



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #13: Forms of Political Participation in Colonial America

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds upon previous lessons examining how colonists responded to growing tensions between Britain and the American colonies. In Lesson 13, students explore how colonists participated in government and community life before and during the American Revolution.

The focus of this lesson is to help students understand the different ways colonists participated in civic life and how those forms of participation helped shape colonial communities and the emerging United States.

Students learn that:

- Colonists participated in government and civic life in many different ways.
- Voting allowed colonists to influence decisions in their communities.
- Jury service allowed citizens to help administer justice.
- Militias helped protect communities and respond to threats.
- Lewis Morris participated through leadership, public service, and militia service.
- Different forms of participation helped communities govern themselves.
- Citizens continue to participate in civic life today.

This lesson is organized into two phases. Phase 1 builds meaning through vocabulary, reading, and text coding. Phase 2 builds argument through gathering evidence and using it to engage in writing. The lesson culminates in a structured Revolutionary Writers essay focused on militia participation during the events at Lexington and Concord.

Competition Note: For teachers participating in the FIREWORKS250 year 2 cohort, this essay is one of nine potential essays students may select for the Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition. Each lesson introduces a key Founding Father or revolutionary while integrating civics standards. Teachers will introduce these individuals to students with a biography and video before students write their essay.

Materials

- Highlighters or pencils for text coding
- Handout #1: Political Participation in Colonial America
- Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer
- Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer
- Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Note: Students may use any notes from any handout (text coding, video notes, or graphic organizer) when writing their essay. These are not separate tasks but support tools for the final essay.

Preparation

- Number paragraphs in the reading text.
- Review vocabulary: Political participation, Voting, Jury, Militia, Minutemen
- Before class, locate and read the biography from the White House Freedom 250 Founders Museum for Lewis Morris: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles>.
- Load the video Lewis Morris. <https://youtu.be/p4GTZ9hOdWs?si=vwNXDFMZAuA3POV>.
- Load the video The Road to Liberty: Lexington and Concord. <https://youtu.be/UpiT6ifKGPA?si=dAjC2OFrIGrzKuAe>
- Prepare essay writing model. See sample paragraphs in the Essay Writing section.
- Be prepared to connect this lesson to previous lessons examining how colonists responded to growing tensions between Britain and the American colonies.

Standards Alignment

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard **SS.5.CG.2.2** Compare forms of political participation in the colonial period to today. *Clarification:* Students will describe forms of political participation in the colonial period (e.g., serving on juries, militia service, participation in elections for government).

Essential Question

How did colonists participate in government and community life before and during the American Revolution?

Phase 1: Make Meaning (Input → Interpretation)

Purpose: Students understand the different ways colonists participated in civic life and why participation mattered in colonial communities.

Hook—Open Response (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “How can ordinary people help make decisions in their community?” Accept all reasonable responses.

- *Quick pair share:* Students briefly discuss. Do not correct yet. Students will return to these questions later during the lesson.
 - What are some official ways that people can be involved in their community? (possible responses below)
 - * Voting
 - * Serving on juries
 - * Holding leadership positions
 - What are other ways to be involved in a community? (possible responses below)
 - * Helping neighbors
 - * Following laws
 - * Military or community service

Vocabulary Instruction (10–12 minutes)

- *Introduce and clarify the following terms:*
 - **Political Participation:** Actions citizens take to help govern or improve their community.
 - **Voting:** The process of choosing leaders or making decisions.
 - **Jury:** A group of citizens who help decide court cases.
 - **Militia:** A group of ordinary citizens trained part-time to defend their community.
 - **Minutemen:** Members of colonial militias who were prepared to respond quickly during emergencies.
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “Why might communities need people to participate?”
 - “How can citizens help make decisions?”
 - “Why would colonial communities need militias?”
 - “How might participation strengthen a community?”

Reading and Text Coding (25–30 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “As you read today, pay attention to the different ways colonists participated in government and community life.”
- *Students read:* Political Participation in Colonial America (Handout #1)
- *Students use three codes to mark sections:*
 - V (Voting) Describes the process of choosing leaders or making decisions by casting a vote.
 - J (Jury Service): Describes the process where a group of citizens serves the community by helping to decide court cases.
 - M (Militia Service): Describes a group of ordinary citizens trained part-time to defend their community.
 - I (Important Information): Important background or context that does not clearly fit V, J, or M.

