

American Experiment

Collecting Protest Materials

OVERVIEW

Theme Introduction

In this unit, we're exploring "the American Experiment." What kind of nation did the American Revolution create? Whom did it serve, and whom did it exclude? How can Americans make change? We'll explore these questions and more.

Podcast Short

[Collecting Protest Materials](#) with Katherine Gould, Curator of History Objects and Fine Art at Cincinnati Museum Center.

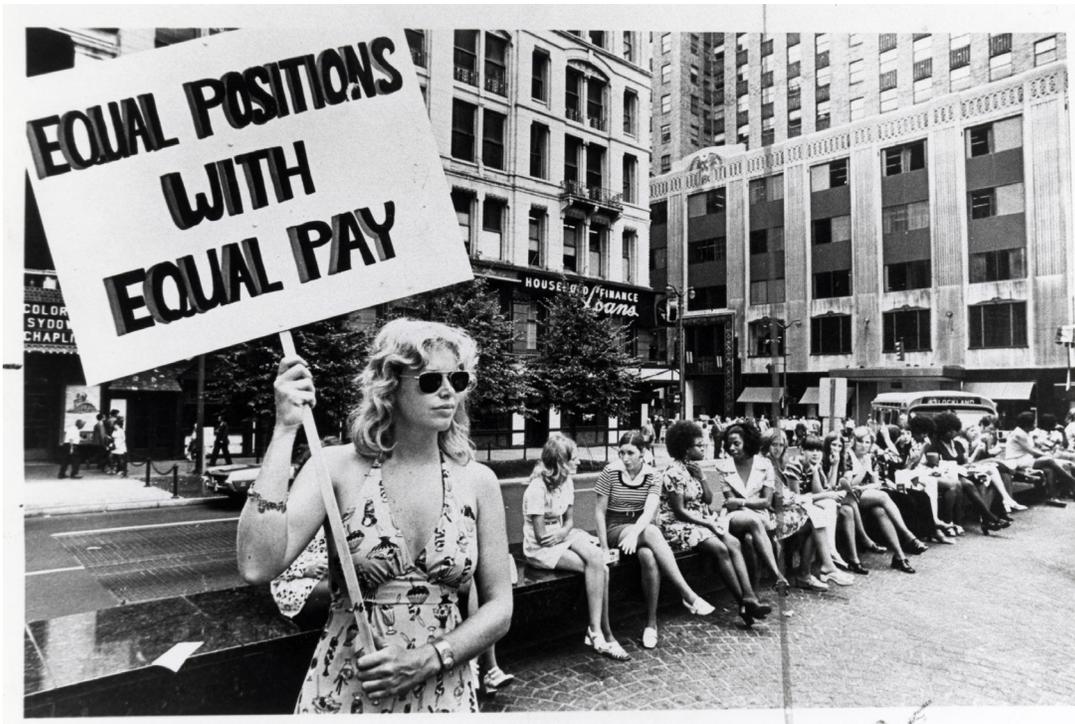
Guiding Questions

As students listen to the podcast, have them consider the following questions:

- In what ways is protesting a central part of our national history and government structure?
- Why do museums collect protest materials?
- Why is it important to collect not just an object, but also the story that accompanies it?

Key Vocabulary

- **Ephemera:** Items (usually written or printed) created for short-term use.
- **Provenance:** The history, ownership and context of an object, artwork or document.



Equal Positions with Equal Pay, c. 1970, Cincinnati Museum Center

ACTIVITIES

Create a Protest Piece

Recommended for grades 5-8

In the podcast, we learned that messages on protest items can tell us what ideas were important at a moment in time. In this activity, students will practice communicating a message or opinion by designing a protest piece for a historic event.

Remind students that protest materials can take many forms, such as sashes, shirts, signs, songs, hats, posters, murals and buttons. People have used protest ephemera for centuries to communicate political messages. Invite students to combine historic research and creativity to design an object with a historic protest message.

Ask students to choose a historical protest or movement (see below). Instruct them to design a protest item inspired by that event, such as a button, sash, poster, banner or song. Review provenance and how the significance of protest objects ties to the story of the person who created or displayed them. Ask students to develop a backstory for the item they create, including:

- Who created this object? Invent a fictional character who would have made this object and explain why they are involved in a protest.
- Where and how might the object have been displayed?
- What message does the object communicate, and whose perspective does it represent?

Invite students to share their pieces with the class and explain what movement or protest it represents, the backstory of its user, what it communicates and how it tells part of the story of that historic moment. As a class, discuss why a museum would collect or preserve each object. Discuss how objects help museums preserve history and understand the past. If desired, combine the objects into a classroom exhibit of protest ephemera.

Topic Options:

- Boston Tea Party
- Women's Suffrage
- Civil Rights
- Vietnam War
- Abolition of Slavery
- Disability Rights
- Temperance and Prohibition
- Environmental Movements
- Minimum Wage Campaigns
- Censorship/Banned Books

Curate a Protest Collection

Recommended for grades 7-12

We heard in the podcast that curating a collection requires setting a goal, finding stories connected with objects and including many voices. In this activity, students will become museum curators to document a protest, movement or cultural moment in American history.

