

U.S. CIVICS

Foundations of Democracy

A Comprehensive Project-Based Unit

Grades 7–12 | 4 Weeks | 20 Lesson Plans

Constitution • Bill of Rights • Branches of Government
Checks and Balances • Voting • Civic Participation

Mock Congress Simulation

UM Printables

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Unit Overview

Course: Social Studies & Civics (Grades 7–12)

Duration: 4 Weeks (20 50-minute class periods)

Focus: U.S. Civics — Foundations of Democracy

Essential Questions

- How did historical documents and philosophies shape the U.S. Constitution?
- How does the Constitution balance power between the government and the people?
- Why are the Bill of Rights essential to American democracy?
- How do separation of powers and checks and balances prevent tyranny?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy?

Unit Project: Mock Congress Simulation

Students will participate in a simulated legislative session. They will draft legislation, participate in committee markups, engage in floor debates, and vote on bills. This project reinforces the legislative process, civil discourse, and the practical challenges of democratic governance.

Standards Alignment (C3 Framework & Common Core)

- D2.Civ.1.6-8: Distinguish the powers and responsibilities of citizens and government.
- D2.Civ.3.6-8: Examine the origins and purposes of rules, laws, and the U.S. Constitution.
- D2.Civ.4.9-12: Explain how the U.S. Constitution establishes separation of powers.
- D2.His.13.6-8: Evaluate the relevance of historical sources for understanding the present.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary sources.

Lesson 1: What Is Democracy? — Ancient Roots to Modern America

Duration: 50 min

Objectives

- Trace the origins of democracy from Ancient Greece to the modern United States.
- Compare and contrast direct democracy and representative democracy.
- Identify key principles of democratic governance.

Materials

- Primary Source Packet 1 (Magna Carta)
- Whiteboard/Markers
- Interactive Notebook

Key Vocabulary

- Direct Democracy
- Representative Democracy
- Magna Carta
- Natural Rights
- Social Contract

Warm-Up / Bell-Ringer

Write a brief response: What does the word "democracy" mean to you? Can a society be completely democratic? Why or why not?

Direct Instruction

Introduce the roots of democracy. Discuss Ancient Athens (direct democracy) and the Roman Republic (representative elements). Transition to the Magna Carta (1215) as the foundation for limiting government power. Introduce Enlightenment thinkers (Locke, Montesquieu) and their influence on democratic ideals.

Guided Practice

Read and analyze Primary Source Packet 1 (Magna Carta excerpts). Guide students through identifying the shift from absolute monarchy to limited government. Complete a class T-Chart comparing Direct vs. Representative Democracy.

Independent Practice

Students create a timeline in their interactive notebooks tracing the evolution of democracy from Athens (508 BC) to the drafting of the U.S. Constitution (1787), including at least 4 key milestones.

Closure / Assessment

3-2-1 Exit Ticket: Name 3 traits of democracy, 2 differences between direct and representative democracy, 1 question you still have.

Homework / Extension

Research one Enlightenment philosopher (Locke, Montesquieu, or Rousseau) and write a short paragraph explaining their most significant contribution to modern democracy.

Lesson 2: The Road to the Constitution — Articles of Confederation

Duration: 50 min

Objectives

- Analyze the structure and powers of the government under the Articles of Confederation.
- Evaluate the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.
- Explain how Shays' Rebellion exposed the need for a stronger central government.

Materials

- Articles of Confederation Summary Handout
- Shays' Rebellion Reading
- Graphic Organizer

Key Vocabulary

- Articles of Confederation
- Ratification
- Sovereignty
- Shays' Rebellion
- Amendment

Warm-Up / Bell-Ringer

Imagine your school had no principal and each teacher made their own rules with no way to enforce them across the building. What problems might arise? Relate this to a newly formed nation.

Direct Instruction

Present the context of the American Revolution's end and the creation of the Articles of Confederation. Explain the fear of strong central government and how it shaped the Articles. Highlight the powers Congress had (declare war, make treaties) vs. what it lacked (tax, regulate commerce).

Guided Practice

Work through Shays' Rebellion reading. Ask guiding questions: Who was Daniel Shays? What were the economic conditions? How did the state and national government respond? Why was this a turning point?

Independent Practice

Complete the "Weaknesses of the Articles" graphic organizer, identifying the specific flaw, the real-world consequence, and how the Constitution later fixed it.

Closure / Assessment

Class discussion: Was the Articles of Confederation a complete failure, or a necessary first step? Justify your reasoning.

Homework / Extension

Write a letter to the editor from the perspective of a 1786 farmer in Massachusetts, arguing either for or against a stronger national government.

Lesson 3: The Constitutional Convention — Compromise and Creation

Duration: 50 min

Objectives

- Identify the key delegates and factions at the Constitutional Convention.
- Compare the Virginia Plan, New Jersey Plan, and the Great Compromise.
- Analyze the Three-Fifths Compromise and its moral and political implications.