Note: The “I” code is intentionally open. Students who disagree about coding are engaging in strong historical thinking. Use discussion prompts such as: “Why did you choose I instead of M?” “Could this paragraph fit more than one code?” “What evidence supports your thinking?”

Teacher Modeling—I Do (5 minutes)

- *Think aloud:*
 - “This section explains how colonists voted for representatives. I would code that V.”
 - “This section explains how juries helped resolve disputes. That's describing how citizens participated in juries, so I might code it J.”
 - “This paragraph provides historical context without clearly being connected to juries, voting, or militias. It’s important background information, so I might code it I.”
 - “This section describes local militias protecting communities. I would code that M.”
 - Model uncertainty and evidence-based reasoning. Not every paragraph fits neatly into one category. Encourage students to explain and defend their thinking.

Guided Practice—We Do (5 minutes)

- *Read the next paragraph together.* Celebrate productive disagreement. There is no single correct answer for every paragraph.
 - “What is this section mostly explaining?”
 - “Is this describing militias, juries, voting, or important background information?”
 - “Could more than one answer make sense?”
 - “What evidence supports your thinking?”
 - Celebrate productive disagreement.

Independent Practice—You Do (15–20 minutes)

- *Students continue coding independently.*
- *Teacher prompts:*
 - “What reasons were given for participating in militias?”
 - “Why might a community use juries to help determine court case outcomes?”
 - “What evidence supports your code?”

Phase 2: Build Argument (Synthesis → Evidence → Writing)

Purpose: Students gather and use evidence to explain how American colonists participated in civic life.

- *Teacher prompt:* “As you read the text today, pay attention to the different ways colonists participated in government and community life.”

Directed Note-Taking (15–20 minutes, Handout #3)

Guiding Question:

How did colonists participate in government and community life before and during the American Revolution?

- **Teacher prompt:** “Today you are gathering evidence to explain how colonists participated in civic life before and during the American Revolution. Think carefully about both the ideas and categories of their participation.” Remind students to use paragraph numbers when citing text evidence. Students may draw on notes from any handout when writing their essay.

Category	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about colonist participation in civic life
Voting		
Jury Service		
Militia Service		
Leadership and Public Service		

- **Teacher prompts:**
 - “Which category appears most often?”
 - “Why was voting important? Militias? Juries?”
 - “How did leaders help communities?”
 - “Which category seems most important to you for civic life at that time?”

Meet a Founding Father: Lewis Morris (10 minutes)

- **Teacher prompt:** “Today we'll learn about Lewis Morris, a colonial leader who participated in government before and during the American Revolution. Morris was a firm believer in independence, even before other leaders in New York were convinced it was a good idea to break away from Britain. When the British invaded New York and liberty was threatened, he chose to serve his community in many ways, including as a Major General in the Westchester County Militia. He signed the Declaration of Independence, but his commitment didn't stop there. He continued to serve his community and the new nation after the Revolutionary War. As you listen to his biography and watch the video, think about how Lewis Morris served his community in different ways, including through leadership, public service, and militia service.”

- **Read** the Lewis Morris biography aloud to the class from:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/freedom250/founders-museum/signers/profiles>
- **Show** the Lewis Morris video to the class from:
<https://youtu.be/p4GTZ9hOdWs?si=vwNXDFMZaUeA3POV>

Note: Lewis Morris demonstrates participation through leadership and public service, including his service as a militia leader during the American Revolution. Encourage students to think about how Lewis Morris served his community in multiple ways and how his militia service prepares students for the Lexington and Concord video and the writing task. The text remains the primary source for understanding civic participation of American colonists.

- *Teacher prompt:* "Lewis Morris served his community in many ways, including as a Major General in the New York militia during the American Revolution. Many ordinary colonists also served their communities through militia service. Communities established the militia to provide protection for their residents. Typically, men ages 16-60 were required to serve. Today, citizens continue to serve their communities in many ways, although local militias no longer play the role they did during the colonial period. However, both of these forms of service were critical as the colonies began their fight for independence. The next video shows how ordinary citizens responded when conflict between Britain and the colonies reached a breaking point."

