Overview

This lesson gives a broad overview of the purpose and structure of the Constitution. Students will analyze the Preamble to understand what the Founders believed the purpose of the national government to be, and examine how those purposes are put into practice in the structure of the Constitution.

If it be asked, what is the most sacred duty and the greatest source of our security in a republic? The answer would be: an inviolable respect for the Constitution and Laws. ...A sacred respect for the constitutional law is the vital principle, the sustaining energy of a free government.

–Alexander Hamilton, 1794

Almost all the world’s constitutions are documents in which governments tell the people what their privileges are. Our Constitution is a document in which ‘We the people’ tell the government what it is allowed to do. ‘We the people’ are free.

–Ronald Reagan, 1989

Objectives

Students will:

- Examine the purposes of the seven Articles of the Constitution.
- Understand the purposes for the national government set forth in the Preamble.
- Analyze how the structure of the US government is designed to protect individual liberties and freedom.
- Evaluate ways that the US government fulfills its purposes today.

Standards

CCE (5-8): IC2, IIA1, IIC1, IID1, IIIA1, IVB1, VB2
CCE (9-12): IC1-2, IIA1, IIIB1
NCHS (5-12): Era 3: 3A
NCSS: Strands 2, 5, 6, and 10
Background/Homework 10 minutes the day before

Distribute Handout A: Why Do We Have a National Government? Students should brainstorm a list of five reasons a national government is necessary—what functions it should serve and what services it should provide.

Warm-up 10 minutes

A. Ask students to share the responses they came up with on Handout A. See the Answer Key for suggested responses. Note: Students may suggest responses which are incorrect. Discuss these as a large group, explaining why the response does not work (i.e. it is a function of state or local government, individual responsibility, private enterprise, etc.) Keep a list of correct responses on the board or overhead.

B. After listing about ten responses, ask students to fit the answers into general categories. Write the categories on the board or overhead.

C. Distribute a copy of the Preamble [Appendix B] and discuss the following questions as a large group:
   - Do the purposes listed match those of the Preamble?
   - Does it matter whether the purposes of government are stated using simple words, or more formal, fancy ones?
   - Have the purposes of government changed since the Constitution was written in 1787?

D. If students have studied the Declaration of Independence, ask them to connect the aims of the Preamble with the conception of government contained within the Declaration.

Activity 30 minutes

A. Before class, copy and put up Preamble Posters around the classroom. Under each Preamble Poster, tape a large sheet of paper.

B. Divide the class into seven groups and have groups move from poster to poster. At each poster station, members of the group should write:
   - One student should write in his or her own words what the phrase means.
   - One student should write an example of the idea in action in America today.
   - One student should write a non-example (the opposite) of the idea.

C. Instruct groups to start writing at the bottom of the paper, and then fold and tape up the paper so that the next groups cannot see what they have written. After giving students time to visit all seven posters, have them return to their seats but remain their groups.
D. Take down the papers with student responses from the Preamble Posters and give one to each group. Ask students to read aloud the rephrased ideas, and keep a list on the board. Then ask students to rank the seven purposes in order of personal importance with number one as the most significant, and number seven being the least significant.

E. Discuss the following question as a large group: If the Preamble is the promise of what good government should be, how did the Framers of the Constitution make that promise a reality?

Wrap-Up 10 minutes

A. Distribute the United States Constitution [Appendix B]. Briefly go over the purposes and content of the seven articles:
   - Article I establishes the legislative branch and lists its powers, as well as powers denied to the Congress.
   - Article II establishes the executive branch and lists the powers and duties of the president.
   - Article III establishes the judicial branch and explains judicial power.
   - Article IV describes the relationship among the states, and the federal government’s responsibility to guarantee each state a republican form of government.
   - Article V describes the amendment process.
   - Article VI explains that neither federal nor state laws can conflict with the Constitution and bans religious tests for office.
   - Article VII dates the formation of the American people to 1776 and explains the ratification process.

B. Ask students to read through the Constitution and locate examples of the government’s power to fulfill its purposes as spelled out the Preamble. See Answer Key for additional suggestions.

C. Have students share their responses with the class.

Homework

A. Ask students to write a one-page essay in which they answer the question: What fundamental beliefs about government are reflected in the United States Constitution? Examples could include limited government, consent of the governed, and representative government.

B. Assign students one of the constitutional principles listed in Homework Option A, and draw an illustration that symbolizes the principle. Have them label their drawings. The next day, post illustrations around the room and give students time to view them all.

Extensions

1. Have students select another country to research and compare that nation’s constitutional structure to that of the United States. Students can report their findings on Handout B: Government Around the World.

2. Have students create a collage of newspaper headlines, photographs, articles, and other artifacts which define or illustrate the purposes of government as established in the Constitution.
**HANDOUT A**

**WHY DO WE HAVE A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT?**

**Directions:** In the space below, list five reasons we have a national government. As you think of your reasons, reflect on whether they are purposes of national government, rather than state government, local government, or private action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason we have a national government</th>
<th>Could this be done by state/local governments or by individuals? Explain.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We the people of the United States,
in order to form a more perfect union,
establish justice,
insure domestic tranquility,
provide for the common defense,
promote the general welfare,
and secure the blessings of liberty
### Directions
Select one other country in addition to the United States to research the answers to the following questions using the resources that follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>United States of America</th>
<th>Other country:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What form of government exists in this country?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the government have a written constitution?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Who wrote this constitution?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the constitution include a bill of rights?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the constitution limit the power of government?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the constitution protect individual rights?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the constitution separate the powers of government?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the constitution guarantee popular sovereignty?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the constitution describe an amendment process?</td>
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</table>
HANDOUT B
GOVERNMENT AROUND THE WORLD (CONT.)

United States of America

Does the constitution permit one part of government to check or balance another?

Does the constitution create a federal system?

Does the constitution create a republican government?

Other country:

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How does the promise of a nation’s constitution compare to its reality?
2. Are rights always protected just because a country has a bill of rights? If not, what else is needed to protect rights?

Suggested countries to research

**Africa**
- Morocco
- South Africa
- Sudan
- Zimbabwe

**Asia/Asia Minor**
- China
- Japan
- North Korea
- Saudi Arabia

**Europe**
- France
- Germany
- The United Kingdom

**North America**
- Canada
- Cuba
- Mexico

**South America**
- Argentina
- Chile
- Venezuela

Resources

- International Constitution Law
- Freedom House

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THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION