

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Lesson 1</b> Executive Branch	<b>4</b>
<b>Lesson 2</b> Legislative Branch	<b>12</b>
<b>Lesson 3</b> Judicial Branch	<b>20</b>
<b>Lesson 4</b> Checks and Balances	<b>28</b>
<b>Answers</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendix</b> Cartoons and Images	<b>39</b>

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# Introduction

## Our Divided Federal System

The vision that shaped our federal system of government is perhaps best captured by James Madison in these famous words from no. 47 of *The Federalist Papers*:

*What is government but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.*

In the spirit of this hard-headed realism, the nation's Founders created a government that was both strong and constrained by a highly complex assortment of internal and external controls.

Among the external controls on our federal government are provisions for selecting (and removing) officials in regular elections as well as the many protections of individual rights contained in the U.S. Constitution. The internal controls are found in the way powers are divided among the three branches of government. In many cases, two or more of the branches share certain powers in complicated ways. Of course, this sharing of powers also often allows each branch to check the power of the others when it sees a need. How this system of checks and balances works is the focus of this booklet. Its twenty-four thought-provoking editorial cartoons should help your students understand how our system is designed to facilitate vigorous government action while also limiting it in order to protect the liberty that is at its very heart. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **Executive Branch**

The cartoons in this section are arranged chronologically and thematically. This gives you a chance to explore the key powers and duties of the president while also looking at the way the executive branch has evolved over the past century.

### **Legislative Branch**

The cartoons here focus on the key lawmaking and regulatory powers of Congress, with some attention also to Congress's role in foreign affairs and to the issue of campaign-finance reform.

### **Judicial Branch**

The first cartoons focus on the U.S. Supreme Court's power of judicial review and the question of how independent the court is of public opinion. Two final cartoons present opposing views on one highly controversial issue—school prayer—that has been before the court often in recent years.

### **Checks and Balances**

Each cartoon in this lesson focuses on a different way in which the three branches of government can check one another's powers. The cartoons reveal the key internal controls on our federal system to which Madison refers in the words quoted above.

## Using Visual Images in the Classroom

Many textbooks today contain colorful visuals, but, all too often, these images function primarily to fill space or offer little educational value. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable, often doing little more than providing simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, school materials pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help the students master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as social or historical documents. The lessons in MindSparks booklets focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, all of which include an emotional power and the ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

After using the booklet, you may wish to look at some of the many other MindSparks products using editorial cartoons, photographs, posters, and other visual images.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with six cartoons per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

### **A BACKGROUND-INFORMATION SHEET**

This page provides brief summaries explaining the six illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY PAGES FOR EACH VISUAL DISPLAY**

Each page includes one image, and a sequence of questions is provided to help you plan an all-classroom discussion while examining the image. The questions take students step-by-step through an analysis of the visual. For students who require more support to answer the questions, you may hand them an entire discussion-activity page, reproducible in order to provide more visual support. For students who need less support to answer questions, keep the page yourself, and ask the questions of the class as a whole in order to provide a listening and response-writing activity. In addition to these questions, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. The instructions for these activities are directed to the student. Some are individual assignments while others work best as small-group or all-class activities. You may reproduce any of these pages for classroom use. Answers to factual questions are also provided on the inside back cover of the booklet.

### **ILLUSTRATIONS AND OTHER VISUAL ART**

Images are printed alongside discussion questions and follow-up activities on reproducible pages, making them readily available to students. Stand-alone versions of all images, also reproducible, can be found in the appendix. Using images without the text may prove useful for testing or to encourage students to formulate their own analyses before consulting the text.

