

Year 1:

Unit 5

"We the People" - Civics and Government Today: Introduction

Unit Purpose: Why This Unit?

After the study of the Constitutional Convention and the debates about the ratification of the nation's new Constitution, scholars will explore the system of American government today. Although many aspects of our government and civic society have changed since the Founding Era, especially in expanding the definition of "citizen" and the role of the government in protecting civil rights and liberties, the foundation of the government rests largely on the system outlined in 1787. These systems established a government with three branches — executive, legislative, and judicial — with distinct powers and responsibilities while also checking and balancing the power of one another. In addition to dividing the government into three branches, the Constitution also balanced power among the federal, state, and local governments, ensuring that although dominant in power, the federal government is limited to the powers listed, while the states retain any remaining powers that are necessary to best govern their citizens.

In practice, the Constitution empowers citizens with roles, rights, and responsibilities in government; in addition to voting, citizens have many avenues to participate and make change in their government, ranging from writing letters to representatives to running for office themselves. Through a series of iCivics games, along with regular history lessons, scholars will explore how the Constitution defines the American system of government in the present day.

This unit is unique among history units, as it considers American government in the present rather than in the past and does not follow the chronology of the Year 1 Scope and Sequence. Rather, this unit pushes scholars to understand the enduring significance of the Constitution in American society. By studying the change and continuity in American government in the past and present, scholars will better understand their rights, roles, and responsibilities as citizens in the United States.

Please note that this unit requires in-class access to computers, laptops, tablets, or any other device that can connect to the internet.

Unit 5 Learning Goals

Essential Question

If you are successful in this unit, your scholars will be able to answer the Unit 5 Essential Question: *How does the U.S. Constitution limit and distribute power in government?*

Big Ideas

The Big Ideas, outlined below, help answer the Unit 5 Essential Question and reflect the key ideas that scholars must master by the end of this unit. As you teach Unit 5, connect every lesson back to the Big Idea(s) that the lesson helps illustrate. The Unit 5 Big Ideas were adapted from the National Standards for Civics and Government: Grade 5–8 Content Standards.

- **Big Idea 1: The Constitution establishes a national government made up of three branches that preside over domestic and foreign affairs and share powers to ensure that no single branch amasses too much power.**
 - The legislative branch, or Congress, which comprises the Senate and the House of Representatives, passes the laws that govern the United States. Committees in Congress compromise on bills that the entire Congress must vote on to pass a law.
 - The executive branch is governed by the president and the cabinet, and it is the responsibility of the executive branch to preside over foreign and domestic affairs, such as serving as commander-in-chief of the military or vetoing laws passed by Congress.
 - The judicial branch establishes the American court system to interpret the Constitution. The Supreme Court, the highest federal court in the nation, determines whether laws are protected by the Constitution.
 - Each of these three branches of government serves as a check on the power of the other to ensure that no single branch of government has too much power over the others. For example, while Congress passes the laws, the president can veto those laws, or the Supreme Court can rule those laws unconstitutional.
- **Big Idea 2: The Constitution divides power among the national, state, and local governments, granting the national government precedence while still ensuring that state and local governments — as well as citizens — retain power and responsibility in their communities.**
 - Through a system called federalism, the Constitution balances the power of the states with that of the federal government. Federalism ensures that, although the federal government's powers are limited to those enumerated in the Constitution, while the states retain authority over any and all powers necessary to govern their citizens.
 - States have the power to establish local governments, which are closest to and therefore can respond most directly to the needs of citizens.
 - The Constitution establishes the rights for individuals to participate and make change in their government at a local, state, and national level. A strong republican form of government depends upon the participation of its citizens.

- **Big Idea 3: After nearly 250 years, Americans continue to debate how to interpret the Constitution and apply it to present-day American society.**
 - While some Americans believe that we should interpret the Constitution based on the original intent of the framers, other Americans argue that the Constitution is a living document that should be applied based on the values of a society.

Key Terms

The following people, places, and events are foundational to understanding the Big Ideas of this unit. As these words are introduced in each lesson, add them to your word wall and hold scholars accountable for using them in discussion and writing throughout the unit.