Work as a class to make a list of what kinds of protest materials museums could collect. Discuss how museums collect objects not just because they are old or rare, but because those objects help people understand what happened, who was involved and why that event mattered. Protest objects often help us understand the context of historical turning points, answering questions such as, “How did we get here?” or “What led up to this moment?” When we collect things, the story and perspective behind each object are just as important as the object itself. Invite students to curate their own collection of protest objects, carefully choosing the objects, stories and voices to include.

Divide students into small groups and invite them to choose a social movement or historical event that generated protest. Each group’s goal is to choose 5-7 objects that tell the story of that moment in time. Students can use images of real historical objects, drawings, sound clips or replica artifacts that they create. For each object, they should write a short explanation that includes:

- What is this object, and how was it used in a protest or movement?
- Why is this object important, and what does it tell us about its time?
- Whose perspective or voice does this object represent, and how does it contribute to a fuller understanding of that event?

Encourage students to consider multiple perspectives. They should include objects that represent the experiences of people who supported, opposed or were impacted by the movement or event. Remind them that museum collections aim to document a broad and inclusive view of history, not just the perspective of the “winners” or most famous participants.

Once students have chosen their objects and considered the stories behind them, invite each group to curate an exhibit sharing their collection and the story of that pivotal time in history. Invite groups to share their exhibits with the class, including why they chose each object, the story behind it and how each object represents a different voice or perspective.



Voter Registration Drive, 1952, Sarge Marsh Photograph Collection, Cincinnati Museum Center

Protests Through Time

Recommended for grades 9-12

In the podcast, we learned that resistance and rebellion are a critical part of our history and central to our democracy. In this activity, students will look at the many ways Americans have protested – from the founding of our nation to today.

Ask students to name some of the forms of protest mentioned in the podcast. Emphasize that protest isn't limited to marches or speeches, but can also show up in songs, clothing, artwork, boycotts, buttons, signs and many other forms. Help students see protest as a creative and flexible way people have responded to the issues and culture of their time. Students will further explore one particular format of protest in the United States, from its beginnings (or even before) until the present.

Divide students into small groups or allow them to work independently. Ask each student or group to choose one form of protest—such as music, signs, clothing, buttons, flyers, posters, murals or another method that interests them. Invite students to research how Americans have used that manner of protest across time as a way to share their message and express emotions. Share links (below) to sites for researching protest memorabilia. Ask students to pay attention to how people used their selected protest medium at different times in history, noting what has and hasn't changed over time (materials, style, technology, tone, topic). Invite students to create short presentations to share their findings with the class. Encourage them to answer:

- What do you notice about the types of images, words or symbolism in this protest medium?
- What type of message did people use this format to convey? Is it informational, emotional or both?
- What events, movements or issues has this form of protest been connected to?
- When was this form of protest first documented?
- Has its use changed over time? How did current events shape the way people used this method at different points in history?

After the presentations, wrap up by reviewing overall patterns in how protest methods have evolved and what has changed or stayed the same over time. Ask students why the practice of protest endures, and what qualities make it an effective form of resistance. Leave students with the message that protest is a creative and essential part of American history, one that they can still see and recognize in the world around them today.

Sites for research:

Note: Some protest materials may contain sensitive material.

- **Music:**
 - California State University Northridge: <https://library.csun.edu/sca/peek-stacks/protest-songs>
 - First Amendment Museum: <https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/history-of-protest-music/protest-music-1774-1911/>
- **Posters:**
 - Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/yanker-posters/?fa=location:united+states%7Csubject:demonstrations>
 - America's Digital Public Library: <https://dp.la/search?q=protest%20broadsides>
- **Buttons:**
 - Harvard Kennedy School Library and Research Services: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/cfa65c76822d481ea76ae7a250b6cb30>
 - University of Michigan Library: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lbc1ic>
 - Duke University Libraries: <https://exhibits.library.duke.edu/exhibits/show/baskin/item/4229>
- **Clothing:**
 - National Museum of American History:
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_509474
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_1900123
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_1899166

STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

- **OH Government 4.15:** Individuals have a variety of opportunities to act in and influence their state and national government. Citizens have both rights and responsibilities in Ohio and the United States.
- **OH Government 4.16:** Civic participation in a democratic society requires individuals to make informed and reasoned decisions by accessing, evaluating and using information effectively to engage in compromise.
- **OH Government 8.20:** Active participation in social and civic groups can lead to the attainment of individual and public goals.
- **OH American Government HS.1:** Opportunities for civic engagement within the structures of government are made possible through political and public policy processes.
- **OH American Government HS.2:** Political parties, interest groups and the media provide opportunities for civic involvement through various means.
- **KY 4.C.RR.1:** Describe the importance of civic participation, and locate examples in past and current events.
- **KY HS.C.RR.2:** Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.
- **KY HS.UH.CE.5:** Evaluate the ways in which groups facing discrimination worked to achieve expansion of rights and liberties from 1877-present.