Materials

- Constitutional Convention Handout
- Plan Comparison Chart
- Primary Source Packet 2 (Declaration of Independence)

Key Vocabulary

- Constitutional Convention
- Virginia Plan
- New Jersey Plan
- Great Compromise
- Three-Fifths Compromise
- Bicameral

Warm-Up / Bell-Ringer

If you were designing a government for a country with both massive states and tiny states, how would you make sure the large states didn't dominate, but the small states still had a voice?

Direct Instruction

Provide background on the 1787 convention in Philadelphia. Introduce the Virginia Plan (bicameral, population-based) and the New Jersey Plan (unicameral, equal representation). Explain the Great Compromise (Roger Sherman). Discuss the Three-Fifths Compromise honestly and critically.

Guided Practice

Analyze excerpts from Primary Source Packet 2 (Declaration of Independence) to understand the ideals the delegates were trying to reconcile. Complete the Plan Comparison Chart as a class.

Independent Practice

Students take on the role of a delegate from either a large or small state. Write a 1-paragraph speech arguing for your state's preferred plan before the compromise was reached.

Closure / Assessment

Think-Pair-Share: Why is compromise essential in a democracy? What happens when compromise fails?

Homework / Extension

Review the Three-Fifths Compromise. Write two sentences: one explaining the political reason it was agreed upon, and one explaining why it was morally flawed.

Mock Congress Simulation Guide

The Mock Congress Simulation is the capstone project for this unit, designed to give students a practical, experiential understanding of the legislative process. Over two days (Lessons 14 and 15), students will transition from learning about how a bill becomes a law to actively participating in the process.

Simulation Objectives

- Draft a structured legislative bill addressing a relevant school, community, or national issue.
- Participate in a committee markup session to amend and refine legislation.
- Engage in floor debate using parliamentary procedure.
- Vote on legislation and understand the consequences of the legislative process.

Roles & Responsibilities

Speaker of the House	Presides over the floor debate, recognizes speakers, maintains order, and calls for votes. Appointed by the teacher or elected by the class.
Committee Chair	Presides over the committee markup session, ensures all voices are heard, manages the amendment process, and calls the committee vote.
Bill Sponsor / Co-Sponsor	Writes the original bill, presents it to the committee and the floor, and defends the bill during debates.
Voting Member (Representative)	Reviews bills, proposes amendments during markup or floor debate, asks questions of sponsors, and votes on final passage.

Bill Template

All bills must follow this structural format to be considered for debate. Sponsors should ensure their bill is specific, enforceable, and addresses a clear problem.

Mock Congress Bill Template
Bill Number: [Assigned by Teacher, e.g., H.R. 101]
Title: [A clear, concise title describing the legislation]
Sponsor(s): [Names of the students who wrote the bill]
Preamble: [A brief statement explaining the problem the bill aims to solve and why this legislation is necessary. Begin with "WHEREAS..."]
Enactment Clause: BE IT ENACTED BY THE MOCK CONGRESS OF THIS CLASSROOM:

Section 1: [Define the main action or rule established by the bill. What exactly will happen if this passes?]
Section 2: [Define how the law will be enforced, who is responsible, and any penalties for violation.]
Section 3: [Funding: How will this bill be paid for? Reallocate existing funds, new taxes, etc.?]
Section 4: [Enactment Date: When will this law take effect if passed?]

Simulation Process (Day 1 & 2)

- **Step 1: Committee Assignment** — Bills are submitted and assigned to a committee (e.g., Education, Public Safety, Finance). Committees consist of 4-5 students plus a Chair.
- **Step 2: Committee Markup** — The Committee reads the bill. Sponsors explain the bill. Committee members propose and vote on amendments. The committee votes on the final bill. If it passes, it moves to the floor.
- **Step 3: Floor Debate** — The Speaker of the House calls the bill. The Sponsor has 2 minutes to introduce it. Opponents and proponents alternate 1-minute speaking turns.
- **Step 4: Voting** — The Speaker calls for a voice vote ("Yea" or "Nay") or a raised-hand vote. A simple majority (50% + 1) is required to pass the bill.

Parliamentary Procedure Quick Reference

Motion to Speak	Requests recognition to debate the bill.	No
Motion to Amend	Proposes a change to the bill's text before voting.	Yes
Motion to Table	Pauses discussion on the bill indefinitely.	Yes
Motion for Previous Question	Ends debate immediately and forces a vote on the bill.	Yes (2/3 vote)

Unit Test: Foundations of Democracy

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Part A: Multiple Choice (2 points each)

Circle the best answer for each question.

