

Principles of the U.S. Constitution

Grade: 8 **Subject:** Social Studies (U.S. History to Reconstruction) **Time:** ~45 min core + ~15 min extension
Work mode: Independent · pencil only Social Studies

Start Here

This is a **paper civics investigation**. You will read short summaries written for this packet, study a diagram of how the U.S. government is organized, and answer questions using a pencil. You do **not** need a computer, a textbook, or the internet — **everything you need is printed in this packet**. Work by yourself and do your best thinking. Write in complete sentences where you are asked to explain. If a question is hard, skip it, keep going, and come back. Reading the passages aloud quietly to yourself is allowed and encouraged. Keep your answers non-partisan — describe how the system is *designed to work*, not which side you favor.

Start Observe a Source 5 min

A **principle** is a basic rule or idea that guides how something is built. Warm up before you read.

1 Read this short public-domain excerpt, then answer below.

Public-domain excerpt — the opening of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution (1787): "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union ... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Type: primary source, public domain · Creator: the framers at the Constitutional Convention · Date: 1787 · Only the first and last phrases are shown; the middle is left out (...).

Notice: Write **one thing you notice** about who the excerpt says the government comes from.

Predict: Based only on the words "We the People," **predict one idea** the framers thought was important.

2 Why do you think the framers might have wanted to divide the government's power among different groups instead of giving it all to one person? Give **one reason** in your own words.

Build Read the Sources 5–10 min

Source A — The five core principles (written for this packet)

When the framers wrote the U.S. Constitution in 1787, they built it on a small set of guiding ideas. Five of these principles appear again and again:

Popular sovereignty means the government's power comes from the people. Voters choose the leaders, and leaders are supposed to answer to the public. The Preamble begins "We the People" to signal this idea.

Limited government means the government may only do what the Constitution allows. Rulers are not above the law; the written rules apply to officials too.

Separation of powers means the work of government is split among three branches: the **legislative** branch (Congress) makes laws, the **executive** branch (the President) carries out laws, and the **judicial** branch (the

courts) interprets laws and settles disputes.

Checks and balances means each branch can limit the other two, so no single branch grows too strong. For example, Congress can pass a bill, the President can veto it, and Congress can override that veto with a large enough vote.

Federalism means power is shared between the **national** (federal) government and the **state** governments. Some powers belong to the nation, some belong to the states, and some are shared.

Type: original explanatory summary · Focus: U.S. constitutional principles, 1787

Source B — A design note (written for this packet)

This is an **original summary**, not a real quotation. It restates a common idea historians use to describe the framers' goal:

"The framers had lived under a distant king and had also seen a national government too weak to work. They wanted a middle path: a government strong enough to act, but tied down by written rules so that no one person or single branch could seize control."

Type: original summary of a historical viewpoint · Creator: not a real person · Focus: the framers' intent, about 1787 · Not a genuine primary quotation.

Word Bank

principle

a basic rule or idea that guides how something is built or run.

popular sovereignty

the idea that the government's power comes from the people.

limited government

the idea that government may only do what the law allows.

separation of powers

splitting government work among three branches.

checks and balances

each branch can limit the others so none grows too strong.

federalism

power shared between the national government and the states.

branch

one of the three parts of government: legislative, executive, judicial.

fact

a statement that can be checked and shown true or false.

interpretation

an explanation of what evidence means; reasoned from facts.

opinion

a personal belief or preference; not proven by evidence.