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## OBJECTIVES

1. Students will learn more about the key powers and duties of the U.S. Congress.
  2. Students will better understand how the legislative branch shares powers with the other branches of government.
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# Legislative Branch

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*Use the following information to help your students better understand the six editorial cartoons making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE CARTOONS

### *Cartoon 1*

Presidents can do a lot to set an agenda for the nation, but it is the legislative branch (Congress) that actually passes laws and puts the president's plans into effect. In 1994, the Republican Party won a majority of the seats in Congress for the first time in forty years. President Bill Clinton was a Democrat, but the Republicans in Congress still hoped to pass laws putting their ideas, not his, into effect. Many of those ideas had to do with cutting various kinds of government spending. Most Republicans said the government had become too big and too involved in trying to solve all kinds of social problems. It is true that the federal government does spend hundreds of billions of dollars on such programs as Social Security, benefits for veterans, Medicare, or various welfare programs for the poor. The government also helps many large corporations and other wealthy citizens, but this cartoon suggests the Republicans were only interested in spending cuts for the poor (or for the arts), not in cutting programs that help the wealthy, where some really big savings could be made.

### *Cartoon 2*

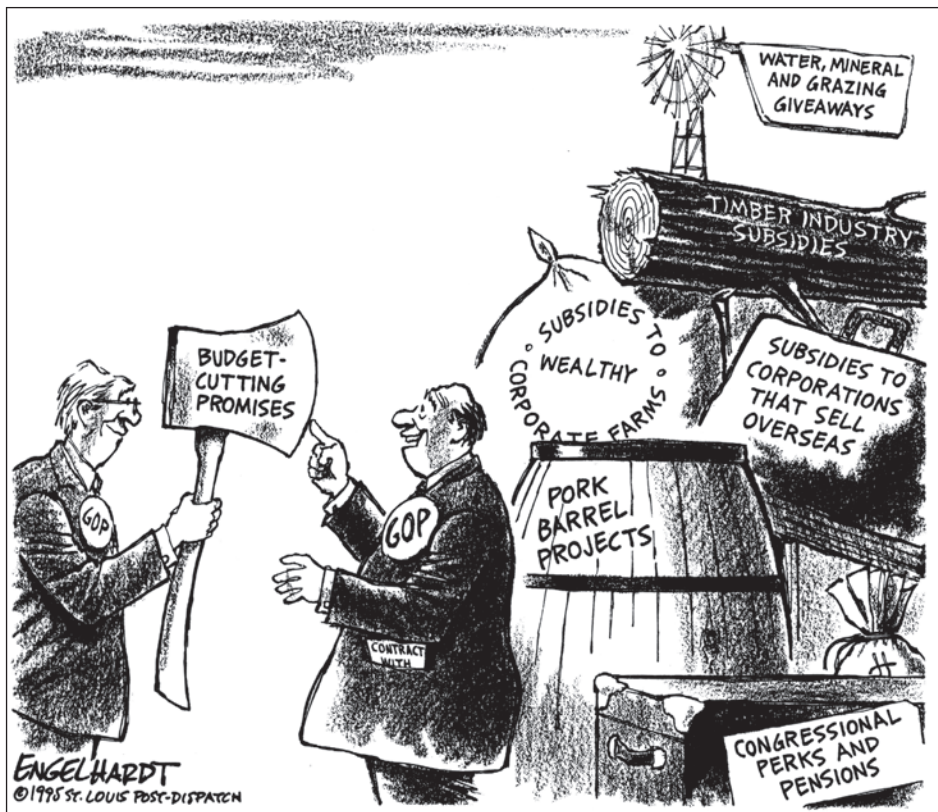
This cartoon should be discussed and compared with cartoon 6. It takes a very different view of efforts by congressional Republicans to cut the federal budget. It also raises an important question about the relationship between elected officials and the voters who put them in office. How can an elected official do what voters demand when those demands conflict with one another? In the cartoon, the voters tell the Republican elephant that they do indeed want it to cut the deficits (which went way up in the 1980s and early 1990s). There is almost no way to do this without cutting government spending, but the cartoon also depicts the voters as unwilling to accept any cuts in their favorite programs. Voters often complain about the dishonesty of elected officials, but this cartoon suggests the voters are often unrealistic in asking for things without being willing to pay for them.

