

- Visit a local history museum in your community to find out how the history of your region relates to the history of the nation as a whole. What was taking place in your area during key events of the nation's history, such as the Declaration of Independence, the framing of the U.S. Constitution, the attainment of freedom by African Americans and the right to vote by women? Have students construct a time line comparing your local history with such key events in the history of the nation.
- Have students do a dramatic reading of the Declaration of Independence, taking turns reading parts of it. (See www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/declaration/decmain.html for an online version of the Declaration.) Students can pull important elements from the document and make illustrations that represent what these passages mean to them.
- Ask appropriate local government officials to visit your class for the purpose of explaining how the U.S. Constitution influences their jobs. Prepare for the visit by asking students to think of questions they wish to ask the officials, such as how their jobs help to fulfill the purposes of the Constitution.
- Encourage students to research what life was like in the American colonies. Based upon this information, students can write journal entries as if they lived during those times. You can share selections from Marissa Moss' *Emma's Journal: The Story of a Colonial Girl* (Silver Whistle/Harcourt; 2001) to provide an example.
- Students can choose one of the significant people from the history of American government — a President, Congressperson or signer of a famous document. Students can then learn about this influential person through Internet and print resources. Then students can present their information by portraying the person in costume for the class.

Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our Web site at www.LibraryVideo.com

• bensguide.gpo.gov

"Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids" is a wonderful site with grade-specific material on the character and history of American government. Full text versions of important documents in the history of America, including the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, are provided.

• www.whitehousekids.gov

The Web site of the White House has a special section for kids, which includes a tour of the White House, information about the President's family and an American history interactive quiz. A helpful guide for teachers and parents is also provided.

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• library.thinkquest.org/J002611F/index.htm

This Web site, created by elementary school students and entitled "Colonial Kids: A Celebration of Life in the 1700s," provides a full picture of life in the American colonies. From this site, students will gain an understanding of colonial housing, clothing, work, education and transportation.

Suggested Print Resources

- Burgan, Michael. *The Bill of Rights*. Compass Point Books, Minneapolis, MN; 2002.
- Burgan, Michael. *The Declaration of Independence*. Compass Point Books, Minneapolis, MN; 2001.
- Draper, Allison Stark. *George Washington Elected: How America's First President was Chosen*. PowerKids Press, New York, NY; 2001.
- Fritz, Jean. *Sbb! We're Writing the Constitution*. Putnam, New York, NY; 1987
- Maestro, Betsy and Giulio Maestro. *A More Perfect Union: The Story of Our Constitution*. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, New York, NY; 1987.
- Sobel, Syl. *The U.S. Constitution and You*. Barron's Educational Series, Hauppauge, NY; 2001.

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THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Grades K-4

This guide is a supplement designed for teachers to use when presenting programs in the video series *American Government For Children*.

Before Viewing: Give students an introduction to the topic by relaying aspects of the program overview to them. Select pre-viewing discussion questions and vocabulary to provide a focus for students when they view the program.

After Viewing: Review the program and vocabulary, and use the follow-up questions and activities to inspire continued discussion. Encourage students to research the topic further with the Internet and print resources provided.



Program Overview

Believe it or not,American government wasn’t always organized like it is today, with a President, Congress and Supreme Court! In the 1600s, many Americans were living in colonies ruled by Great Britain. The colonies outgrew British government and finally demanded self-government.When the British government refused, the Americans issued a Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.The Declaration, written by Thomas Jefferson, declared that all people are born equal, without having to obey any government to which they do not consent. With the help of the French, the Americans fought and won a Revolutionary War against the British, and began ruling themselves under a constitution called the Articles of Confederation. It soon became clear that the Articles needed to be changed if the new country was to survive.

In 1787, a new constitution was drawn up in Philadelphia. It was the result of a compromise between large and small states. The writers of the U.S. Constitution worried about government abusing its power,so they created a system of shared powers among three branches.The U.S. Constitution is the most important document in the history of American government and is the highest law in the land. James Madison is often called the “Father of the Constitution” because he wrote part of it and was the leading voice in persuading people to agree to it.When some resisted ratifying a document that gave so much power to a central government, Madison promised to ensure freedom through the development of a bill of rights.After the Constitution was adopted, Madison wrote the Bill of Rights, which was ratified in 1791. It provides for most of America’s basic freedoms, including those of religious belief and practice, speech, privacy and many others that Americans exercise every day.

