

## University of Virginia Center for Politics



### Four Key Constitutional Principles

**Purpose:** Through this lesson, students will understand the four key principles of the Constitution: separation of powers, checks and balances, Federalism, and limited government.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will define key features of the United States Constitution.
2. Students will analyze political cartoons in relationship to key principles of the Constitution.
3. Students will work cooperatively to research and teach one Constitution principle to the other members of the class.
4. Students will demonstrate understanding of the Constitution through individual writing.

**Key Words:**

*checks and balances*  
*limited government*

*Constitution*  
*separation of powers*

*Federalism*

**Materials:**

1. Overhead: *Constitution Principles*
2. Student handout: *Political Cartoons*
3. Overhead: *Understanding the Constitution*
4. *U.S. Constitution* (copies for each student); visit <http://www.house.gov/Constitution/Constitution.html> to download
5. Student handout: *Constitution Principles (Checks and Balances, Federalism, Limited Government, and Separation of Powers)*

**Procedures:**

1. Warm-up: Concept Attainment. Write the word "Constitution" on the board or overhead and ask students to write down the first thing they think of when they hear this word. Students should give their responses one at a time, generating a list of words on the board. Once all students have given at least one response, explain that you will be exploring many of the concepts they identified today in class.
2. Analyzing the Constitution
  - a. Using the provided overhead *Constitution Principles* define with students the following key words: *separation of powers, checks and balances, Federalism, limited government*. Be clear in pointing out the distinctions between all the terms, in particular the difference between separation of powers and checks and balances.
  - b. Distribute the *Political Cartoons* handouts. Ask students to study each of the cartoons and answer the questions at the bottom of each page.

*Political Cartoons Teacher Key:*

Cartoon #1

1. **Checks and Balances, Separation of Powers**
2. When one party controls all three branches of government, the minority party has few checks against the majority party's power.
3. The elephants represent the Republican Party, and the donkey represents the Democratic Party.

Cartoon #2

1. **Limited Government, Federalism**
2. The Republican Party traditionally advocates small, limited government, but has instead expanded the size of government under the Department of Homeland Security.
3. The elephant represents the Republican Party. He is seated on the highest point of a large jumble of government buildings, suggesting that he is in control of the "humongous" government. The Eye of Providence atop the building labeled "Homeland Security" implies that the Department of Homeland Security is all-seeing.

Cartoon #3

1. **Separation of Powers, Checks and Balances**
2. The Bush Administration has a close relationship with members of the Supreme Court. This relationship goes against the principle of separation of powers, which is harmful to justice.
3. Vice President Dick Cheney represents the Bush administration, and Justice Antonin Scalia represents the Supreme Court. The hunting equipment and champagne suggest that the two have a very close relationship. Scalia's gun is smoking after shooting Lady Justice. Cheney is complimenting his shot, implying that the attack on her was deliberate. Lady Justice lays submerged in the water, her scales unbalanced, representing damage done to the justice system.

Cartoon #4

1. **Limited Government**
2. The United States Government's extensive use of surveillance is contrary to American values.
3. There is a video surveillance camera attached to the flag pole, implying that the government is spying on its citizens. The American flag is flying upside down, suggesting that this surveillance misrepresents American principles.

- c. Using the overhead *Understanding the Constitution*, analyze each Article in the Constitution with the class. The purpose of this activity is to familiarize the class with the basic structure of the Constitution, so they will be more prepared when they begin the next group activity.

3. Carousel Activity. Divide students into four equal groups. Assign each group a Constitution principle and distribute the relevant *Constitution Principle* handouts to each student along with a copy of the Constitution. Explain that each group will be

responsible for two tasks. First, they must research their principle using a copy of the Constitution and their handout. Second, they will prepare a poster based on their research that creatively explains their Constitution principle to the rest of the class in a carousel activity.

*\*Directions for the carousel:* Display the four posters around the room and have each group stand at their station. Each of the four student groups will divide in half, one group will become the “teachers” and the second will become the “learners”. The learners will travel clockwise and stop at each poster to be taught about each principle. Meanwhile, the teachers will explain their Constitution principle using their prepared poster to instruct each group of learners that arrives at their station. Once all learners have traveled to each station, the teachers and learners will switch places and the carousel will resume again.

