

DISCUSSION FOUR

CITIZENSHIP

AT THE STATE LEVEL

Introduction to Lincoln as a State Politician

It's worth considering Lincoln's experiences in state politics. As a legislator in Illinois, he pushed for internal improvements and supported the State Bank, often with partisan enthusiasm. As a Representative for Illinois in the United States Congress, he saw less success. His "Spot Resolutions" failed, and his words were used against him to question his patriotism. The acquisition of new territory from Mexico seemed destined to aggravate questions related to the admission of slave states and free states to the Union. He turned to partisan politics to oppose then-President James K. Polk and support candidate Zachary Taylor. Lincoln returned to Springfield at the end of his term with the distinct impression that he had failed as a Congressman. He was not longer willing to return to his role as a state legislator, and he was uncertain as to what future he had in politics, if indeed he had any future at all.

Introduction to the Primary Source: "Legitimate Object of Government"

Only a little is known about Lincoln's "Legitimate Object of Government." It was likely written around the time that he served in state office, or during the time that he served as an Illinois Representative in Washington, D.C. Its title is a self-explanatory description of its content, but consider Lincoln's experiences at this point in his life: how might his experiences in state-related government have affected his view of government as a whole?

Essential Questions to Begin

- What types of issues do people tend to be concerned about at the state level?
- How can arguments arise over whether an issue should be a state concern or a national concern?
- What does good citizenship at the state level look like?
- How can good citizens become more involved in issues at the state level?

Of the People
By the People
For the People

PRIMARY SOURCE

LEGITIMATE OBJECT OF GOVERNMENT

Estimated to have been written at some point in the 1840s

The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves -- in their separate, and individual capacities--

In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere--

The desirable things which the individuals of a people can not do, or can not well do, for themselves, fall into two classes; those which have relation to to wrongs, and those which have not-- Each of these branch off into an infinite variety of subdivisions--


The first -- that in relation to wrongs -- embraces all crimes, misdemesnors, and non-performance of contracts-- The other embraces all which, in it's nature, and without wrong, requires combined action, as public roads and highways, public schools, charities, pauperism, orphanage, estates of the deceased, and the machinery of government itself--

From this it appears that if all men were just there still would be some, though not so much need of government--

For this discussion, too, revisit Lincoln's "House Divided Speech" on page 03.

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 HUMANITIES
TENNESSEE


Abraham Lincoln
LIBRARY & MUSEUM
Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, TN

WHAT MATTERS TO THE COMMUNITY?

Questions on Citizenship at the Local Level

Brainstorm: How do we decide which issues are decided at the state level?

Brainstorm: What issues tend to matter the most to individuals at the state level?

Brainstorm: How might increased participation of citizens at the state level produce healthier communities?

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