered Europe a century ago – and historians hear echoes today in the U.S.*](#) *Note: This article is highly controversial and excessively suggests a parallel between U.S. President Donald Trump and past dictatorships. Only use this article if appropriate for your class. The seminar should include discussions based on all texts used in the lesson as well as additional finds.

Notes

**Use discretion for activities according to what is appropriate for your class.*



Quotes on Natural Rights

Directions: Carefully analyze the following quotes and write your interpretation of each. Note whether you agree or disagree with the statement.

Quote #1: “A right is not what someone gives you; it’s what no one can take from you.” –Ramsey Clark

Quote #2: “Totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within.” –Hannah Arendt

Quote #3: “The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom. For in all the states of created beings, capable of laws, where there is no law there is no freedom.” – John Locke



DEFINING FASCISM

“The Doctrine of Fascism”

Benito Mussolini, 1932

“If liberalism spells individualism, Fascism spells government.” – Benito Mussolini

Excerpt from the text	Interpret in your own words	Thoughts/Reaction
<p>1) “[Fascism] does not believe in the possibility of ‘happiness’ on earth as conceived by the economic literature of the 18th century [...] Anti-individualistic, the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State” (p 2).</p>		
<p>2) “It is opposed to classical liberalism which arose as a reaction to absolutism [...] Liberalism denied the State in the name of the individual; Fascism reasserts the rights of the State as expressing the real essence of the individual. And if liberty is to [be] the attribute of living men and not of abstract dummies invented by individualistic liberalism, then Fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State. The Fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value” (p 2).</p>		
<p>3) “Fascism is therefore opposed to that form of democracy which equates a nation to the majority, lowering it to the level of the largest number; but it is the purest form of democracy if the nation be considered as it should be from the point of view of quality rather than quantity, as an idea, the mightiest because the most ethical, the most coherent, the truest, expressing itself in a people as the conscience</p>		



<p>and will of the few, if not, indeed, of one, and ending to express itself in the conscience and the will of the mass, of the whole group ethnically molded by natural and historical conditions into a nation, advancing, as one conscience and one will, along the self same line of development and spiritual formation” (p 2).</p>		
<p>4) “Its [the Fascist State’s] functions cannot therefore be limited to those of enforcing order and keeping the peace, as the liberal doctrine had it [...] The Fascist State is an inwardly accepted standard and rule of conduct, a discipline of the whole person [...] it stands for a principle which becomes the central motive of man as a member of civilized society...Fascism, in short, is not only a law-giver and a founder of institutions, but an educator and a promoter of spiritual life. It aims at refashioning...man, his character, and his faith. To achieve this [purpose] it enforces discipline and uses authority” (p 3).</p>		
<p>5) “A doctrine — fully elaborated, divided up into chapters and paragraphs with annotations, may have been lacking, but it was replaced by something far more decisive, — by a faith. All the same, if with the help of books, articles, resolutions passed at congresses, major and minor speeches, anyone should care to revive the memory of those days, he will find, provided he knows how to seek and select, that the doctrinal foundations were laid while the battle was still raging. Indeed, it was during those years that Fascist thought armed, refined itself, and proceeded ahead with its organization” (p 4).</p>		



<p>6) “Fascism will have nothing to do with universal embraces; as a member of the community of nations it looks other peoples straight in the eyes; it is vigilant and on its guard; it follows others in all their manifestations and notes any changes in their interests; and it does not allow itself to be deceived by mutable and fallacious appearances” (p 5).</p>		
<p>7) “Fascism denies the materialistic conception of happiness as a possibility[...] Fascism denies the equation: well-being = happiness, which sees in men mere animals, content when they can feed and fatten, thus reducing them to a vegetative existence pure and simple” (p 5).</p>		
<p>8) “Democratic regimes may be described as those under which the people are, from time to time, deluded into the belief that they exercise sovereignty, while all the time real sovereignty resides in and is exercised by other and sometimes irresponsible and secret forces. Democracy is a kingless regime infested by many kings who are sometimes more exclusive, tyrannical, and destructive than one, even if he be a tyrant” (p 5).</p>		
<p>9) “The keystone of the Fascist doctrine is its conception of the State... For Fascism the State is absolute, individuals and groups relative. Individuals and groups are admissible in so far as they come within the State. Instead of directing the game and guiding the material and moral progress of the community, the liberal State restricts its activities to recording results. The Fascist State is wide awake and has a will of its own. For this reason it can be described as ‘ethica’” (p 7).</p>		



DEFINING FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS OF A REPUBLIC

“The Declaration of Independence”

Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, 1776

“I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than to those attending too small a degree of it.” -Thomas [Jefferson](#), to Archibald Stuart, 1791

Excerpt from the text	Interpret in your own words	Thoughts/Reaction
1) “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”		
2) “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”		
3) “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”		
4) “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”		
5) “A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”		
6) “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”		



Explain 3–5 major differences between Fascism and Democracy (Republic)

*Note: This lesson uses the term “democracy” as it is used more widely in contemporary discourse.