Note: Lewis Morris demonstrates participation through leadership and public service, including his service as a Major General in the New York militia. The Lexington and Concord video highlights how ordinary colonists also participated through militia service. Together, the two videos show different ways colonists contributed to their communities.

- **Show:** The Road to Liberty: Lexington and Concord video at:
<https://youtu.be/UpiT6ifKGPA?si=dAjC2OFrGrzKuAe>

Note: Students may need support making connections between Lewis Morris and the actions of ordinary citizens who participated through militia service. Help students recognize that Lewis Morris served in the militia as a part of his political participation, even though he participated in many other aspects of the revolutionary movement as a Founding Father.

- *Students complete Handout #4 while watching.*
- *Teacher prompts (after video):*
 - "How did Lewis Morris participate in public life?"
 - "Why did colonists join local militias?"
 - "What responsibilities did minutemen have?"
 - "How did participation help communities?"

Interpretive Discussion (10 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* “Which form of political participation seems most important in colonial America?”
- *Students discuss:*
 - Voting
 - Jury Service
 - Militia Service
 - Leadership and Public Service
- *Teacher prompt (after students talk):* “Colonists participated in different ways. Communities depended on citizens who voted, served on juries, protected their neighbors, and helped lead government. Which do you think seems most important in colonial America?” Let this synthesis emerge from student responses rather than leading with it. Remind students that there may be more than one reasonable answer. Encourage them to support their position with evidence from the reading and videos.

Debate: Which form of political participation was most important? (10–12 minutes)

Teacher Setup: Display the debate question and the four categories:

The Debate Question

Which form of political participation was most important in colonial America?

Political Participation categories:

- Voting
- Jury Service
- Militia Service
- Leadership and Public Service

Note: These are different ways the text helps explain civic participation.

Debate Directions

Choose one category and explain why it was the most important form of political participation in colonial America. Students must support their thinking using evidence from the text or videos.

Structured Discussion

- Call on students who chose different ideas. *Prompts include:*
 - “What evidence supports your position?”
 - “Does another group disagree?”
 - “Could more than one category be correct?”
 - “If you lived in 1776, what might have influenced your choice? How would you have participated?”
 - There is no single correct answer. The goal is for students to use evidence to defend a position—exactly the thinking the essay requires. Teachers may shorten discussion or combine steps depending on class time.

Bridge to Essay

- *Teacher prompt:* “Today you learned that colonists participated in civic life in many different ways. One important form of participation was militia service. Your essay asks you to consider whether you would have chosen to participate in that way during the events at Lexington and Concord.”

Primary Assessment Task (20–25 minutes, Handout #2)

Revolutionary Writers Essay: Militia Participation

Important: This essay is the primary assessment for Lesson 13 and also serves as one of nine potential student essays for the FIREWORKS250 Revolutionary Writers Essay Competition for students with teachers participating in cohort 2. Participating teachers should save all student essays. Students will select their best essay at the end of the year to submit for the competition.

- *Teacher prompt:* “You have read about different kinds of civic participation of colonial America. You have learned that militia service was one of the categories of civic participation. Imagine you are a colonist living near Lexington or Concord in April 1775. Would you have joined the militia or minutemen to defend your community? Explain your choice with evidence from the text and videos. Use Handout #2 to plan and write your essay.”

Writing Prompt

If you had been a colonist living near Lexington or Concord in April 1775, would you have joined the militia or minutemen to defend your community? Explain your answer using details from the text and videos.

Students should write a paragraph that:

- states their position.
- explains why they would join or not join.
- uses evidence from the text and videos.
- explains how militia service was a form of political participation.

Sentence starters to share with students (optional):

If I lived in 1775, I would have...

Lewis Morris believed...

If I were part of the community of Lexington or Concord, I would have...

One reason I would join the militia is...

One reason I would not have joined the militia is...

I would have made this choice because...