*\*Note to teachers:* The carousel activity works best if the teacher has all groups switch at the same time. Also, explain to students that they will be using the information learned in the activity for an individual reflective writing piece. This will serve to hold them accountable for the information they learn during the carousel process. If your class is too large for only four groups, other principles can be taught such as *majority rule* and *representative government*.

4. Wrap-up/Individual Reflection: As a culminating activity students will respond to the following writing prompt:  
Which of the Constitution principles do you believe is the most important for our government to protect in today’s society? In your response, cite several specific reasons to support your thesis.

# Constitutional Principles

## Separation of Powers

A way of dividing power among the three branches of government, in which members of the House of Representatives, members of the Senate, the President, and the federal courts are selected by and responsible to different constituencies.

## Checks and Balances

A government structure that gives each of the three branches of government some degree of oversight and control over the actions of the others.

## Federalism

A system of government in which power is divided between the national government and the state governments and in which independent states are bound together under one nationalized government.

## Limited Government

A type of government in which the functions and powers of authority are written, limited, and restricted by law to protect the citizenry.

# Political Cartoons

Cartoon #1



4. Which Constitution principle is represented in this cartoon?
5. What message is the cartoonist trying to get across?
6. What symbols does the cartoonist use?

Cartoon #2

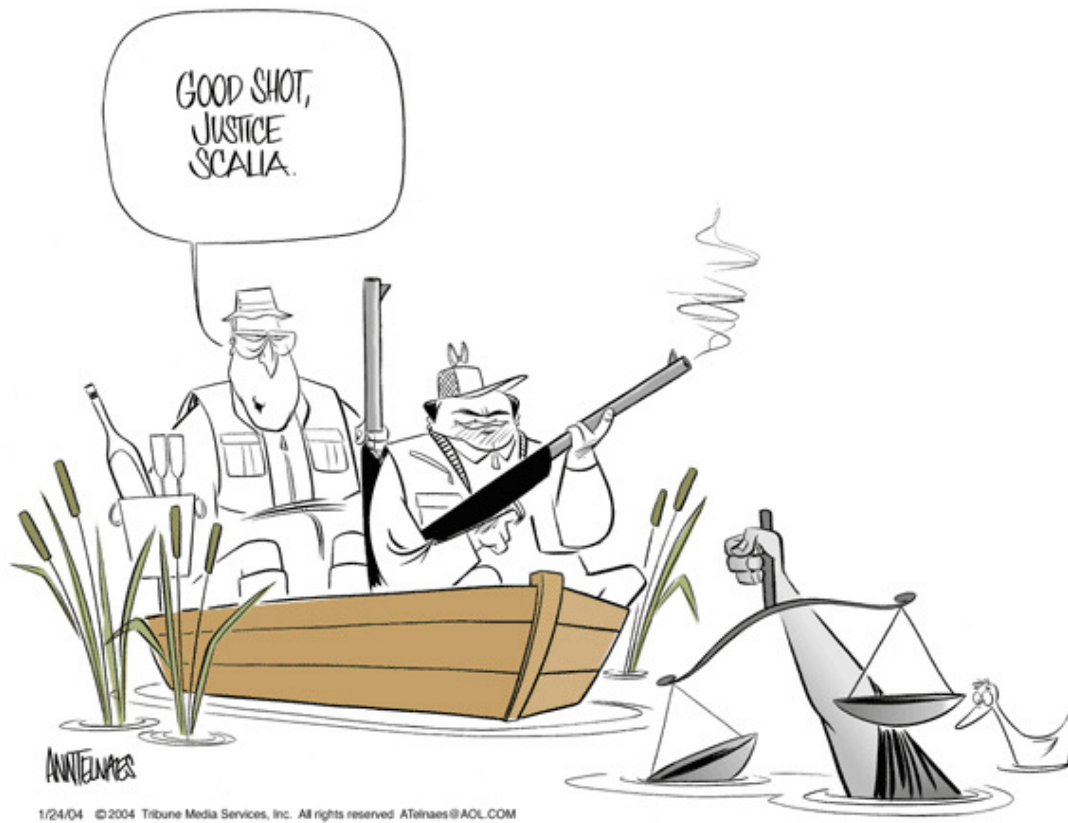


4. Which Constitution principle is represented in this cartoon?

5. What message is the cartoonist trying to get across?

6. What symbols does the cartoonist use?

**Cartoon #3**



**4. Which Constitution principle is represented in this cartoon?**

**5. What message is the cartoonist trying to get across?**

**6. What symbols does the cartoonist use?**

**Cartoon #4**



4. Which Constitution principle is represented in this cartoon?

5. What message is the cartoonist trying to get across?

6. What symbols does the cartoonist use?



# Understanding the Constitution

## Article I: Legislative Branch

- This article spells out the powers and duties of the **bicameral** legislature, which consists of the **House of Representatives** and the **Senate**.
- It lists the powers given to Congress, called **enumerated** powers. These include the right to tax, declare war, regulate commerce, and create legislation.
- Congress is given the right to make all laws that are “necessary and proper” to the maintenance of the country. This is referred to as the **elastic clause** because it has been stretched to accommodate the changing needs of the country.

## Article II: Executive Branch

- This article defines the powers of the President. These powers include being Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, reporting to Congress on “the state of the union” and the authority to make treaties and to appoint officials with the advice and consent of the Senate.
- The President must also “take care that the laws are faithfully executed.” This phrase has become a source of **implied powers**, meaning that the President is assumed to have powers and responsibilities not specifically mentioned in the Constitution.

## Article III: Judicial Branch

- This article establishes a Supreme Court and defines its **jurisdiction** or its authority to hear certain cases.
- Congress is also given the power to create lower courts.

## Article IV: Federalism

- This article more clearly defines the relationship between the states and the federal government.
- It includes the “full faith and credit” clause, which states that an act or judicial proceeding of one state must be honored in all other states.

## Article V: Amendment Process

- This article defines the process for making changes to the original Constitution.
- The process involves **federalism**; Congress must **propose** an amendment by a two-thirds vote in both houses and the states must **ratify** it by a three-quarters vote in order for the amendment to be added to the Constitution.

