
The Checks and Balances Game

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OVERVIEW

Teaching the Constitution is the hardest task of the year for government and American history teachers. Those endless charts of checks and balances and how a bill becomes a law stymie teacher and student alike. In desperation, in the face of drowning in a sea of "dittoed sheets," we began to develop the following activity.

GOALS

In addition to the usual goals involved in mastering the Constitution, the major strength of this activity is that kids become passionately involved with the Constitution, government, the news, and their own learning. They gain pride and confidence in their ability to master difficult material.

AUDIENCE

Grades 8-11.

TIME TO COMPLETE

Periodically, over a six- to eight-week period.

PROCEDURE

On the first day of school, divide the students into the House and Senate and the Judicial and Executive branches, give each person a copy of the Constitution, and tell them that at the end of the week they will need to know it "cold." Discuss with the kids ways in which they can organize themselves including:

- dividing up the Constitution by Articles or branches
- choosing a team for offense and a team for defense
- dividing up the Constitution by important national issues
- assigning roles to each member of the group
- finding information inside and outside the classroom, from books and people

Talk about ways to gather information and to communicate it by:

- dividing up newspapers and TV channels
- making a buddy system and telephone chain
- rewriting parts of the Constitution in their own words for each person

Let them work for a week, answering their questions when they have ones which are specific and show that they are beginning to wrestle with the material. At the end of the week, give them ten minutes to organize themselves on an easy problem such as "The Air Force is formed." Then ask them for:

- jurisdiction
- the relevant Article and Section of the Constitution (from their notes)
- a summary, in their own words, of the relevant section
- any precedents they have found
- a solution to the problem
- any rebuttals to other groups

The rebuttal process usually takes care of the "right answer." If one group cites an incorrect section, another is delighted to point out the error. Rarely does the teacher need to intrude upon the process to make sure they are correct.

The group scores one point for each correct answer. Points are added up until the end of the game. The total number of points earned by the winning team is then divided by the number of team members; each member's individual points are added to his or her final exam score.

Students need the opportunity to reorganize the group's ideas and thinking, to plan who will answer which part of the problem, and then to speak clearly and loudly. The rebuttal portion forces them to take accurate notes on what other groups say and to answer quickly.

Inevitably, one group gives a beautiful answer. Real panic sets in when the other three groups realize they are still at sea; members of those groups shout at each other and reorganize the work in a way they feel will be productive. For some groups, having this experience once is enough; others will go through it several times before they find a way of organizing their learning that is best for them.

Then give the whole class a few days to continue learning before giving them a second easy problem such as, "A Texas BBQ restaurant in New York City has been invited by the governor of Texas to secede from New York and become a part of Texas."

Regularly present more complicated and more frequent problems, giving them less time to gather information. We often give problems as homework and gather answers at the beginning of the next class.

A presentation at the end of the activity helps focus kids' learning and also provides a natural celebration. It gives kids the opportunity to dress up appropriately and to feel very special and important. Investing a few dollars in cheap, disposable graduation gowns for robes for the Supreme Court justices is well worth it.

The Checks and Balances Game allows us to place the Constitution in its own time as well as to focus on its importance in ours. It ties in the events leading up to its writing and brings in current events. Playing the game in September permits us to refocus on the Constitution constantly during the year as major issues come into the news.

EVALUATION

The culminating activity is all the evaluation that is really needed. It is thrilling to see kids who have trouble learning dive into the Constitution and understand it at a far more sophisticated level than a reasonable person would believe possible. In addition, each student keeps a daily log of what he or she does and what other people did to help. At the end of the game, each student writes a summary of his or her work for the entire period.

In moving about the room and creatively eavesdropping, the teacher also picks up evaluative information. It is also very informative to watch the process of the members of the winning groups dividing up their points.

TIPS FOR THE TEACHER

Note that the room becomes very noisy and messy during this game. The students' passion may infuriates other teachers, and you cannot expect the students to sit down in their chairs and immediately return to a teacher-centered classroom.



No Way! My Parents Will Kill Me! Determining Your Political Party

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OVERVIEW

American politics is dominated by two major political parties: Democrats and Republicans. Policy is usually determined by the party in power. Secondary students have a difficult time determining their party affiliation, if any. They are aware of sharp differences but usually don't understand what they are. This lesson allows students to determine their affiliation.

GOALS

As a result of this lesson students will:

- Be able to differentiate 16 issues confronting the Republican and Democratic parties.
- Determine whether they are in agreement with a particular party.

AUDIENCE

Grades 9-12. It can be taught in American History, Government, Civics, or Contemporary Issues.

TIME TO COMPLETE

One 50-minute class session.

MATERIALS

A sheet of paper for each student.

PROCEDURE

1. Have students divide their paper into three columns. At the top of their paper have students list each column as Group A, Group B, and Group C.
2. Place the following on the chalk board:

Issue	Group A	Group B	Group C
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Explain to the class that you are going to discuss 16 social and political issues. They are to write the issue topic under "issue". You will then give the position of each group on the particular issue. Students are to place a check under the group they are most closely aligned with.