Sample paragraphs:

Join the Militia: *If I had been a colonist living near Lexington or Concord in April 1775, I would have joined the militia. One reason is that I would have wanted to help protect my family, neighbors, and community. The text explains that militias were made up of ordinary citizens who trained to defend their towns when danger threatened. Another reason is that I would have believed it was important to stand up for the rights and freedoms of the colonies. The Lexington and Concord video showed how the minutemen quickly responded when British soldiers marched to seize colonial weapons and arrest Patriot leaders. Joining the militia was one important way colonists participated in civic life, and I would have wanted to do my part to help my community during a difficult time.*

Do Not Join the Militia: *If I had been a colonist living near Lexington or Concord in April 1775, I would not have joined the militia. One reason is that I would have wanted to protect my family by staying out of the fighting. Joining the militia meant facing real danger, and I would have been worried about being injured or killed. Another reason is that there were many ways colonists participated in their communities besides military service. The text explains that voting, serving on juries, and helping lead local government were also important forms of political participation. Even if I chose not to join the militia, I could still serve my community in other ways and support my neighbors. I think that would have been the best choice for me.*

Closure (5 minutes)

- *Teacher prompt:* "Today we learned that colonists participated in civic life in many different ways."
- *Turn-and-Talk teacher prompt:* "Which form of participation would you have been most likely to choose? Why?"
- *Exit Ticket prompt:* "What is one way colonists participated in government or community life?"

Handout #1

Political Participation in Colonial America

In the 1700s, before the American Revolution, the 13 colonies had their own colonial governments. The colonists participated in government in several important ways. This helped them feel like they had a voice and that their rights were protected. Some common forms of political participation included:

- Voting in elections for local leaders and assemblies
- Serving on juries to decide court cases
- Serving in the militia to defend their communities

These activities were ways ordinary colonists—farmers, shopkeepers, and craftsmen—helped run their towns and colonies. Let’s explore each one, including the vital role of the militia and the famous minutemen who were part of it.

Voting in Elections

In most colonies, white men who owned property or paid taxes could vote. They elected representatives to colonial assemblies (like legislatures) that made local laws about taxes, roads, schools, and more. This was different from Britain, where only wealthy people had much say. Voting let colonists have a voice in their government and choose leaders who understood their needs. Women, enslaved people, Native Americans, and most poor men could not vote, but for those who could, elections were a big part of political life.

Serving on Juries

Colonists often served on juries in court cases. A jury is a group of ordinary citizens who listen to evidence and decide if someone is guilty or not. In colonial courts, juries helped make sure laws were fair and protected people from unfair punishment. Serving on a jury was a duty and a privilege—it showed you were trusted by your neighbors to help decide justice. It was another way colonists participated directly in their government.

Serving in the Militia

The militia was one of the most important forms of political participation. A militia was a group of ordinary men (usually white males aged 16 to 60) who trained part-time to defend their homes and communities. Almost every able-bodied man was expected to serve—it was a civic duty, like voting or jury service.

In colonial times, there was no big national army, so militias protected towns from dangers like Native American raids, pirates, or foreign attacks. Men gathered for training (called “mustering”) a few times a year, often on court days or town greens. They practiced marching, shooting muskets, and following orders from local officers elected by the community.

Militia service was political because it connected to ideas of self-government and rights. Colonists believed free men should defend their own liberties instead of relying on a king’s standing army (which they feared could be used against them). Serving in the militia showed loyalty to your colony and neighbors. It also built community—men from farms and shops worked together, shared news, and discussed politics.

A special part of the militia was the minutemen. Minutemen were the best-trained and most ready members. They promised to be ready to fight “at a minute’s notice.” In Massachusetts especially, minutemen trained more often and kept their muskets and powder horns at home so they could respond quickly to any threat.

The Most Famous Example: Lexington and Concord

The most famous example of militia and minutemen participation happened on April 19, 1775, at the battles of Lexington and Concord that started the Revolution. After years of growing tensions between Britain and the colonies, war became inevitable. When British soldiers (Redcoats) marched from Boston to seize colonial weapons and arrest Patriot leaders in Concord, the local minutemen prepared to defend their homes and ammunition stocks.

The night before the battles, on April 18, 1775, Patriots learned that British troops were on the move. Working with Dr. Joseph Warren, Paul Revere—a Boston silversmith, engraver, and committed Patriot who was part of the Sons of Liberty—sprang into action. That night, when Dr. Warren learned of the British plan, Revere, along with

William Dawes and Samuel Prescott, rode out to warn the minutemen and other Patriots. Revere had arranged a simple signal system: lanterns in the steeple of Boston's Old North Church—one lantern if the British came by land, two if by sea. Two lanterns were hung. The three riders alerted a network of riders and key Patriots along the way. Revere was briefly captured by British troops toward the end of his ride, but he was released after questioning. Fortunately, the riders had already spread the alarm that “the British are coming.”

