



3. What Does Congress Do? | Lesson Plan

What does the legislature do, and how do its limits protect liberty?

Students will understand that Article I of the Constitution establishes Congress as a two-part legislature with listed and limited powers designed to protect liberty.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify Article I as the part of the Constitution that explains Congress (the Legislative Branch) and its job of making laws.
- Describe how Congress is divided into two chambers (the House of Representatives and the Senate) and explain the basic difference in representation (population vs. equal representation).
- Create a law for their civilization that responds to a crisis scenario, and explain how that law could be unfair or abused.
- Apply the idea of limited government by proposing a fair “guardrail” (limit) that protects people and prevents lawmaking power from being abused.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Article:** Sections of the Constitution that give details about what the government can and cannot do, organized by branch.
- **Congress:** The national legislature of the United States that makes federal laws and is made up of two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate.
- **Legislature:** The branch of government that makes the laws for the country.
- **House of Representatives:** One-half of the chamber of Congress that is comprised of elected members representing each state in the United States.
- **Senate:** One-half of Congress that is made up of two elected senators from each state, who help write and vote on federal laws and approve important presidential appointments and treaties.
- **Bicameral:** (Of a legislative body) having two branches or chambers.
- **Enumerated Powers:** The specific, limited authorities granted to Congress.
- **Bill:** A proposed law that Congress must approve before it can become official.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.7, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.9, CCRA.L.1, CCRA.L.2, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2

Academic Subject Areas: US Constitution, US History

What You'll Need

- Video: History in 5: *The Constitution Explained: What Does Congress Do?* (Watch [Here](#))
- Worksheet: History in 5: *The Constitution Explained: What Does Congress Do?* (Click [Here](#))
- Supplies: Paper, pencil, timer

Scan to watch episode:



Lesson Plan (45-55 minutes)

Warm Up: (6-7 minutes)

1. Briefly review *Lesson 2: How the Founders Got it Done* with students. Ask students to remember one problem their government system had and what the Constitutional Convention set out to accomplish.
2. Begin today's lesson with this prompt (display or read aloud):
 - If you had a pen that could write laws, what law would you write for our school?
 - Now imagine your law must apply to everyone, could be enforced with punishment, and could be used unfairly. What could go wrong (who might it help, and who might it hurt)?
3. Call on 2-3 students. Write short responses on the board. (Key idea to surface: Congress holds "the Power of the Pen," but they have rules on what they can write because writing laws should be difficult.)
4. Discuss the necessity of government systems that can handle emergencies, protect human dignity, and support unity *while limiting power so laws cannot be made too quickly or unfairly*.
5. Explain that today's lesson will examine how Article I of the Constitution created Congress as a two-part legislature with listed and limited powers, so laws can be made without letting government become too bossy or too chaotic.

Government Scenario: Crisis Activity (10-12 minutes)

1. Place students back into their Lesson 1 & 2 groups (or switch up for variety).
2. Assign each group a crisis scenario from the **Government Crisis Scenarios** (last page of the lesson plan), ensuring the scenario matches their assigned government system.
3. After students read their crisis, distribute the worksheet (one per student) and direct them to complete the "**Crisis! Power of the Pen**" section.
4. Teacher notes for this section: If students get stuck, help with these questions:
 - **Dictatorship:** What rule would make the law fairer (evidence, witnesses, a hearing)?
 - **Absolute Monarchy:** What limit could protect people while still keeping respect (trial, written rights, advisors, rules for punishment)?
 - **Oligarchy:** What limit could force the leaders to consider everyone (representatives, fair distribution rule, a vote that includes ordinary people)?
 - **Theocracy:** What limit could protect people's right to believe differently while still keeping order (freedom of belief, no punishment for peaceful worship, equal protection)?
 - **Communist Government:** What limit could prevent corruption (public records, fair rules for sharing, no punishment for honest disagreement)?
 - **Direct Democracy:** What limit could protect people and still allow action (elected representatives to represent groups, set established laws)?

5. Share Out and Class Comparison: Ask groups to share their crisis briefly and explain how the law needed to be limited.
6. Save the other elements of the worksheet until after students have watched the video and received direct instruction.

Founders Purpose: Article 1 of The Constitution (5-7 minutes)

1. Direct Instruction: Explain why the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was necessary.
 - Article I of the Constitution creates the Legislative Branch, called Congress, whose main job is to write laws for the whole country. Congress holds the “Power of the Pen,” so the Founders built rules to keep that power from being abused.
 - Congress is bicameral, meaning it has two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate. The Founders split Congress into two chambers so no single group could pass laws too quickly.
 - The House of Representatives represents people based on population. States with more people get more representatives, so the House reflects what large groups of citizens want.
 - The Senate represents states equally. Every state gets two senators, so smaller states still have a voice and cannot be ignored.
 - Making a law is intentionally difficult. A bill must pass both the House and the Senate before it can move forward, slowing down bad or rushed ideas.
 - The President also checks Congress through the veto. If the President thinks a bill is harmful, he can reject it to force Congress to rethink it.
 - Congress does not have unlimited power—Article I lists what Congress is allowed to do (enumerated powers). Congress can only use the powers written in the Constitution, not whatever it wants.
2. Watch the video to see how the Founders limited the power of the pen in Congress. Ask students to watch for the following in the video:
 - Article I creates Congress, the lawmaking branch.
 - Congress has two parts (bicameral): the House and the Senate.
 - House = based on population; Senate = equal for every state.
 - Lawmaking is slow on purpose: a bill must pass both parts of Congress.
 - Congress has listed and limited powers (and the Constitution includes guardrails to prevent abuse).

