

# 6 Big Ideas

## Summary:

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This lesson engages students in a study of the Constitution to learn the significance of "Six Big Ideas" contained in it. Students analyze the text of the Constitution in a variety of ways, examine primary sources to identify their relationship to its central ideas and debate the core constitutional principles as they relate to today's political issues.

## Rationale:

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In order to understand how our government works students must understand the major ideas that underpin it. This lesson asks students to explore those ideas and apply them to current issues.

## Guiding Question:

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What is the significance of the Six Big Ideas in the Constitution historically and for Americans today? The Six Big Ideas are:

1. limited government
2. republicanism
3. checks and balances
4. federalism
5. separation of powers
6. popular sovereignty

## Vocabulary:

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- Articles of Confederation
- Federal
- Ratification
- Sovereignty
- Great Compromise
- Republic
- 3/5 Compromise

## Learning Steps:

### 1: Outlining the Constitution's Six Big Ideas (45 minutes)

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Students will analyze the text of the Constitution to identify specific examples of the Six Big Ideas in action. Provide the list of the Six Big Ideas to the students, direct them to define each term, then discuss with the whole class to check for understanding.

In groups the students will go through the Constitution looking for examples of the Big Ideas. Students will fill in [Handout 3](#) with quotes from the Constitution and their locations. Students will then rephrase the quotes in their own words to hone in on its meaning. There will be multiple correct answers for each Big Idea. Each group will share their examples with the class.

*Example: Separation of Powers-Article II, Section 2, clause 2 says that the Executive "shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur." This means that two branches, the President and Congress (the Senate), have to agree before a treaty goes into effect.*

### 2. Analyzing Primary Sources to Relate the Six Big Ideas to History (45 minutes)

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Students will apply their understanding of the Big Ideas to actual documents which were created or received by the federal government as it was exercising its powers under the Constitution. Students will act as historians who must consider the source of each document, when it was created and its content to determine how it relates to the Big Ideas.

Pairs of students will be given a copy of one document from a [selected list](#). Students will carefully read and inspect the document to determine which Big Idea is represented within it.

After all pairs have analyzed their document, the pairs will each take a turn describing their assigned document and explaining three clues in the document which support their determination of the Big Idea illustrated within. **Some documents may be related to more than one Big Idea so students should be prepared to justify why they determined that one was more relevant than another.**

### **3: Debating the Six Big Ideas in America Today (45 minutes for preparation and 45 minutes to implement)**

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More than 220 years after the ratification of the Constitution, the Six Big Ideas still inspire debate. Different understandings of how the Big Ideas should be manifested in the actions of the federal government often engender debates over what government should be doing in the name of the people it serves. Students will obtain an understanding of these current disputes by taking sides in a debate featuring current issues.

#### ***The Debate Format:***

- Two teams will be assigned one of the scenarios described below. One team will argue for Position A and the other will argue for Position B.
- Each debate will have five participants on each side of the issue. Each participant will speak for no more than two minutes and teams will alternate speakers. Teams can use [Handout 4](#) to plan the arguments to be made during the debate. Students should anticipate and respond to the arguments that could be made by the opposing team.
- Each team will choose a speaker to deliver the opening (an overview of the team's position).
- Three speakers on each team should give supporting arguments—one argument per speaker.
- One speaker on each team should deliver the closing argument.

#### ***The Debate Questions:***

1. The idea: Limited Government  
Question: To what extent should the federal government be involved in economic issues?
  - Position A: The federal government's powers over taxation as well as international and interstate trade allow significant latitude in directing economic policy.
  - Position B: The federal government should only act to remedy unfavorable economic conditions for business activity.
2. The idea: Republicanism  
Question: What should be the role of citizens in creating public policy?
  - Position A: Public policy should reflect the opinion of voters.
  - Position B: Public policy should be created by officials who are most informed about the issues involved.

3. The idea: Checks and Balances

Question: When the President makes a nomination, what should be the nature of the Senate's "advice and consent?"

- Position A: The Senate should defer to the President's choice of who he wants working under him.
- Position B: It is the Senate's duty to make an independent judgment of a nominee's suitability for a position serving the American people, even if that means denying the President his choice.

4. The idea: Federalism

Question: How should power be divided between the federal government and the states?

- Position A: The Federal government should retain the most power because it is best positioned to insure fair treatment, safety and equal protection for all Americans.
- Position B: The states should retain the most power because they are closer to the people, better informed on local issues and best positioned to exercise authority for their residents.

5. The idea: Separation of Powers

Question: Once Congress declares war and the President assumes the role of Commander-in-Chief who decides how the war ends?

- Position A: Congress, the policy making branch which represents the people, should determine peace terms.
- Position B: The President as Commander-in-Chief is in the best position to determine appropriate actions.

6. The idea: Popular Sovereignty

Question: Should voter ballot initiatives be allowed to overturn laws passed by legislative bodies?

- Position A: Yes; ballot initiatives allow voters to directly participate in their government.
- Position B: No; voters already express their views through election of public officials.