



Lesson 18.19 “Three Branches”

Unit 18: Civics and Government Today

Lesson Objectives

- Students will review the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government.
- Students will identify the powers of each branch.
- Students will reflect on how the powers of each branch balance each other.

Lesson Competencies

- I can analyze, interpret, evaluate, and use information delivered orally or visually. (ELA 7)
- I can identify, explain, and analyze the core civic practices and foundational principles that guide governments and communities. (Moose SS)
- I can use reasoning, planning, and evidence to gather, select, and cite information to support inferences, interpretations, and analyses. (ELA 8)

Essential Questions

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

Focus Questions

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

Grade Level

Grades 7-8

Estimated Time

One 45-minute class session

Materials & Equipment

Access to [Unit 6](#) and [Unit 18](#) Learn It! student readings
Infographics: “[Limited Government](#),” “[The Tree of Liberty](#),” “[Three Branches of Government](#),” and “[Organization of the Federal Government](#)”
Partner sets of “Three Branches Layout”
Partner sets of “Three Branch Tiles”
Glue sticks (optional)
Class set of “Checks and Balances”



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](#), especially page 5, for more information.

This is the 19th lesson in [Unit 18, Civics and Government Today](#). It is designed for middle school students. It can stand alone from the unit, but works well in conjunction with Lesson 18.20, Balance of Power and Lesson 18.18, Federalism: The Levels of Government, to illustrate how the foundational principle of limited government works. In this lesson, students discover the different ways the structure of the federal government limits government power. In the activation, students will consider why it is important to limit the power of the federal government. Then, they will play a sorting game to determine the responsibilities of each of the three branches. Next, students will deepen their understanding of the three branches by identifying how powers granted to each branch can check the power of the others.

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

Learning Activity

Actuation

Why is it important to limit the power of the federal government?

Project or write this question for students. Give one or two minutes for them to think or write individually, then have them turn and talk with a neighbor. Discuss as a class and create a well-rounded discussion.

Possible responses:

- Elected officials could refuse to leave office when their term is up. There could be a king or a dictator.
- Without limits, the government could decide to keep people from voting.
- The leader(s) of the country would not have to obey the laws.
- The government could try to control everything for people, like where they live, where they work, and where they can travel.
- The government could make everyone practice the same religion.
- The government could take your property.
- The government could decide how much things cost.
- If you disagree with the government, you could get arrested.

Teaching Tip: If students are slow to get started, project the "[Limited Government](#)" infographic to help prompt discussion.

Direct Instruction

Project the "[The Tree of Liberty](#)" infographic.

Explain that the Founders wanted to limit the power of the new government they were created, for all of the reasons you just discussed.

First, they wrote down everything that the government could and could not do in constitutions.

Then, they split the government into three different levels—federal, state, and local.

Finally, they divided the federal government into three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial. Point out the branches of the tree on the infographic.

Student Reading

Direct students to read the following:

Unit 6, Establishing Government, Learn It! "[Foundational Principles](#)," page 7 and "[The U.S. Constitution](#)," page 2.

Unit 18, Civics and Government Today, Learn It! "[Federalism and the Federal Government](#)," page 9, including the chart "[Three Branches of Government](#)" and the infographic "[Organization of the Federal Government](#)."



Guided Practice

What are the roles of the three branches of government?

Project the "[Three Branches of Government](#)" chart and review with students that the three branches of our federal government are called the legislative branch, the executive Branch, and the judicial Branch. The legislative branch makes the laws, the executive branch carries out the laws, and the judicial branch evaluates the laws.

Explain to students that they will work with a partner to identify the main functions of each branch, using the reading in Unit 18, Civics and Government Today, Learn It! "[Federalism and the Federal Government](#)," pages 10-12. (Also available as a [downloadable pdf](#), pages 25-27.)

Distribute "Three Branches Tiles" and "Three Branches of Government" worksheets to pairs of students. Direct partners to cut and sort the tiles into the appropriate column on the chart, referring to the reading to help complete the task. If you wish, ask students to paste the tiles into the columns.

As the students are sorting the tiles, walk around the room to help guide them in the correct direction. After most of the pairs have correctly placed their tiles, review the answers with the class as a whole group so the students gain a better understanding of the role and responsibilities of each branch. Display or distribute the "Three Branches of Government Answer Key" to help with this.

Independent Practice

How do the three branches of government ensure a balance of power?

Distribute copies of the "Checks and Balances" worksheet. Have students fill out the worksheet individually, and then review as a class.

Reflection

Discuss with students why it is important that our government has three branches. Emphasize that the purpose of the branches is to separate the power of the government so no one branch has too much control or can overpower the others. This helps ensure that our government is operated in an equal and democratic manner.

Reinforcement

Students who need reinforcement may benefit from listening to [Limits on Each Branch of Government: Balance of Powers, Part 7](#), a 60-Second Civics podcast from the Center for Civic Education.

Extension

For students who are ready to think more deeply about the three branches of the federal government and how they help put checks and balances in place, assign this writing prompt:

Pick one check from the "Checks and Balances" worksheet. Imagine what would happen if that check did not exist. Write one paragraph about the potential consequences of not having that check in place.

Note: Adapted from C-Span Classroom, Lesson Plan: Middle School Checks and Balances.

<https://www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?16940>.



Standards

New Hampshire Social Studies Frameworks:

- ✓ Civics and Governments: Structure and Function of United States and New Hampshire Government (SS:CV:8:2.1, SS:CV:8:2.2)

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, D2.Civ.5.6-8)

Common Core ELA:

- ✓ Key Ideas and Details (RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2)
- ✓ Comprehension and Collaboration (SL.8.1a, SL.8.1b)
- ✓ 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
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
executive branch	(noun) The section of government that puts plans and laws into effect
federalism	(adjective) When local towns, states, and the federal government share power together
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
veto	(verb) To reject something; in government, to reject the final version of a bill passed by the legislature