Example:

Issue	Group A	Group B	Group C
Inflation		*	
Abortion	*		

When students are ready to begin, the teacher should state the issue and then present each group's position using the Teacher's Guide. At the conclusion of the list, students should add up their checks in each column. At this time the teacher should inform the class that Group A answers generally represent the Democratic Party position, Group B answers are generally the Republican Party position, and that Group C answers represent the Libertarian Party's position.

EVALUATION

There are several ways to evaluate this lesson.

1. Have students write a paragraph entitled:
As a Republican/Democrat the most pressing American issue is _____ because _____.
2. Have students administer the survey to their family and report back to the class.
3. Facilitate a discussion using local party leaders.

TIPS FOR THE TEACHER

Students must be able to understand the issues. You might spend the previous day explaining such terms as the Federal Reserve. Some students will have scores of 8 and 8. They will ask you how they should register for voting purposes. When students are split, you might encourage them to look at the individual leaders of each party to see with whom they feel more comfortable. Each party writes a platform every four years. Write the national and state headquarters for copies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Oklahoma Observer, Super Southern Primary Thumbnails, February 25, 1988.
Libertarian Party Platform
Democratic and Republican National Platforms



Teacher's Guide

1. What should the federal government do about inflation?
 - A. Impose wage and price controls, as well as limit interest rates.
 - B. Federal Reserve Board should hold money supply at a steady rate instead of wide fluctuations.
 - C. Government should stop printing money, return to the gold standard, and abolish the Federal Reserve.
2. Should abortion be legal?
 - A. It is a woman's right.
 - B. It is murder and should be a crime.
 - C. The government should stay out of this issue, neither imposing criminal penalties nor forcing anyone to subsidize another's abortion.
3. Should prayer be allowed in public school?
 - A. No. It violates the separation of church and state.
 - B. Yes. Our founding fathers did not intend the First Amendment to deny children the right to pray in school.
 - C. The government should not be operating the schools so there would not be a problem with this issue.
4. Should children be required to attend school?
 - A. Yes, otherwise poor parents would not be able to afford equal education.
 - B. Yes, children should be educated in order to compete in business and with foreign nations.
 - C. No. It violates the rights of parents who should be able to decide for themselves on educational programs.
5. Should the U.S. government send aid to other countries?
 - A. Yes, to help the poor and to have a good human rights record.
 - B. Yes, to help those governments that are trying to resist communism.
 - C. No. American taxpayers should have their money go to America.
6. Should the government intervene militarily in other countries?
 - A. Yes, to advance human rights.
 - B. Yes, to contain communism.
 - C. No. The U.S. government should not intervene in the affairs of other countries.
7. Should there be a military draft?
 - A. Only in time of war.
 - B. Yes. Elimination of a draft sends the wrong message to our potential enemies.
 - C. The draft is slavery. Never, ever under any circumstances.
8. Should the minimum wage be raised?
 - A. Yes, to keep up with the cost of living.
 - B. No, it eliminates jobs and hurts business.
 - C. There should be no minimum wage. It should not be a function of our government.
9. Attitude toward marijuana.
 - A. Reduce penalties for its use, but not those who sell it.
 - B. Severe penalties for those who use and sell it.
 - C. Use, possession, and sale should have no penalty because it does not violate anyone's rights.
10. Should the government help U.S. businesses through hard times?
 - A. Yes. It will save jobs of workers.
 - B. Yes. Business is the foundation of America.
 - C. No. Never steal from the taxpayer to subsidize others.
11. Should immigration barriers be maintained?
 - A. We need to let in as many as possible especially those escaping from violations of human rights.
 - B. Maintain the gates because the U.S. can't assimilate them and they many times work against the American way.
 - C. Let anyone come. All humans have the right to seek opportunity as long as they are responsible for themselves.
12. Attitude toward home school.
 - A. Parents would teach bigotry, and unscientific doctrine rather than one that stresses equality.
 - B. Public schools are not doing a good job.
 - C. Government should not be involved in education. It should be a parental responsibility.
13. Should gun ownership be prevented or restricted?
 - A. Yes. No one but law enforcement and military really needs guns.
 - B. Americans have the right and the need to own most guns, but some should be limited.
 - C. Ownership of guns does not violate anyone's rights. Ownership of guns should never be subject to restriction.
14. Should an Equal Rights Amendment for women be added to the U.S. Constitution?
 - A. Yes, the states aren't doing the job.
 - B. No. Women already have equal rights.
 - C. No amendment is necessary. Women not treated equally should seek judicial recourse.
15. How should we deal with the budget deficit?
 - A. Raise taxes and reduce military spending.
 - B. Leave taxes alone or reduce them and reduce social spending.
 - C. Reduce all government spending. Confine government to national defense and the protection of constitutional rights from violations by state and local governments.
16. What should we do to improve the Federal Income Tax?
 - A. Close the loopholes for the wealthy so they pay as much as everyone else.
 - B. Establish rates that will be an incentive to produce more.
 - C. Abolish the Federal Income Tax and replace it with voluntary financing.

