

The Constitution



THE BIG IDEAS

Summary



- This lesson engages students in a study of the Constitution to learn the significance of "Six Big Ideas" contained in it.
- Students analyze the text of the Constitution in a variety of ways, examine primary sources to identify their relationship to its central ideas and debate the core constitutional principles as they relate to today's political issues.

Rationale



- In order to understand how our government works students must understand the major ideas that underpin it. This lesson asks students to explore those ideas and apply them to current issues.

Guiding Question



- What is the significance of the Six Big Ideas in the Constitution historically and for Americans today?
- The Six Big Ideas are:
 - Limited Government
 - Republicanism
 - Checks and Balances
 - Federalism
 - Separation of Powers
 - Popular Sovereignty

Vocabulary



- Articles of Confederation
- Federal
- Ratification
- Sovereignty
- Great Compromise
- Republic
- 3/5 Compromise

Part 1: Orientation to the Constitution



- **Mapping the Constitution**
 - To understand the Six Big Ideas which underpin the Constitution students need to be familiar with the text itself.
 - Mapping the text of the Constitution presents the national charter in a way that illustrates the attention the Founders gave to the structure and power of government.
 - The 4447 words of the U.S. Constitution are the foundation of our nation and establish the federal government's structures and branches.
 - By counting the words in each article and calculating the percentage of the whole it represents, students can determine how much of the overall project was dedicated to each structure or power

Part 1: Instructions



- Fill out the table on Handout 1 to determine the number of words contained in each Article of the Constitution, and the percentage of the whole document that represents.
- This can be done easily with a digital copy of the text using the word count feature available in most word processing programs.
- Map the Constitution by representing the percentages from the table in a visual form on Handout 1.
- Using different colors for each of the Articles and the Preamble, color in the squares to represent the percentage of the whole Constitution that is dedicated to each article. Each square represents 1% of the document (round up or down as necessary).

Part 1: Discussion Questions



- Which topics received the most attention in the Constitution?
- Does the map suggest hypotheses about the relative importance to the Founders of the powers of the new government?
- To what extent do the powers of each branch of government displayed in the map match how the federal government works today?

Part 2: Introducing the Founders



- Studying the Founders themselves can aid in understanding the government they created.
- Many of the Founders knew each other before the Constitutional Convention and were able to draw on their personal relationships when trying to garner a consensus for specific proposals to be included in the Constitution.
- Students will explore these relationships by creating a Founders' Social Network using Handout 2.

Part 2: Instructions



- After students complete the profile and likes section on Handout 2, post them on the wall.
- Students will then browse the other profiles to determine who would likely be "friends" with their assigned Founder, then fill out the Friends section of the handout.
- Direct students to these web sites for biographical information:
 - **National Archives "America's Founding Fathers"**
 - ✦ http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_founding_fathers.html
 - **USConstitution.net:**
 - ✦ <http://www.usconstitution.net/index.html>
 - **National Constitution Center:**
 - ✦ <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/intro.html>

Part 3: Outlining the Constitution's Six Big Ideas



- Students will analyze the text of the Constitution to identify specific examples of the Six Big Ideas in action.
- Provide the list of the Six Big Ideas to the students, direct them to define each term, then discuss with the whole class to check for understanding.

Part 3: Instructions



- Divide the students into six groups with each group assigned a Big Idea.
- Provide a copy of the Constitution to each group (printed or electronic) and direct them to examine the text to identify two examples of the assigned Big Idea in action.
- Students will fill in Handout 3 with the quote from the Constitution and its location.
- Students will then rephrase the quote in their own words to hone in on its meaning.
- There will be multiple correct answers for each Big Idea. Each group will share their examples with the class.

Part 4: Analyzing Primary Sources to Relate the Six Big Ideas to History



- Students will apply their understanding of the Big Ideas gained in Step 3 to actual documents which were created or received by the federal government as it was exercising its powers under the Constitution.
- Students will act as historians who must consider the source of each document, when it was created and its content to determine how it relates to the Big Ideas.

Part 4: Instructions



- The teacher will list the Six Big Ideas on the board or post them on a wall.
- Pairs of students will be given a copy of one document from a selected list.
- Students will carefully read and inspect the document to determine which Big Idea is represented within it.
- They will then post the document under the corresponding Big Idea on the board or wall.

Part 4: Instructions



- After all pairs have posted their document, the pairs will each take a turn describing their assigned document and explaining three clues in the document which support their determination of the Big Idea illustrated within.
- Some documents may be related to more than one Big Idea so students should be prepared to justify why they determined that one was more relevant than another.

Part 5: Debating the Six Big Ideas in America Today



- More than 220 years after the ratification of the Constitution, the Six Big Ideas still inspire debate.
- Different understandings of how the Big Ideas should be manifested in the actions of the federal government often engender debates over what government should be doing in the name of the people it serves.
- Students will obtain an understanding of these current disputes by taking sides in a debate featuring current issues.

Part 5: Debate Format



- Two teams will be assigned one of the scenarios described below. One team will argue for Position A and the other will argue for Position B.
- Each debate will have five participants on each side of the issue. Each participant will speak for no more than two minutes and teams will alternate speakers. Teams can use Handout 4 to plan the arguments to be made during the debate. Encourage students to anticipate and respond to the arguments that could be made by the opposing team.
- Each team will choose a speaker to deliver the opening (an overview of the team's position).
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- Three speakers on each team should give supporting arguments—one argument per speaker.
- One speaker on each team should deliver the closing argument

Part 5: Debate Questions



- The Idea: Limited Government
- Question: To what extent should the federal government be involved in economic issues?
 - Position A: The federal government's powers over taxation as well as international and interstate trade allow significant latitude in directing economic policy.
 - Position B: The federal government should only act to remedy unfavorable economic conditions for business activity.

Part 5: Debate Questions



- The idea: Republicanism
- Question: What should be the role of citizens in creating public policy?
 - Position A: Public policy should reflect the opinion of voters.
 - Position B: Public policy should be created by officials who are most informed about the issues involved.

Part 5: Debate Questions



- The idea: Checks and Balances
- Question: When the President makes a nomination, what should be the nature of the Senate's "advice and consent?"
 - Position A: The Senate should defer to the President's choice of who he wants working under him.
 - Position B: It is the Senate's duty to make an independent judgment of a nominee's suitability for a position serving the American people, even if that means denying the President his choice.

Part 5: Debate Questions



- The idea: Federalism
- Question: How should power be divided between the federal government and the states?
 - Position A: The Federal government should retain the most power because it is best positioned to insure fair treatment, safety and equal protection for all Americans.
 - Position B: The states should retain the most power because they are closer to the people, better informed on local issues and best positioned to exercise authority for their residents.

Part 5: Debate Questions



- The idea: Separation of Powers
- Question: Once Congress declares war and the President assumes the role of Commander-in-Chief who decides how the war ends?
 - Position A: Congress, the policy making branch which represents the people, should determine peace terms.
 - Position B: The President as Commander-in-Chief is in the best position to determine appropriate actions.

Part 5: Debate Questions



- The idea: Popular Sovereignty
- Question: Should voter ballot initiatives be allowed to overturn laws passed by legislative bodies
 - Position A: Yes; ballot initiatives allow voters to directly participate in their government.
 - Position B: No; voters already express their views through election of public officials.