

“E Pluribus Unum”

The Latin phrase “E Pluribus Unum” means “out of many, one” and expresses the ideals and aspirations of the American Founding and American identity today. This unofficial national motto of the United States is significant for the ways in which it points toward the unity of Americans around Founding principles and civic virtues.

In 1776, Founders John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson proposed “E Pluribus Unum” as the national motto of the Great Seal of the United States. While the seal was eventually changed in 1782, the motto was associated with an image of a bald eagle representing freedom holding in its talons an olive branch for peace and arrows representing the thirteen colonies that endured.

The original conception of the motto was rooted in the constitutional principle of federalism. The authors hoped the motto would represent the original thirteen states coming together in the federal system to form the national union. New states soon joined the union on an equal basis and were guaranteed a republican form of government. Today, fifty states comprise the United States.

The motto “E Pluribus Unum” also represented the character of the American people. In Federalist #10 and Federalist #51, James Madison writing as Publius demonstrated that the American republic would be an “extended sphere” with a great diversity of views and interests. Even during the late eighteenth century, Americans were a remarkably diverse people. They were many different races and ethnicities, different social classes, different religions, different cultures, and different sectional views.

Over the past two hundred years, the country has continued to grow, welcoming new immigrants from different parts of the world, contributing to a flourishing and diverse nation. Since the Founding of the United States, the unifying principle among its people was found in the ideal of liberty, equality, and free government. Though united by these ideals many continue to practice and preserve their unique cultures and customs especially in their local communities and civic institutions such as neighborhoods, schools, churches, and volunteer organizations. Thus, “E Pluribus Unum” conveys that Americans are united amidst great diversity. Out of many, we are still one.

My Impact Challenge directs us to closely examine and carefully consider the idea of “E Pluribus Unum.” Local civic organizations help to unite local communities in the spirit of a common purpose. Serving others humbly to improve a local community and making a difference is one of the most important civic virtues that citizens can practice. Sacrifice and service to others promotes unity and common purpose in local communities and helps build a vibrant national character among all Americans. Your project can make an important contribution to the idea and practice of “E Pluribus Unum.”

Suggested Discussion Questions

The following questions can be used to help think through the concept of E Pluribus Unum. These are not required but may be helpful as you prepare your project components.

What does E Pluribus Unum mean to you?

To me, E Pluribus Unum means...

Ask friends and family what the term means to them. What similarities do you see between their meanings and your own?

Some of the similarities are...

How can we live out the idea of E Pluribus Unum in our community?

One way to live out the idea is to...

How does service in the community contribute to a sense of E Pluribus Unum?

Service contributes to the E Pluribus Unum by...