



Lesson 18.20 “Balance of Power”

Unit 18: Civics and Government Today

Lesson Objectives

- Students will identify how an in-balance of power impacts the function of the government
- Students will participate in a simulation to analyze how the branches of government balance each other
- Students will explain how disagreement plays an important role in government processes

Lesson Competencies

- I can identify, explain, and analyze the core civic practices and foundational principles that guide governments and communities. (Moose SS)
- I can I can present grade-appropriate information that is supported with evidence, elaborating when elicited, and respond to questions with relevant ideas or comments. (ELA 7)
- I can logically connect reasons, facts, analyses, and sources and provide a conclusion that addresses possible counterclaims. (ELA 6)

Essential Questions

How has New Hampshire come to be the way it is?
How have New Hampshire’s people shaped its government?

Focus Questions

How is a balance of power part of our democracy?
What are the responsibilities of federal, state, and local government?

Estimated Time

One 45-minute class session

Materials & Equipment

Unit 6: Learn It! “[Foundational Principles](#)” pages 7-8
Infographic: “[The Tree of Liberty](#)”
See-saw graphics for projection
Blank paper
Class set of “Benefits of Disagreement”



Educator Introduction & Rationale

One of the foundational principles of American government is the idea that government should be limited so as not to have too much power over its citizens. The U.S. Constitution does this in two ways. First, federalism is the idea of splitting the government into levels of government with power shared between them. American government is divided into three major levels: the national or federal government, state governments, and local governments. The federal and state governments each have different responsibilities but interact with each other and work together to provide services and establish laws. Second, the federal government is divided into three branches: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. State governments also follow this same basic structure. Each branch has ways of limiting the other branches, known as the power to check. Please see the Educator Overview for Unit 6 for more information.

This is the ninth lesson for middle school students in Unit 18, Civics and Government Today, and can stand alone from the unit but works best with the other units on federalism. In this lesson, students discover the different ways the structure of government limits government power. The activation begins by asking students to think about how extremes on one side or the other can prevent the government from serving the best interest of the people they govern. In the next part of the lesson, students will participate in a role play/simulation of the three branches of the federal government. Finally, an extension about the importance of disagreement in a democracy is available for students who are ready to think about compromise in government on a deeper level.

Please adapt all the material in this lesson, as necessary to meet the needs of the students in your classroom. Please note, lesson vocabulary and definitions are at the end of the document. You may wish to preview these with your students.

Students may also read the "Learn It!" section of Unit 18: Civics and Government Today, specifically the sections on "Federalism and the Federal Government" and "State and Local Government" as a preview for this lesson. The information provided in this section will give students a background the three branches of government, the different levels of federal government, as well as an understanding of how they all work together to create, pass, and enforce laws to keep us safe.

Before the Learning Activity

Student reading and comprehension questions

Why is a limited government important? Direct students to read Unit 6: Learn It! "Foundational Principles" pages 7-8, including the "Tree of Liberty" infographic linked on page 8.

Students should be able to answer:

1. Why is it important to limit the power the federal government has?
2. What are the two ways the new Americans limited the government they formed?
3. What are the three branches of the federal government? What are the four levels of government?

Students seeking to learn more specifically about the three branches of government can refer to the Unit 18 text linked on page 8.

Learning Activity

Activation

See-saw of compromise. Ask students to think about a debate that has two clear sides. You could use something that the students might be familiar with from the local news, or an idea like 'what flavor of ice cream should the cafeteria serve, chocolate or vanilla?' Take a vote within your class to see how many people are on each side of the debate. Then discuss who in your school would be responsible for making this decision (the school board, the principle, the department heads, etc.).

First, ask students what might happen if those in charge of making the decision only considered one side. In this ice cream example, this could look like only having two different choices of chocolate flavors – chocolate fudge and triple chocolate. Then, ask what the reverse might look like (vanilla being the only option). Finally, ask them what a balanced decision might be (different flavor choices, optional toppings and mix-ins, swirled ice cream). Note that there are positives and negatives to all three possibilities, but that a skewed balance is frequently a problem.

Teaching Tip: For visual learners, it might help to use a see-saw image to think about these three possible outcomes. Graphics are provided in the Worksheet file for this lesson.

Direct Instruction

Review with students that:

- Federalism is the idea of dividing the government into different branches – like federal, state, and local; or executive, legislative, and judicial
- The Constitution limits the power each of these branches has and assigns certain roles to particular branches
- When the branches work together, it forces them to take multiple perspectives into account and provides "checkpoints"



to make sure no one branch has all the power and is making all of the decisions. This also means that all three branches need to work together in order for anything to get done.

Guided Practice Balance of power simulation. Divide students into the three groups, one for each branch of the federal government: Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. Quickly review each branch (it is recommended to have the branches posted on the board or somewhere for the students to easily locate):

- Executive: The President, Vice President, and Cabinet (which is omitted for this activity).
- Legislative: Congress – The House of Representatives and the Senate.
- Judicial: The Supreme Court

Ask who would like to be the President. If more than one student volunteers, you may have the rest of the class vote by a show of hands (have everyone close their eyes so it is anonymous). The person with the most votes is President, the President may select their Vice President from the class.

