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# CONSIDERING THE NATURE OF PATRIOTISM WITH A SORTING ACTIVITY

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## Abstract

This article describes an activity in which students sort 10 index cards with actions that could be considered patriotic in order from least to most patriotic. With minimal preparation required, this is a simple activity that generates critical thinking and conversation among students about the nature of patriotism in context.

**Keywords:** patriotism, Constitution Day, sorting, small-group activity

Every year at Emporia State University on September 17, what is celebrated as Constitution Day, local high school students are invited to a day-long series of activities and workshops to learn more about and engage with the Constitution and Bill of Rights. In my workshop, I wanted students to engage with the idea of patriotism and what it means to be a patriot. With this in mind, I created the following activity: students received a set of ten 3 x 5 index cards with various actions written on them that could be interpreted as patriotic and were told to sort them from least to most patriotic. I split them into groups and allotted them five minutes to come to a consensus with their group about the ordering of their cards. The index cards I created contained the following activities:

1. Serving in the military
2. Reading American literature
3. Serving on a jury
4. Supporting national sports teams
5. Peacefully protesting government policy
6. Buying America-made products
7. Wearing clothes with the American flag
8. Voting in an election
9. Volunteering at a local organization
10. Running for political office

Before students began the activity, I read all the cards aloud and gave an example for each to avoid confusion and to give them a concrete example to draw from. Depending on the class or age of the students, these prompts could change. For instance, in a senior-level class where students have taken US History, perhaps adding specific examples, such as burning draft cards in the Vietnam War, could engage students in deeper conversations. It is also worth noting that, prior to this activity, students created their own definition of patriotism then compared it to an academic definition. This gave students context and an agreed upon definition to reference as they completed the activity.

When preparing to facilitate this activity, I was nervous as to what conversations this may inspire between students, and how conversations about patriotism and American identity can become unproductive. However, at no point did I identify a tense conversation or hurtful rhetoric shared between students. They negotiated among themselves about the order of their cards and had deep conversations about the nature of patriotism. Interestingly, every single group of students rated serving in the military as the most patriotic out of the options they were given. The order of the rest of the cards varied, but students seemed to prioritize the options which required action and choice over those that did not.

Overall, I believe this activity could be beneficial for classrooms of any age. The nature of the activity is flexible in that it allows the teacher to choose which options students will consider, but also requires critical thinking as students debate and prioritize some options over others. Although I allowed students to put some options as a tie, to further encourage conversation and critical thinking, one could remove this option. In general, I would consider this a relatively simple activity with minimal preparation required from the teacher that has the potential to generate interesting conversation among students and allow them to critically consider the concept of patriotism.

### **Author Biography**

Sasha Joy is a senior BSE English and BA Spanish student at Emporia State University. She is student teaching in spring 2026 and plans to attend graduate school after graduation.

