

## LESSON PLAN ON THE U S CONSTITUTION

### A LESSON ON THE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT AND CHECKS AND BALANCES

**Goal:** to introduce students to the first three Articles of the US Constitution, to the concept of three branches of government, to the concept of checks and balances, and to identify the current occupants of these offices.

**Materials needed:** name tents (8 x 11 sheets of paper, folded in half horizontally so they can stand, with names such as President, etc.) as below and a copy of the Constitution for each student (I got them free from West Publishing Company but many textbooks will include the Constitution.)

**Time needed:** 50 minutes, could be less

Assign each student a name tent with a name such as President, Vice President, Secretary of State, US ambassador, Ambassador to China, Army Chief of Staff, Supreme Court justice (three of these), US Senator (four of these), and US Representative (eight or so of these for a class of 20 – adjust the numbers as needed). Have the students move to tables or areas so that all the Senators were together and next to the Representatives, the executive officers were at another table, and the justices at a fourth table.

The students could now visualize the three branches of government in a physical setting. It would help to show them photos, either power point slides or physical pictures of the symbols of each branch (a photo of the White House, Congress, the Supreme Court or a photo of the current occupants of those offices). This visualization allows for a very brief lecture that there are three branches of government and that one of the Articles of the Constitution governed each of them. Also briefly comment on the make-up of the two houses of Congress, including a review of each state having two senators and having the number of representatives determined by population. If time, comment on the Constitutional Convention compromise that led to this make-up.

Distribute the Constitution to each student. Direct each table to look up information about their offices on such items as:

- Was the office the mentioned in the constitution?
- What is the term of office?
- How does one acquire the office?
- What are the requirements for the office?

Offer hints as to where to find the information but do not supply the answers.

Have each table report on what they learned.

Then direct each table to the part of the Constitution that listed the duties of each branch, and look up questions such as

Can the President appoint anyone he or she wanted to the US Supreme Court or as ambassador? What does Congress get to do about that?

Can the Congress tell the General what to do? Or the Ambassador? Or the Secretary? Would they do what the Congress said or what the President said? Why?

Suppose Congress passes a bill the President thinks is bad, what can the President do?

Suppose the Congress passes a bill the Court thinks is bad, what can the court do? How would a case get to the Court?

Suppose the Senate wanted to come up with funds to build a new space station? Could it do that? What would the House of Representatives think about that?

Suppose the President tells the US Army to invade China, will the General follow those orders? Where will he or she get the money to fund the war? What does the Congress think about that?

These questions lead to discussions rather than specific answers. Let the students raise questions about how to interpret the Constitution when it is unclear or when the answers are missing.

These activities should be enough to make the point about checks and balances. If possible, present a power point slide showing a chart of the concept, or write the concept on the board. Discuss the reason for checks and balances – to avoid consolidating too much power and corruption in the hands of one office - and the disadvantages –stalemate- as well.

If time, ask who the current occupants of these offices were. Again it would help to show slides of the current occupants.

Very briefly, review the lesson – three branches, separate but co-equal, and checking each other. Explain that the same idea operated at the state level; identify the comparable state offices and the current occupants. Explain that there is a comparable state constitution.

Finally, ask about the importance of the US Constitution as the students experienced it in this class. That should raise issues such as the Constitution created the offices, defined the duties and some of the requirements, and created a situation where they depended on each other.

If time permits, ask each table to tell one thing they learned about the Constitution from our lesson.

I used this lesson plan in a GED class of about 20 students, with limited abilities, but great interest. I began by asking each student his or her name and something about each person. This helped me remember their names. Alternatively, I could have had them put their names of the name tents I gave them. In a class of 20, learning names was fairly easy, but not essential. Because this was a GED class, I was not sure of their level of attention or engagement and knowing their names helped me keep them attentive.