



Lesson 18.18 “Federalism: The Levels of Government”

Unit 18: Civics and Government Today

Lesson Objectives

- Students will discuss a comparison of their school’s governance to the country’s governance to form an understanding of federalism.
- Students will define different ways in which the federal, state, and local governments work separately and together.
- Students will explain how “We the People” is a key part of federalism.

Lesson Competencies

- 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 identify, explain, and analyze the core civic practices and foundational principles that guide governments and communities. (Moose SS)
- I can identify a focus and employ informational text structures to develop and elaborate on my central idea. (ELA 5)

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](#)”
Class set of “Structure of Government”
Cake graphics for display



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 seventh lesson for middle school students in Unit 18, Civics and Government Today, and can stand alone from the unit. In this lesson, students discover the different ways the structure of government limits government power. This lesson opens with an activation that encourages students to compare the branches of government to how their classroom, school, and district operates similarly to the government. Students will explore the responsibilities that belong to the local, state, and federal governments, respectively. A reinforcement activity asks students to consider the fourth branch of government, "We the People."

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 founding Americans limited the government they formed?
3. What are the branches of the 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

My school and federalism. The concept of federalism, which is the federal, state, and local governments working together to govern the country, is a difficult one for students since they frequently see "government" as one big entity.

To help them make concrete connections, open a discussion about how your school district is governed. Consider these questions together:

- Who makes decisions about school rules? About classroom rules?
- Who enforces them?
- Who decides the schedule of the lunches and recess?
- Who handles money for field trips and special events?
- Who decides the dates of vacations and holidays?
- Who decides classroom setup? Classroom schedules?
- Who decides the budget for a school?

Guide the discussion to help students understand that there is more than one level of governance or organization in the school district. Optionally, use a whiteboard or chart paper to sketch out the different levels. Like in the U.S. government, everyone works together, knowing and doing their various responsibilities, to make a positive learning environment for students, the citizens. Tell students that just as different levels of the school district work together, so too do different levels of the country work together to govern the country and make it a good place to live.

Direct Instruction

Review with students the questions at the bottom of "The Tree of Liberty" infographic:

- Why is the tree a good way to describe the organization of the U.S. government?

- What are some of the positives of limited government? What are some of the problems that could happen?
- Why is the soil that the tree is planted in a good metaphor for the American people?
- Think of an issue important to you. How could the decisions of the local government affect that issue? How about the state government? The federal government?

Guided Practice

Structure of government. Distribute "Structure of Government". Have students work in pairs to fill out the first two columns. Review answers as a class.

Next, display the two pictures of the cakes. Explain to students that people used to think of the government as a layer cake – each of the federal, state, and local "layers" being distinct. Now, we think of it more as a marble cake – with the levels swirling together to make up the larger whole.

Ask students to independently complete the final column – they may already have ideas from their work on the first columns. Discuss how the branches of government work together to create the "whole."

Extension

The fourth branch of government: the people. Explain to the students that there is actually a fourth branch of government: we, us, them – "We the People"! Without us, there would be no one to elect the President, or any of the members of Congress!

Have the students write a multi-paragraph response that answers two of the following questions:

- Do you agree with the statement that the citizens are the fourth branch of the U.S. Government? Why or why not?
- What role do you think the citizens play in the government?
- Do you think the role that citizens play is important to how the government runs? Explain why or why not.
- Do you think citizens should have a smaller or larger role in how the government operates? Or should their role stay the same as it currently is? Explain why or not.

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)
- ✓ 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)
- ✓ Integration of Knowledge (RH.6-8.7)
- ✓ Text Types and Purposes (WHST.6-8.1a, WHST.6-8.1b, WHST.6-8.1c WHST.6-8.2b, WHST.6-8.2d,)
- ✓ Comprehension and Collaboration (SL.8.1)
- ✓ 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.
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
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
law	(noun) A rule that regulates the actions of members of a community
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