Thanks to warnings from Revere and others, the minutemen and regular militia were ready when the British arrived. The British reached Lexington and encountered about 77 American minutemen led by Captain John Parker. The first shot was fired—to this day, no one knows who fired it first. It became known as the “shot heard ‘round the world.” The British fired a volley, killing eight Americans—the first of thousands who would lay down their lives for independence.

Later that morning, the British reached Concord to destroy American supplies. At the sight of smoke rising from the town, about 400 colonists marched down Punkatasset Hill toward the North Bridge to confront the British. The British opened fire, killing several Americans. The colonists then ambushed the Redcoats relentlessly, forcing them to retreat all the way back to Boston. The battles involved about 1,700 British regulars and over 4,000 colonists, raging over 16 miles along the Bay Road. One British soldier later said the Americans “fought like bears.” These ordinary men—farmers, blacksmiths, and shopkeepers—showed that colonial political participation through the militia could defend their rights and begin a revolution.

Why It Mattered

Forms of political participation like voting, jury service, and militia duty gave colonists experience in self-government. They learned to work together, make decisions, and protect their freedoms. When Britain passed new taxes and sent soldiers to the colonies, many colonists felt their rights were in danger. Their participation in local government and the militia helped them stand up and say, “We can govern ourselves!” The colonists' militia service, especially the brave minutemen, reminds us that ordinary people can make a big difference when they work together to protect their freedoms!

Handout #2: Essay Writing Organizer

Writing Prompt

If you had been a colonist living near Lexington or Concord in April 1775, would you have joined the militia or minutemen to defend your community? Explain your answer using details from the text and videos.

Remember: Use what you learned about militia service and the Minutemen from the text and videos.

Step 1: Choose Your Position

Which choice would you make?

- ☐ Join the militia
- ☐ Not join the militia

Step 2: Plan Your Essay

Which decision would you have made?

I would have decided to _____

What is one reason for your choice?

What is a second reason for your choice?

How did the description of militia service from the text or videos influence your decision?

My decision was influenced by _____

How does Lewis Morris's example of serving his community through leadership, public service, and militia service influence your thinking?

My decision was influenced by _____

Why do you think your choice would have been the best one?

I think that my choice would have been best because _____

Step 3: Gather Your Evidence

Evidence from the text (include paragraph number):

Paragraph ____: _____

Use the space below to write your essay paragraph

[illegible]

If I lived in 1775, I would have

Lewis Morris believed

If I were part of the community of Lexington or Concord, I would have

One reason I would join the militia is

One reason I would not have joined the militia is

I would have made this choice because

Handout #3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Guiding Question:

How did colonists participate in government and community life before and during the American Revolution?

Directions: As you read the text, record evidence below. Find evidence for each category that shows how colonists participated in government and community life. Include paragraph numbers for text evidence.

Category	Evidence (paragraph #)	What this shows about colonist participation in civic life
Voting		
Jury Service		
Militia Service		
Leadership and public service		

Think About It:

Which category seems most important to you for civic life at that time?

Which category do you think you would have been most interested in? Why?

Handout #4: Video Notes Organizer

Videos:

1. Lewis Morris <https://youtu.be/p4GTZ9hOdWs?si=vwNXDFMZaUeA3POV>
2. Road to Liberty: Lexington and Concord
<https://youtu.be/UpiT6ifKGPA?si=dAjC2OFrIGrzKuAe>

Directions: Your teacher will read the biography of Lewis Morris and show two short videos. As you watch, think about the different ways colonists participated in government and community life before and during the American Revolution. Record important ideas from both videos. Answer the questions below.

Lewis Morris

1. How did Lewis Morris participate in government and public life?

2. What does Lewis Morris teach us about leadership and public service?

Lexington and Concord

3. How did ordinary colonists participate during the events at Lexington and Concord?

4. Why were militias and minutemen important to their communities?

Compare the Two

5. How were Lewis Morris and the minutemen similar in the way they served their communities?

6. How were their forms of participation different?

7. Which form of political participation do you think would have been the most difficult? Explain your thinking.