The size of your judicial branch depends on the size of the class, use your best judgement to determine this. Make sure it is an odd number, it is recommended to have 5, 7, or 9 justices. Once the students have volunteered to be justices, have those students vote on which one they would like to be the Chief Justice. The Chief Justice will be in charge of facilitating discussions amongst the court justices.

The rest of the students will make up the legislative branch. Half of them will be the House of Representatives, half of them will be the Senate.

The students that make up the House of Representatives will work together for 10 minutes to propose 3 different bills that they would like to become laws. Once they have drafted these 3 bills, they will present them to the Senate.

The Senate will then work together to pick just 1 of the bills they would like to push forward. They may make changes to the bill that they find necessary. They will also determine the consequences for breaking the law. After they have chosen the bill and made changes, they will then propose it to the House of Representatives again. The House may choose to make changes to the law or the consequences of breaking it or may agree to them. If they choose to make changes, it will have to be presented and approved by the Senate again.

Once the bill has been approved by both parts of Congress, the bill moves on to the President and Vice President. They will discuss between just the two of them whether they think the bill should be passed into a law. They will also discuss the consequences for breaking the law. The Vice President may share their opinion with the

President, but ultimately it is the President's decision. The President has two choices:

- Veto – If the President vetoes the bill, it will be sent back to the Legislative Branch to be revised using the feedback the President provided. If it is revised, it will need to be approved by both houses in Congress before it can be resubmitted to the President.
- Law – If the President agrees with the bill, they will sign it. Once it is signed, it is officially a law.

Once the law has been signed, the judicial branch will convene to determine if the law is constitutional or unconstitutional. The Chief Justice will facilitate this discussion to ensure it is a respectful conversation amongst the justices.

- This discussion will happen in front of the rest of the class; however, the other branches may not intervene.
- The judicial branch should also discuss the consequences of breaking the law. They may pass the law but can decide that one of the consequences is unconstitutional and may choose to strike (remove) that consequence.
- They will then vote on whether the law is constitutional or unconstitutional. The majority vote will win.

Once a majority has won, have the class come back together as a whole. Ask the students the following questions:

- Where did you see the branches balance each other in the simulation? What might happen if these "checkpoints" didn't exist?
- Do you think it was a productive process? Why or why not?
- What ways do you think the process could improve?
- Do you think it's important for all three branches to work together? Why or why not?

Extension

The benefits of disagreement. A variety of opinions and viewpoints is a crucial aspect to our democracy and strengthens it. Acknowledge with students that disagreement and discussing difficult topics is hard. Pivot the issue and distribute the "Benefits of Difference" handout. Give students time to think individually, respond, and discuss as a class. Although disagreement can be difficult, what are the benefits? Ask students to consider their experience in the simulation and think about how disagreement and compromise played a part in their outcome.

Standards

New Hampshire Social Studies Frameworks:

- ✓ Civics and Governments: The Nature and Purpose of Government (SS:CV:8:1.1, SS:CV:8:1.2)
- ✓ Civics and Governments: Structure and Function of United States and New Hampshire Government (SS:CV:8:2.1)

NCSS Themes:

- ✓ Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance
- ✓ Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

C3 Frameworks:

- ✓ Civic and Political Institutions (D2.Civ.4.6-8)
- ✓ Participation and Deliberation (D2.Civ.8.6-8)
- ✓ Processes, Rules, and Laws (D2.Civ.11.6-8)

Common Core ELA:

- ✓ Key Ideas and Details (RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.3)
- ✓ Craft and Structure (RH.6-8.4)
- ✓ Production and Distribution of Writing (WHST.6-8.4)
- ✓ Comprehension and Collaboration (SL.8.1, SL.8.1b, SL.8.3)
- ✓ Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (SL.8.4)

Lesson Vocabulary

branch of government	(noun) A section of government with its own purpose; the U.S. government has three sections of the government with different responsibilities that support each other to create, examine, and enforce laws
central government	(noun) The center or federal government of a group of states; the U.S. central government is in Washington, D.C.
checks and balances	(noun) The idea where separate parts of the government are given powers to stop each other's actions and are made to share power
constitution	(noun) A document laying out the rules for how a government will work
democracy	(noun) A government ruled by majority vote of the people
executive branch	(noun) The section of government that puts plans and laws into effect
federal	(adjective) The central government of a group of states; the U.S. federal government is in Washington, D.C.
federalism	(adjective) When local towns, states, and the federal government share power together
government	(noun) A group of people that have the power to make and carry out laws for a community
judicial branch	(noun) The section of government that decides if laws are fair
law	(noun) A rule that regulates the actions of members of a community
legislative branch	(noun) The section of government that makes laws

- local control** (noun) When decisions about government are left up to the local community, rather than the state or federal government
- majority** (noun) More than half of a group
- minority** (noun) Less than half of a group
- representative** (noun) The person selected by a group of people who will communicate their views and make laws for them
- veto** (verb) To reject something; in government, to reject the final version of a bill passed by the legislature