- Federal government
- Legislative branch (Congress)
- Senate
- House of Representatives
- Congressional committee
- Bill
- Law/legislation
- Executive branch
- Domestic policy
- Foreign policy
- Judicial branch
- Supreme Court
- Judicial review
- Federalism
- State government
- Local government
- Citizen
- Citizenship
- Originalism
- Living constitutionalism

Geography

The following places are foundational to understanding the geographical context of the unit. As you teach Unit 5, continually reference maps in class, not only to build scholars' fluency with geography but also to develop their geographic reasoning skills as they grapple with the Big Ideas of the unit.

- All 50 states and Washington, D.C.

Intellectual Preparation

Class Materials Once you have internalized the Big Ideas of the unit, to be successful you must study all scholar documents and materials before you teach the first lesson:

- All documents in the [Unit 5 Sourcebook](#)
- All scholar and teacher materials in the [Unit 5 Workbook](#)

Additional Resources The resources below provide additional historical background for the content covered in Unit 5:

- Create a free iCivics account to access all preparatory materials for this unit.
- Watch the iCivics overview video to understand the resources available when using this site in class.
- Play the following games on the iCivics website through at least once so you are best able to guide scholars through their own gaming experience and facilitate a discussion in class after scholars finish each game:
 - LawCraft, Executive Command, Do I Have a Right?, Branches of Power, and Counties Work

Unit 5 Sequence of Lessons

Essential Question: How does the U.S. Constitution limit and distribute power in government?

The first four lessons develop scholars' understanding of the basic foundation of American government: the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Lesson 1 introduces scholars to the legislative branch through an iCivics game, in which scholars will simulate the process of passing a law in Congress. In Lesson 2, scholars will complete an iCivics simulation to understand the role of the president and his or her cabinet in serving as chief executive and presiding over the nation. Scholars will complete a third iCivics simulation in Lesson 3 to understand how the judicial branch — focusing on the Supreme Court — interprets the Constitution based on the court cases the justices elect to hear. Scholars will synthesize their knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of the three branches in Lesson 4, in which scholars will again complete an iCivics simulation to understand how each branch checks and balances the powers of the others. By the end of these lessons, scholars must be able to explain the basic foundations of American government established by the Constitution and how the government was designed to distribute power in such a way that no one portion of the government could become tyrannical over another. At the end of these lessons, scholars will be prepared to consider how federalism further balances and distributes power.

Lesson 1: The Legislative Branch (iCivics Game)

- **Central Question:** How does the legislative branch pass laws?

Lesson 2: The Executive Branch (iCivics Game)

- **Central Question:** How do the president and the executive branch affect foreign and domestic policy?

Lesson 3: The Judicial Branch (iCivics Game)

- **Central Question:** How does the judicial branch apply the Constitution to interpret law?

Lesson 4: Checks and Balances (iCivics Game)

- **Central Question:** How do the three branches of government balance one another?

In Lessons 5 and 6, scholars will explore how power is distributed among the federal, state, and local governments to ensure that the federal government is given sufficient power to govern without overpowering the autonomy of state and local governments. In Lesson 5, scholars will dive into the meaning of federalism and explore how the Constitution both names the federal government supreme while expressly limiting its powers to those listed, in contrast to the enumerated powers of the states. In Lesson 6, scholars will study local governments and simulate how states empower local governments to pass laws that most directly affect the daily lives of their communities. In Lessons 7 and 8, scholars will explore how the Constitution empowers citizens with rights and responsibilities to participate in and change their government and society. By the end of these lessons, scholars must understand the shared and distinct powers at the federal, state, local, and citizen level and will be prepared to explore the complex debate over the meaning of the Constitution in practice.

Lesson 5: Federalism (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How do federal and state governments distribute power?

Lesson 6: Local Government (iCivics Game)

- **Central Question:** How does local government affect citizens and their communities?

Lessons 7–8: Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship (PBL)

- **Central Question:** What is the role of a citizen in the American political system?

In the final three lessons of Unit 5, scholars will consider the debates over constitutional interpretation. The DBQ in Lessons 9 through 11 considers the questions of interpretation that have lingered since the adoption of the Constitution more than 200 years ago. In this DBQ, scholars will consider originalist and living constitutionalist perspectives to understand the two main ways that the Supreme Court has applied the Constitution to laws in present-day society. By the end of these lessons, scholars will understand that, despite the Constitution's distributions of power and responsibilities across branches and levels, how to interpret those powers and responsibilities, in practice, remains a matter of debate.

Lessons 9–11: Constitutional Interpretation (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** To what extent is the Constitution a "living document"?