



Citizen You: SS.7.CG.1.11
The Rule of Law
VIDEO SCRIPT



1. During his presidency, Richard Nixon was accused of covering up crimes that were done by people working for him. After he resigned from office he did an interview that talked about what he did during his presidency. When he was asked about whether some of his actions could be considered breaking the law, he declared that ‘When the president does it that means it is NOT illegal.’ But he was wrong, because in the United States, we have what we call the rule of law, and this applies to everyone, from the poorest citizen to the president of the United States of America.

2. After watching this video, you will be able to

- compare and contrast the characteristics of a society that operates under the rule of law and one that does not.
- assess the importance of the rule of law in protecting citizens from arbitrary and abusive uses of government power.
- analyze the meaning and importance of due process in the United States legal system.
- evaluate the impact of the rule of law on governmental officials and institutions (e.g., accountability to the law, consistent application and enforcement of the law, decisions based on the law, fair procedures, transparency of institutions).

So let’s begin looking at the rule of law.

3. The rule of law means that the laws of the country apply equally to everyone. In the United States, citizens elect people to represent them and expect them to make laws that apply equally to everyone. This helps create order and fairness in society.

4. The rule of law also applies to the power of the government. The government’s power is controlled through separation of powers and checks and balances. These principles are in our Constitution to make sure that one branch of government does not abuse its power.

5. So if we want to keep the government from abusing its power, we have to remember the amendments of the U.S. Constitution. In the U.S. Constitution, the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments guarantee that citizens accused of crimes will be protected from unfair treatment, this is known as due process of law. Due process and rule of law work hand in hand to protect the rights of citizens. For example, if you’re accused of a crime, the Sixth Amendment guarantees that a judge must tell you what you are accused of. And you have the right to a trial before an impartial jury within a reasonable amount of time (known as a “speedy and public trial”). And the rights of the accused must apply to all citizens fairly and equally. This is the rule of law.

6. What is really most important about the rule of law is that it protects citizens from the government. The Constitution makes sure that government does not become too powerful by separating the powers of government into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and

then making each branch accountable to the others with the principle of checks and balances.

7. Having a written set of laws that must be approved by elected representatives also protects citizens against abuses of government powers and ensures the rule of law.

8. Let's check in. Try to answer the following questions in your own words.

9. What is the rule of law?

10. ANSWER TO QUESTION

11. What role does the Constitution and its amendments play in ensuring we have the rule of law?

12. ANSWER TO QUESTION

13. Let's recap what we've learned so far. The rule of law means that laws of the country apply to all citizens equally. And it's supposed to keep the government from abusing its powers. Separation of powers and checks and balances under the Constitution help ensure the rule of law, and the Constitution and its amendments help ensure everyone is treated equally and fairly under rule of law. Due process works hand in hand with rule of law to ensure that our rights are protected.

14. So let's think about ways that the rule of law impacts government officials and institutions. Government officials – whether they are police officers, senators, judges, or presidents – are accountable to the law.

15. One of the jobs of an independent judiciary, or court system, makes sure that no one is above the law, making sure that government leaders are responsible for their actions. And the rule of law ensures that no one, from the poorest, smallest, weakest of us to the most powerful, is above the law.

16. The rule of law also means that judges and juries make their decisions based on the law, and that they apply the law equally to everyone regardless of wealth, power, and other things that make people different from each other. Judges must use the same laws and procedures, no matter who is on trial.

17. What about the police? Do they have to follow the rule of law? Yes they do! The rule of law applies to the enforcement of the law too. Preventing crimes requires the cooperation of federal, state, and local officials who we trust to apply law enforcement fairly.

18. You know, sometimes people like to complain about having to serve on juries, because it can take so much time.

19. But would it mean for the rule of law if we couldn't get people to serve? Remember that to make sure the rule of law stays strong, citizens must be able to know what the laws are, participate on juries, understand how the legal system works, and know what is in the Bill of Rights.

20. If the legal system is not transparent, or clear, the rule of law is even harder to protect. A transparent legal system requires that the general public know the court system's rules and procedures, which serve as common tools to guarantee justice for all. This ensures the rule of law. We have to know how the system works to ensure that rule of law, due process, and the protection of our rights.

21. What if we didn't have the rule of law? What might life in the United States be like? Well, citizens accused of crimes might stay in jail for a long time with no idea of what they are accused of. The law might be applied differently between the poor and the rich, the powerful and the powerless, men and women, and popular and unpopular groups of people.

22. And without the rule of law, if someone wanted to speak out against the government by protest, petition, or writing a letter to the editor of the newspaper, this person might be arrested and held in prison without a trial if the rule of law is not in place. Without the rule of law, it is easy for the government to abuse its power with no one having the right to say anything about it.

23. So, under the rule of law, when President Nixon said that if the president does something, it can't be illegal, was he right? Definitely not!

24. So, let's check in! Try to answer the following questions in your own words.

25. What would life be like if we did not have the rule of law?

26. ANSWER TO QUESTION

27. Does the president of the United States have to follow the laws of the country?

28. ANSWER TO QUESTION

29. Let's recap what we've learned so far. Let's recap what we've learned so far. The rule of law means that laws of the country apply to all citizens equally. And it's supposed to keep the government from abusing its powers. Separation of powers and checks and balances under the Constitution help ensure the rule of law, and the Constitution and its amendments help ensure everyone is treated equally and fairly under rule of law. Due process works hand in hand with rule of law to ensure that our rights are protected.

30. Remember too that we have to know about courts and juries for rule of law to be protected. If we didn't have the rule of law, people could be imprisoned for protests, the rule of law applies to common citizens AND government officials. Without the rule of law, government could easily abuse its power.

31. Thanks for watching, and remember, the rule of law is one of the things that makes this country great. And just because the president does it **doesn't** mean that it is legal!