

4.7

Leadership and the Qualities of Political Leaders

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](#)

Standard 4.7 addresses **political leadership** and the qualities that people seek in those they choose for leadership roles in democratic systems of government.

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 "lead, follow or get out the way" 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.

The INVESTIGATE and UNCOVER modules for this topic explore five more women and men, straight and gay, Black and White, who demonstrated political leadership throughout their lives. ENGAGE asks who would you consider are the most famous Americans in United States history?

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger, and Harvey Milk - Three Examples of Political Leadership](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Benjamin Banneker, George Washington Carver and Black Inventors' Contributions to Math, Science, and Politics](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Who Do You Think Are the Most Famous Americans?](#)
 1. [MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Contextualizing Celebrities](#)

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.

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

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 Poster - with Biographical Paragraphs
 "BENJAMIN BANNEKER - ASTRONOMER-CITY PLANNER" by Charles Henry Alston | Public Domain

Benjamin Banneker was "a man of many firsts" ([Washington Interdependence Council, 2017, para. 1](#)). In the decades before and after the American Revolution, he made the first striking clock made of indigenous American parts, 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 Washginton 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: Who Do You Think Are the Most Famous Americans?

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 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.

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](#))

Media Literacy Connections: Contextualizing Celebrities

Focus Question: How do celebrities influence young people's thinking about politics?

Celebrities from the fields of music, movies, sports, and television hold a considerable influence over everyone, but this might be especially true for youth. During an election, 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).

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?

Activity: Analyze a Celebrity Endorsement

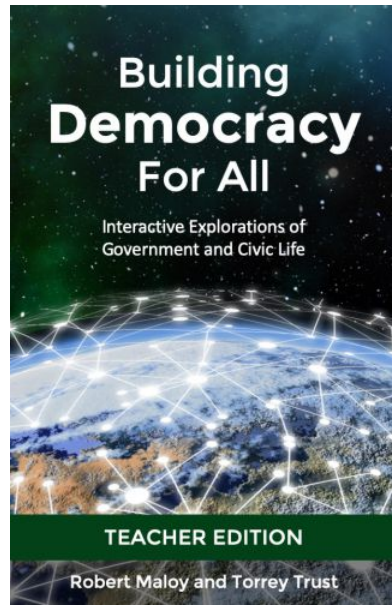
- Find an example of a celebrity endorsement of political figure or a political issue.
- The example can be a piece of media content (e.g., website, clip from a TV program or movie, a description or trailer from a video game, social media post, YouTube video), an article from the news, a scholarly study or reading, an item or object, or anything else that you can think of that ties in to this question.
 - How did the celebrity use media and persuasive language to communicate their message?
 - What impacts, if any, do you think will result from this endorsement?
 - Do you think it will encourage young people to think and/or act differently about this topic?

Additional Resources:

- [iHeartRadio's podcast "Why I'm Voting"](#)
- [The Taylor Swift effect: Nashville sounds off on singer's political endorsements](#)
- [From Sinatra to Taylor Swift: 100 Years of Celebrity Political Endorsements](#), CBC Radio (October 12, 2018)

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.



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books.
<https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>



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