

Middle School “Lesson-in-a-Box”

Objective: STUDENT WILL BE ABLE TO explain the purpose of each branch of government.

Materials Needed: Stop watch or egg timer, 3 fake \$100 bills (attached), deck of cards.

Summary:

The goal of this lesson is to convey three underlying principles which American government is based upon:

- 1) Governments need to be accountable to the people in order to have just laws (democracy).
- 2) Democracy needs to be limited by individual rights, protected by a coequal branch of government.
- 3) Sometimes it is not practical for the whole government to carry its decisions into effect, so another, smaller, branch exists to execute laws.

Procedure:

This lesson is divided into three independent parts, each corresponding with one of the three principles listed above. Each part should require about 15 minutes, and includes an activity, discussion and brief lecture.

PART I (The Legislative Branch: Congress)

Activity (3 minutes):

- Using the deck of cards, count a number of cards equal to the number of students in the class. Make sure only one King is included in this stack.
- Have each student choose one card. Invite the student who chose the King to sit at the front of the room.
- Give that student one of the fake \$100 bills. Announce to the class that you have decided to give the class \$100, and that you are giving it to the “King” to do whatever they want with. Emphasize that the “King” has total control of what is done with it.
- Have the “King” announce to the class what they are doing with the money.

Discussion (8-10 minutes)

The goal of this discussion is to emphasize that placing decision making power in too few hands, or in the hands of someone who is not accountable for their decisions leads to unjust results.

Possible discussion questions include:

- Did the “King” decide to distribute the money fairly?
- If not, why do you think the “King” chose to distribute the money unfairly?
- Could the class have picked the “King” in a way more likely to produce a fair result?
- Is there a way the “King” could have been encouraged to reach a fairer result?

Summary Lecture (3-4 minutes)

Middle school students are notoriously impatient during lectures, so brevity is recommended. This lecture should tie together the key points of the discussion by highlighting the following points:

- The framers of the Constitution were also concerned with a King who was not chosen by the people and who was not accountable for his decisions.
- They decided to form a government where most of its members would be elected. This way they would be more likely to make fair laws because they were chosen by the people they governed.
- They also placed the power to make laws in a large body of people (Congress) to prevent any one person from having too much power.
- They also called for frequent elections, to keep lawmakers accountable.

PART II (The Judiciary: Federal Courts)

Activity (2-3 minutes)

- Count out a number of cards equal to the number of students. Make sure there are substantially more black cards than red cards. (You may want to use an additional deck, and have it pre-counted for this purpose).
- Have all the “red” students sit on one side of the room, and all the “black” students sit on the other.
- Tell the students that you are going to give the class another \$100 bill (hold up fake bill), but that who gets it will be decided by an election. The students may either vote for you to give it to the “red” students or the “black” students.
- After the vote, give the bill to the winning side (almost certainly the “black” students).

Discussion (8-10 minutes)

The purpose of this discussion is to emphasize that certain rights must be protected, even against the will of the majority, and discuss how the judiciary branch ensures this. Possible discussion questions include:

- Was the vote between the “red” and “black” students fair? Did it reach a fair result? Why or why not?
- If all decisions were made by having the “red” and “black” students vote, is it likely that the “red” students would ever win a vote?
- How could this decision have been made differently to protect “red” students?
- Besides protecting minority groups, what other sorts of rights should be protected from a majority vote? Can you think of any rights that the Constitution protects from a majority vote?

Summary Lecture (3-4 minutes)

Key points include:

- The Constitution protects certain minority groups (based on race, gender, etc.) against discrimination based on that trait. This is to prevent the majority from ganging up on them. (maybe include examples from the Jim Crow era).

- The Constitution also protects certain rights like free speech, freedom of faith and from government-sponsored religion and the right to privacy. These are rights considered so precious that not even a majority vote should be able to take them away.
- Because these rights are supposed to be protected from the majority, they are guarded by the judiciary, which is not elected by the majority, and which is appointed for life.

PART III (The Executive: The President)

Activity (2-3 minutes)

- Tell the class that you have one more \$100 bill, and want them to decide democratically what to spend it on.
- Have the class suggest several things that it could be spent on (candy, games, etc.). Write three or four of the more reasonable ones on the board.
- Take a quick vote from among the choices on the board as to what the money should buy.

Discussion (4-5 minutes)

The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate that, once a decision (or law) has been made, sometimes it makes sense for a single person to execute it.

Possible discussion questions include:

- Now that we have decided to buy X, does it make sense to make the entire class go to buy it?
- If we send just one person to buy X, how do we make sure we can trust them?

Summary Lecture (3-4 minutes)

Key points include:

- The Constitution also recognizes that it does not make sense for the entire government to carry out every decision, so it creates an Executive (President) to carry out decisions.
- This President is elected, so that they will have some accountability to the voters.

CONCLUSION (2-3 minutes)

If you have time, conclude the lesson with a short lecture restating what you just taught about why we have three branches and what their purposes are.

Handouts