1. Which ancient civilization is credited with establishing the first direct democracy?

- A. Roman Empire
- B. Ancient Athens
- C. Sparta
- D. Carthage

2. Under the Articles of Confederation, the national government lacked the power to:

- A. Declare war
- B. Make treaties
- C. Levy taxes
- D. Borrow money

3. The Great Compromise at the Constitutional Convention resolved the dispute over:

- A. Slavery and the Three-Fifths Clause
- B. Representation in Congress
- C. The Bill of Rights
- D. The length of the President's term

4. The phrase "We the People" in the Preamble illustrates the principle of:

- A. Federalism
- B. Checks and Balances
- C. Popular Sovereignty
- D. Judicial Review

5. Which amendment reserves powers not delegated to the federal government to the states?

- A. 9th Amendment
- B. 10th Amendment
- C. 1st Amendment
- D. 14th Amendment

6. The First Amendment protects all of the following EXCEPT:

- A. Freedom of religion
- B. Freedom of speech
- C. The right to bear arms
- D. The right to petition the government

7. The 5th Amendment protection against self-incrimination means a person cannot:

- A. Be tried for the same crime twice
- B. Be forced to testify against themselves
- C. Be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process

D. Be charged with a capital crime without a grand jury

8. Which article of the Constitution establishes the Legislative Branch?

- A. Article I
- B. Article II
- C. Article III
- D. Article IV

9. When the President vetoes a bill, which branch of government is being checked?

- A. The Executive Branch
- B. The Judicial Branch
- C. The Legislative Branch
- D. The State Governments

10. Which amendment lowered the voting age to 18?

- A. 15th Amendment
- B. 19th Amendment
- C. 24th Amendment
- D. 26th Amendment

Part B: Matching (2 points each)

Write the letter of the correct term next to its definition.

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| | 11. _____ The power of the Supreme Court to declare laws unconstitutional. |
| | 12. _____ A tactic used in the Senate to prolong debate and delay or block a vote on a bill. |
| | 13. _____ The body that formally elects the President and Vice President of the United States. |
| A. Bicameral | 14. _____ Consisting of two branches or chambers, like the U.S. Congress. |
| B. Judicial Review | 15. _____ The right of the government to take private property for public use, provided just compensation. |
| C. Filibuster | |
| D. Electoral College | |
| E. Eminent Domain | |

Part C: Short Answer (5 points each)

Respond to the following questions in 2-3 complete sentences.

16. Explain the main difference between the 9th Amendment and the 10th Amendment. Why are both important?

17. Describe the specific steps a bill must take after being introduced in the House of Representatives before it becomes a law.

Unit Test: Answer Key

Part A: Multiple Choice

1. B (Ancient Athens)
2. C (Levy taxes)
3. B (Representation in Congress)
4. C (Popular Sovereignty)
5. B (10th Amendment)
6. C (The right to bear arms - this is the 2nd Amendment)
7. B (Be forced to testify against themselves)
8. A (Article I)
9. C (The Legislative Branch)
10. D (26th Amendment)

Part B: Matching

11. B (Judicial Review)
12. C (Filibuster)
13. D (Electoral College)
14. A (Bicameral)
15. E (Eminent Domain)

Part C: Short Answer

16. The 9th Amendment states that the enumeration of certain rights in the Constitution shall not be construed to deny others retained by the people (unenumerated rights). The 10th Amendment states that powers not delegated to the federal government are reserved to the states or the people. Both are important because the 9th protects individual liberties from government overreach, while the 10th limits federal power and reinforces federalism.

17. After introduction, the bill is assigned to a committee for study, markup, and a vote. If it passes the committee, it goes to the full House floor for debate and a vote. If it passes the House, it goes to the Senate, where it goes through a similar committee and floor process. If both chambers pass identical versions, it is sent to the President. The President can sign it into law, veto it, or pocket veto it. If vetoed, Congress can override the veto with a 2/3 majority in both houses.

18. A civic duty is an action required by law (e.g., obeying laws, paying taxes, serving on a jury). A civic responsibility is a voluntary action that is considered important for the health of a democracy (e.g., voting, volunteering, staying informed). Duties are mandatory and carry legal penalties if ignored; responsibilities rely on civic virtue.

Part D: Essay

Scoring Rubric: Full credit (10 pts) requires a clear thesis, an accurate explanation of Madison's quote, two specific constitutional examples of checks and balances, and a conclusion on preventing tyranny.

Sample Response: James Madison's quote "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition" means that the self-interest of individuals in different branches of government will prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful. The Constitution puts this into practice through the system of checks and balances. For example, the President can veto legislation passed by Congress, checking the Legislative branch's power. Conversely, Congress can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority and has the power to impeach and remove the President, checking the Executive branch. Additionally, the Supreme Court can declare laws or executive actions unconstitutional (judicial review), but its judges are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. This system is essential for preventing tyranny because it ensures that no single branch can make and enforce laws unilaterally, requiring cooperation and consensus in governance.

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