Vocabulary

government — The people and groups who make, carry out and enforce rules and laws, and who manage disputes about them.

laws — Written rules that are made and enforced by governments.

constitution — A document that describes what government is allowed to do and what it is not allowed to do.The U.S. Constitution is the highest law in America.

colonies — Groups of people from a country living in a distant place.These people continue to be ruled by the country from which they came.

Magna Carta — A document that guaranteed rights to English nobles and was written in 1215. Magna Carta is Latin for “great charter.”

legislature — A group of people that has the power to make laws.

Mayflower Compact — A document stating how the Pilgrims would be governed when they arrived in America from England. The Mayflower Compact was signed on board the Pilgrims’ ship, the Mayflower, in 1620.

tax — Money paid by people to support the work of government.

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Declaration of Independence — A document issued on July 4, 1776, which declared that the American colonies were free and independent states.

popular sovereignty — The idea that all the power of government belongs to the people.

Articles of Confederation — A document that established American government after the American Revolution.

separation of powers — The idea of giving different powers of government to different groups of people, to make sure that no one group becomes too powerful.

constitutional amendments — Additions to the Constitution.

Bill of Rights — The first ten amendments of the U.S. Constitution, which include guarantees of individual rights.

consent of the governed — The idea that people have to agree to their form of government.This consent, or agreement, is often given when people vote in elections.

rule of law — The idea that government should only do what the law allows it to do.

constitutionalism — The use of a set of rules, called a constitution, to distribute the powers of government and to limit what government can do.

Pre-viewing Discussion

- Students can brainstorm what comes to mind when they hear the word “government.” What are some of the things that government does? Help students to list important events and people from the history of American government.
- Discuss with students whether they would prefer to have a king or queen to rule the United States of America, or the current system of government. Students should justify their answers.
- Encourage students to discuss what they know about the celebration of the Fourth of July. Do they know why many Americans have fireworks, picnics and parades on this national holiday? What are the important events, and who are the significant people related to this holiday?
- Help students to generate a list of what they know about the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Why are these documents important to the United States of America?

Focus Questions

1. Describe what laws are. Who has the power to make laws in America?
2. What are colonies? Who came to the American colonies and how did they travel?
3. Who were the Pilgrims? What was the name of the ship on which they arrived?
4. What is a constitution? Why is a constitution important for government?
5. Who was King George III of Great Britain? Why is he important in the history of the United States?

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6. What is a legislature?
7. What are taxes? Can you choose whether or not to pay taxes?
8. What was the Boston Tea Party? Why did the Massachusetts colonists hold this “party”?
9. Who was Thomas Jefferson and why is he so famous?
10. Why did the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 decide to meet? Where did they meet?
11. What is the Bill of Rights? Why was it written?
12. What are some important rights that the Bill of Rights protects?
13. What role in government does the Constitution give to the people?
14. What role did James Madison play in the creation of the U.S. Constitution?
15. What are the three branches of government created by the Constitution? What does each of them do?

Follow-up Discussion

- The American colonists used violence to disobey Great Britain and obtain the right to rule themselves. Discuss with students whether or not they feel that it was right for colonists to do this. Do students feel that George was a bad king? Do they think Americans were bad colonists? Why or why not?
- George Washington became the first President of the United States. Discuss with students why Washington was a good choice for this important position, specifically in terms of what he did for America.
- Encourage students to discuss the important ideas contained in the Declaration of Independence. What do the rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” mean to them? Students should give concrete examples of how these concepts are present in their lives.
- Constitutionalism means using a written list of laws to limit the powers of government. Encourage students to discuss whether or not they feel using a constitution to limit government is a good idea. What might happen if there were no limits on government?

Follow-up Activities

- Students can act out a meeting between the British and the American colonists before the Revolution began. Have one group play the colonists and formulate a list of demands, based on what they find in the Declaration of Independence. Have another group play the British, who answer the demands, mostly by refusing. When the role-play is completed, ask the students which side had the best arguments and why. Students can speculate about how the American colonists might have felt in their negotiations with Britain.

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