Watch and Discuss: (10-15 minutes)

1. Watch ***History in 5: Constitution Explained: What Does Congress Do?*** uninterrupted.
2. After the video, discuss the following questions to check for understanding and prepare students to complete the worksheet:
 - What do the first three words, “We the People,” show about who holds power in America? (Look for: the people are in charge/government gets power from the people, not a king.)

- The video asks: How do you give people power without resorting to mob rule—what problem is the Constitution trying to solve? (Look for: freedom without chaos / giving people power while preventing mob rule.)
 - What is Article I about, and what is another name for the Legislature? (Look for: Article I explains the lawmaking branch / Legislature = Congress.)
 - According to Section 1, what two “squads” make up Congress—and why did the Founders divide power even inside Congress? (Look for: House of Representatives + Senate / to divide power so laws aren’t made too quickly.)
 - Why did the Founders make it hard to create laws, according to the video? (Look for: laws restrict freedom / they wanted to protect freedom.)
 - What must happen for a bill to become a law—and what is the President’s “check” called? (Look for: approved by the House and Senate / President approves / veto if he rejects it.)
 - If the President vetoes a bill, how can Congress still pass it? (Look for: Congress can override with at least a two-thirds vote.)
3. Prepare students for the remaining sections of the worksheet.
 4. Allow students time to complete the rest of the worksheet. Scaffold and differentiate as needed based on student needs.

Wrap Up: (5 minutes)

1. Have students complete an exit ticket or door check (spoken or written):
 - What does Article 1 of the Constitution cover?
 - Why did the Founders establish a bicameral Congress?
2. Success Criteria: A strong response should mention that Congress is the lawmaking branch (Article I), that it has two chambers (House and Senate), and that lawmaking is intentionally slow and limited to protect liberty.
3. Let students know that they’ll continue their civilization activity with the next lesson
(Lesson 4): *Constitution Explained: What is the President’s Job?*

Don’t have time for a full lesson? Quick Activity (30 minutes)

Distribute one of the Government Crises Scenarios slips to each group of students and invite them to complete the “Crisis! The Power of the Pen” section of the ***What Does Congress Do?*** Worksheet. Then watch the video ***Constitution Explained: What Does Congress Do?*** and discuss as a class.

Government Crises Scenarios

Note: Government systems were assigned in Lesson 1. Students should use their assigned government system for this lesson as well. Scenarios are broad and meant for analysis and discussion.

Dictatorship – A fight breaks out in a food line and supplies go missing. The Dictator makes a law: Anyone accused of stealing by the dictator's guards will go to jail. No questions. No trial.

Question: Could this law be abused? What rule (limit) would you add so that innocent people don't get punished?

Absolute Monarchy – The king gets frustrated because people complain constantly. He wants peace and respect. He proposes this law: It is illegal to criticize the king or queen either in public or online. Anyone who complains will go to jail.

Question: What happens if the monarch is wrong? What limits would protect people from a cruel ruler?

Oligarchy – Drought and famine hit the land. Ordinary people do not have access to food because the powerful families want to keep their stockpiles. The leaders worry that they will have less if the famine continues. The oligarchs make a law: Only powerful families get first access to food and water. Everyone else must wait.

Question: How might regular people react to this law? What lawmaking rule would make this fairer for everyone?

Theocracy – A new group of people moves into the land, but they have different beliefs. They want to live peacefully, but the leaders fear it will corrupt their civilization. They make a law: Everyone must follow the same religious rules, even if they believe differently.

Question: How might this harm peaceful people? What limit on the law could help protect religious freedom?

Communist Government – Some hungry citizens start growing extra food and selling it for a profit. The government leaders feel this will create inequality. They make a law: All extra food supplies and earnings must be turned over to the government. Growing food and making a profit is illegal and punishable by imprisonment.

Question: What problems might this create for people's motivation? Is there potential for corruption here? What limits on this law would keep leaders from taking too much power?

Direct Democracy – A big storm is coming, and the river is rising. Engineers say the town must open the floodgates today or the farms will flood. Opening the gates will protect most people, but it will flood a few fields on the riverbank. In your direct democracy, everyone must vote before the floodgates can be opened. A small group refuses to vote because they don't want any fields flooded. While people argue and delay, the water continues to rise.

Question: What problems happen when everyone must vote on every law? How could your government make decisions faster without letting one group take too much power?