### *Cartoon 3*

Congress makes most of the basic rules for U.S. society by passing new laws. To become a law, a bill must first get a majority of votes in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Any differences between the House and Senate bills are worked out in a conference committee. The bill to which all finally agree must then be signed by the president to become a law. If the president refuses to sign it (called a veto), it only becomes a law if both houses of Congress pass it again by a two-thirds vote. In this way, the president shares power with Congress in making laws. But the

Lesson 2 — Legislative Branch

# Cartoon 1



**'Oooh, That's Sharp — Let's Try It On Some Poor Kids, Old Folks and Elitist Cultural Snobs First.'**

© 1995 Engelhardt in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Reprinted with permission.

### Discussing the Cartoon

1. This cartoon shows two members of Congress with a sharp axe labeled "Budget-Cutting Promises." Can you explain the "GOP" button each lawmaker is wearing?
2. This cartoon was published in 1995. In 1994, the makeup of Congress had changed in a big way. From the GOP buttons, can you explain this big change in Congress?
3. Congress makes the nation's laws. Many of these laws involve spending billions of dollars that the federal government collects each year in taxes. What word on the axe is used for the government's big plan for raising and spending money each year?
4. Many government programs give amounts of money, or subsidies, to help various industries or groups of well-off individuals. Other programs help the poor and elderly. Which group of programs does this cartoon think the GOP lawmakers in 1995 most wanted to cut? Do you agree or disagree with this view of GOP lawmakers? Why?

### Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** As a group, learn more about the kinds of spending programs listed on the barrels, boxes, and bags to the right of the two Republican lawmakers in the above cartoon. These barrels are all forms of government help to corporations and other well-off or powerful individuals. Your librarian should be able to help you locate newsmagazines and other sources that will describe examples of such programs. As a group, find an example of one program or law that fits each label you see to the right of the lawmakers in the cartoon. Discuss also whether any or all of these programs serve a useful public need. Present your findings and your group's views to the entire class.
2. In the above cartoon, the phrase "elitist cultural snobs" refers in part to an argument in Congress about funding the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Find out more about this argument. In a brief talk in class, explain the phrase "elitist cultural snobs" and lead a discussion about the NEA.

## Lesson 2 — Legislative Branch

# Cartoon 2



John Trever, Courtesy *Albuquerque Journal*

### Discussing the Cartoon

1. Like the last cartoon, this one is also about the Republican's plans to cut the federal budget. In this cartoon, a big elephant is shown going through the federal budget looking for ways to cut spending. This elephant stands for the Republicans in Congress. For what larger group or groups do you think the people on the left in the cartoon are supposed to stand?
2. The citizens on the left seem to want Congress to cut the deficit. Why do think so many Americans want to see the federal deficits go down? Are they right to worry about these deficits? Why or why not?
3. While these voters want the deficits to go down, they also do not want any programs cut. Could deficits go down without any cuts in government-spending programs? Is it reasonable for these people to ask Congress to cut the deficits without cutting spending? Explain your answers. What point about government spending is the artist who drew the cartoon trying to make? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?

### Follow-up Activities

1. Compare this cartoon with this lesson's cartoon 1. Together, the two cartoons comment on Republican plans just after they won control of Congress in 1994. Pretend you are one of the Republican lawmakers who joined Congress as a result of an election victory in 1994. Write a letter to the editor about both of these cartoons. In it, explain what you do and do not agree with in each cartoon. Now pretend you are a Democrat in Congress at that time and write a similar letter to the editor commenting on both cartoons.
2. Look closely at the way the elephant in the above cartoon is drawn. Now look closely at the way the people on the left in the cartoon are drawn. How does the artist's way of drawing these figures help the cartoon make its point? As a class, discuss the way these figures are drawn and whether this aspect of editorial cartooning is a fair way for an artist to make a point or express a view.