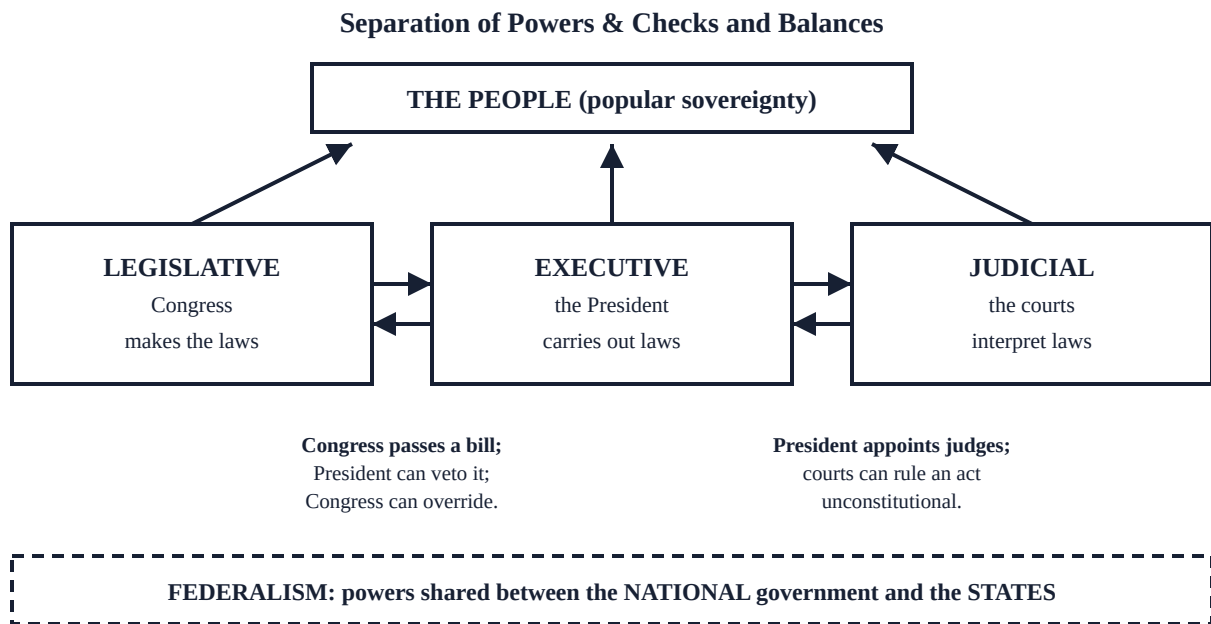


Figure 1. The three branches of the U.S. government and how they check one another, with the people above (popular sovereignty) and a federalism band below. The boxes, arrows, and labels are black on white so the diagram reads clearly in grayscale.

3Using the diagram, write the job of each branch in a few words. Legislative: _____ .
Executive: _____ . Judicial: _____ .

Apply Analyze the Sources 20–25 min

4**Match the principle to the example.** Write the letter of the best example next to each principle. Use Source A and the diagram. Each is used once.

Principle	Letter	Example
Popular sovereignty	_____	A) The President can veto a bill, and Congress can override the veto.
Limited government	_____	B) Voters elect the members of Congress.
Separation of powers	_____	C) Some powers belong to the nation and some to the states.
Checks and balances	_____	D) Officials must follow the written rules of the Constitution.
Federalism	_____	E) Congress makes laws, the President carries them out, the courts interpret them.

5**Source analysis.** Look back at the **Preamble excerpt** in Question 1 and fill in what you can tell about it.

Creator: _____

Date: _____

Type of source (primary or secondary? public domain?): _____

What it shows: Name one principle from Source A that the words "We the People" help show, and explain in one sentence.

6**Why did the framers include this?** Use Source B and the diagram. In 2–3 sentences, explain **why the framers built in checks and balances** — what problem were they trying to prevent, and how does one branch

checking another help?

7Fact, interpretation, or opinion? Write **F** (fact you can check in the sources), **I** (interpretation reasoned from facts), or **O** (opinion / personal belief).

____ a) The Constitution divides the national government into three branches.

____ b) The framers probably included checks and balances because they feared one branch gaining too much power.

____ c) The judicial branch is the most important branch of all.

____ d) Under federalism, power is shared between the national government and the states.

8Evaluate a claim using the sources. A student claims: "*Separation of powers and federalism are just two names for the same thing.*" Do the sources support this claim?

- Yes — both mean splitting power among the three branches.
- No — **separation of powers** divides power among three **branches**, while **federalism** divides power between the **nation and the states**.
- The sources never mention federalism.

Explain your choice using one detail from Source A or the diagram:

Explain Claim–Evidence–Reasoning 5–10 min

Question 9. Read this scenario, then answer.

Scenario (written for this packet): "Congress passes a new law. The President disagrees and refuses to sign it, sending it back. Congress then votes again, and this time enough members vote for it that it becomes law anyway."

Which single principle does this scenario best illustrate, and how does the evidence support that? Write a **claim** that names one principle, give **two pieces of evidence** from the scenario, Source A, or the diagram, then explain your reasoning.

Sentence stems you may use: "This scenario best illustrates _____ because..." · "One piece of evidence is... (from the scenario / Source A / the diagram)." · "A second piece of evidence is..." · "This shows the principle because..."

Claim

Evidence (two pieces)

Reasoning

Close ACE Wrap-Up 5 min

Articulate

In your own words, explain what **checks and balances** means, as if teaching a friend.

Connect

Point to one arrow or box in the diagram, or one line in a source, that shows one branch limiting another. Name it.

Extend

Name one everyday group (a team, club, or family) where power is divided so no one person decides everything, and give one reason that helps.

Continue Early Finisher optional • ~15 min

If you finish early (no new materials needed):

Remove a check and predict. On the back of this page, imagine the Constitution had **no** way for Congress to override a presidential veto. Using only the sources and the diagram, **predict two ways** the balance of power might change. For each prediction, name the **check you removed** and the **effect you expect** on how the branches work together.

Turn in: Hand in this whole packet with your name, class period, and date filled in. Make sure questions 1–9 and the ACE box are answered. The early-finisher prediction is optional but turn it in too if you did it.

G08_SOC_Constitution_01 — Principles of the U.S. Constitution Student Packet