Fascism	Democracy (Republic)
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Summarize the difference between Fascism and Democracy here:



ARTICLE ANALYSIS

President's Message – The Constitution Liberates Us: The Rule of Law and How It Enables Equal Protection, Justice, and Enduring Freedom for All

W. West Allen, [Federal Bar Association](#)

1. In your own words, list the **Seven General Principles of Law and the Application of Law:**

2. In your own words, list the **Five True Principles Regarding the Rule of Law:**



Identifying Differences Between Fascism and Democracy

Note: This quiz uses the term "democracy" as it is used more widely in contemporary discourse.

1. What is the primary source of power in a republic?

- A) A single leader
- B) The people through elected representatives
- C) The military
- D) Hereditary monarchy

2. Which system is characterized by the protection of individual rights and freedoms?

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy
- C) Both
- D) Neither

3. In which system is dissent and opposition most likely to be suppressed?

- A) Democracy
- B) Fascism
- C) Both
- D) Neither

4. Which ideology emphasizes extreme nationalism and the supremacy of the state over the individual?

- A) Democracy
- B) Fascism
- C) Socialism
- D) Liberalism

5. How are leaders typically chosen in a fascist system?

- A) Through free and fair elections
- B) By inheritance
- C) By appointment or force, often resulting in a single leader with absolute power
- D) By lottery

6. Which system promotes pluralism, equality, and freedom of speech?

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy
- C) Oligarchy
- D) Theocracy

7. Under which system does the state often impose strict regulations and prioritize national unity over social equality?

- A) Democracy
- B) Fascism
- C) Monarchy
- D) Anarchy

8. In which system is top-down decision-making by a centralized authority most common?

- A) Democracy
- B) Fascism
- C) Both
- D) Neither

9. Which system is more likely to allow for freedom of the press and open political debate?

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy
- C) Both
- D) Neither

10. What is a key difference in how social classes are viewed in fascism versus democracy?

- A) Fascism promotes equality among all classes
- B) Democracy often elevates one class above others
- C) Fascism may consider one class or group superior, while democracy treats all citizens as equals in theory
- D) Both systems ignore class differences



"Is It Fascism or Is It Democracy?"

Instructions: For each scenario below, choose whether it describes *fascism* or *democracy*.

Note: This quiz uses the term "democracy" as it is used more widely in contemporary discourse.

1. A country is ruled by a single leader who suppresses opposition parties, controls the media, and uses propaganda to promote extreme nationalism. The leader is celebrated in mass rallies, and dissent is punished.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy

2. Citizens regularly vote in free and fair elections to choose their leaders. Multiple political parties compete, and peaceful protests are allowed. The press operates independently from the government.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy

3. After winning an election, a political party changes the constitution to ban all other parties. The government dissolves parliament and rules by decree, eliminating checks and balances.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy

4. The government encourages debate and allows criticism of its policies. Laws are passed through a representative assembly, and leaders can be removed from office through legal means.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy

5. The state declares that all economic activity must serve the interests of the nation. Private property is allowed, but the government heavily regulates and directs businesses. Strikes and independent unions are banned.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy

6. A new law is passed requiring all citizens to pledge loyalty to the leader and the state. Those who refuse are imprisoned or exiled.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy

7. The government is formed by a coalition of several parties, representing a range of views. Laws are made through compromise, and minority rights are protected.

- A) Fascism
- B) Democracy



“Is It Fascism or Is It Democracy?”

ANSWER KEY WITH EXPLANATIONS

1. A) Fascism

Explanation: Fascism is characterized by dictatorial power, suppression of opposition, state-controlled media, and a cult of personality around the leader.

2. B) Democracy

Explanation: Democracy is defined by free elections, political pluralism, protection of civil liberties, and an independent press.

3. A) Fascism

Explanation: Fascist regimes often abolish democratic institutions and establish one-party rule, as seen in Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany.

4. B) Democracy

Explanation: In a democracy, government accountability, open debate, and the rule of law are fundamental principles.

5. A) Fascism

Explanation: Fascism permits private property but imposes strict state control over the economy for national goals, often banning independent labor organizations.

6. A) Fascism

Explanation: Fascist states demand absolute loyalty to the leader and the nation, often punishing dissent harshly.

7. B) Democracy

Explanation: Coalition governments, compromise, and protection of minority rights are hallmarks of democratic systems.