## Article VI: Supremacy Clause

- This article clearly states that national law will be supreme over state law.

## Constitution Principle – Carousel Activity

# Checks and Balances

**Directions:** Complete the following research tasks below with the members of your group.

Relevant Quote: “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition” *James Madison, Federalist #51*

Define what the quote means in your own words: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Using your copy of the *United States Constitution*, find examples of your Constitution principle:

Article I: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article II: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article III: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article IV: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article V: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article VI: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Directions for Constitution Carousel:** Your group must now decide how best to teach your Constitution principle to the class in the carousel activity. You are responsible for teaching the class what the principle means in your own terms, giving multiple examples found in the Constitution and relating it to current events. Your group must create a poster that should be creative and contain at least one visual aid (a political cartoon, news story, comic strip, picture, etc.) that depicts the Constitution principle. Remember that all members of the group must be prepared to teach about the principle during the carousel activity.

## Constitution Principles – Carousel Activity

# Separation of Powers

**Directions:** Complete the following research tasks below with the members of your group.

Relevant Quote: “The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.” *James Madison, Federalist #47*

Define what the quote means in your own words: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Using your copy of the *United States Constitution*, find examples of your Constitution principle:

Article I: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article II: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article III: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article IV: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article V: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article VI: \_\_\_\_\_

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Constitution Principles – Carousel Activity

# Federalism

**Directions:** Complete the following research tasks below with the members of your group.

Relevant Quote: “...a kind of assemblage of societies, that constitute a new one, capable of increasing by means of new associations, till they arrive to such a degree of power as to be able to provide for the security of the united body” *Alexander Hamilton, Federalist #9.*

Define what the quote means in your own words: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Using your copy of the *United States Constitution*, find examples of your Constitution principle:

Article I: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article II: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article III: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article IV: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article V: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article VI: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Constitution Principle – Carousel Activity

# Limited Government

**Directions:** Complete the following research tasks below with the members of your group.

Relevant Quote: “The fabric of the American Empire ought to rest on the solid basis of the consent of the people. The streams of national power ought to flow immediately from that pure original fountain of all legitimate authority” *Alexander Hamilton, Federalist #22*.

Define what the quote means in your own words: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Using your copy of the *United States Constitution*, find examples of your Constitution principle:

Article I: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article II: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article III: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article IV: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article V: \_\_\_\_\_

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Article VI: \_\_\_\_\_

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