

# The Presidency Teacher's Guide



**Grade Level:** 6–8

**Curriculum Focus:** Social Sciences

**Lesson Duration:** Two class periods

## Program Description

*The Presidency*—Few people in the world are as powerful as the president of the United States. This program is a thorough, up-to-date look at the presidency, its history, and its role in our federal government. The program describes how the presidency has grown through the deliberate efforts of strong presidents. It explains the system of checks and balances contained in the Constitution. It gives examples from American history of struggles between the executive and legislative branches over various powers, such as the power to declare war and make treaties. Viewers learn how wars and other emergency situations strengthen the powers of the president and his cabinet. They also explore key events in which Congress has challenged presidential powers. The program ends with a review that summarizes the powers and responsibilities of the executive branch.

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## Discussion Questions

- What powers does the U.S. Constitution grant to the president?
  - How have various presidents made the presidency stronger?
  - According to the Constitution how does Congress balance the power of the president?
  - How can ordinary citizens limit or affect the power of the executive branch?
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## Lesson Plan

### *Student Objectives*

- Identify the powers granted by the United States Constitution to the executive branch of government.
- Describe how Congress balances the power of the president.
- Write a short essay describing the presidency of one of the presidents of the U.S.

### *Materials*

- *The Presidency* video

- Computer with Internet access
- Print and Web resources (including textbook entries, encyclopedia articles, and biographies) about U.S. presidents and their presidencies

### Procedures

1. Explain that the program is fairly long and contains many details. Encourage students to view the program more than once or to stop and replay the program in order to take adequate notes.
2. After students have viewed the program, ask them to recall details of what they saw and heard. This review can take the form of a class discussion or a quick, unannounced quiz. One effective review strategy is to have students define key terms and illustrate their definitions with examples from the program. (Use the Vocabulary section of this lesson plan.) Another good strategy is to list categories on the chalkboard, asking students to supply details that fit under each category. The following categories should help students recall details:
  - Powers granted to the president in the Constitution (These include the power to carry out laws, meet foreign ambassadors, negotiate treaties, and command the armed forces.)
  - Powers that have been assumed by presidents as the presidency has grown stronger (Presidents have raised armies, concluded treaties, declared war, and even taken over private companies without formal congressional approval. In addition the executive branch as a whole has grown enormously, with many cabinet members heading large departments of the federal government.)
  - Departments of the federal government headed by cabinet members (The program states that 15 cabinet posts exist and mentions the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, Interior, Education, Transportation, and Homeland Security.)
  - Examples from history of how Congress can balance the power of the president (The program mentions the Senate's rejection of President Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations, President Richard M. Nixon's invasion of Cambodia and Congress's subsequent passing of the War Powers Act, the Watergate investigations that led to the resignation of President Nixon, and the impeachment and acquittal of Presidents Andrew Johnson and William Clinton.)
3. Ask students to distinguish between the *president* and the *presidency*. Lead a brief class discussion, or have students explain the difference in a short paragraph. (Students should recognize that the *president* is an individual, while the *presidency* describes a president's time in office. The word *presidency* can also refer to the entire executive branch of government. Presidents are largely remembered by history for what they accomplished during their presidencies and how their actions affected the presidency.)
4. Have students use print and Web resources to learn more about the presidents and their presidencies. Alert students to possible pitfalls in conducting online research. They will encounter a vast amount of Internet writing about the presidents. Students should take special care to use material from reliable sources. These include government sites, the sites of major

museums, and university-sponsored databases. Students should record their sources (the Web addresses) as they take notes. The following Web sites are a good starting point:

- Library of Congress: American Memory (select “Presidents”)  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
  - University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs: AmericanPresident.org  
<http://www.americanpresident.org/>
  - Ben’s Guide to U.S. Government for Kids (Grades 6–8) (select “Historical Documents,” “Branches of Government,” “How Laws Are Made,” and “Glossary”)  
<http://bensguide.gpo.gov/6-8/index.html>
  - U.S. National Archives and Records Administration: The Charters of Freedom (select “Constitution of the United States”)  
<http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/charters.html>
  - Library of Congress: Enactment of a Law  
<http://thomas.loc.gov/home/enactment/enactlawtoc.html>
  - Internet Public Library (University of Michigan School of Information): POTUS (Presidents of the United States)  
<http://www.ipl.org/div/potus/>
  - Library of Congress: The Learning Page: Features and Activities (select “American Memory Timeline,” “Elections,” and “Inaugurations”)  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/index.html>
  - PBS: The American President  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/amerpres/>
  - Smithsonian Education: IdeaLab: Mr. President  
[http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/students/idealabs/mr\\_president.html](http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/students/idealabs/mr_president.html)
  - Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History: The American Presidency, a Glorious Burden  
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/home.html>
  - Students.gov (see “Government 101”)  
<http://www.students.gov/STUGOVWebApp/index.jsp>
  - University of Virginia, Miller Center of Public Affairs: WhiteHouseTapes.org  
<http://www.whitehousetapes.org/>
  - The White House  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>
5. Assign a different U.S. president to each student or group. Ask students to write short essays describing different presidencies. Emphasize that the essay should stress events that took place

during the presidency, rather than simply being about the president himself. Students should focus on what the president (and his administration) accomplished during his time in office.

6. Have selected students take turns reading their essays to the class. You might want to appoint an editorial team to select the 10 best essays and publish them in booklet form.

## Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Students were highly engaged in class discussions; defined most key terms; conducted online research using reliable sources; wrote a well-organized descriptive essay, including many details about the assigned U.S. president's presidency.
- 2 points: Students participated in class discussions; defined some key terms; conducted online research using mostly reliable sources; wrote an adequate descriptive essay, including some details about the assigned U.S. president's presidency.
- 1 point: Students participated minimally in class discussions; defined few key terms; conducted online research using unreliable sources; wrote an inadequate descriptive essay, including few details about the assigned U.S. president's presidency.

## Vocabulary

### acquit

*Definition:* To set free from a charge of an offense by means of a legal process

*Context:* Andrew Johnson and William Clinton, the two U.S. presidents who have been impeached, were both acquitted.

### administration

*Definition:* A group constituting the executive branch of a presidential government

*Context:* The administration of President Warren G. Harding was notorious for its corruption.

### checks and balances

*Definition:* The system established in the U.S. Constitution that allows each branch of the federal government to restrain the powers of the other two branches

*Context:* A veto of a bill by the president is an example of the system of checks and balances at work.

### Congress

*Definition:* The body of elected representatives who make the federal laws of the U.S.

*Context:* The U.S. Congress is made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

### Constitution

*Definition:* The document that determines the powers and duties of the federal government



*Context:* The U.S. Constitution outlines the duties of senators and representatives.

**executive**

*Definition:* Having to do with a president or another leader

*Context:* The president is the head of the executive branch of the U.S. government.

**federal**

*Definition:* Having to do with a central government authority

*Context:* One issue that has often divided Congress is how to allocate authority between state and federal governments.

**impeach**

*Definition:* To accuse of crimes that, if true, could lead to removal from public office

*Context:* After the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson was impeached because he refused to follow the Republican leaders in Congress.

**judicial**

*Definition:* Having to do with judges and courts

*Context:* The U.S. Supreme Court heads the judicial branch of the government.

**legislative**

*Definition:* Having to do with making and passing laws

*Context:* The Senate and the House of Representatives make up the legislative branch of the U.S. government.

**powers**

*Definition:* Legal or official authorities, capacities, or rights

*Context:* Especially during times of war many presidents have assumed special powers that belong to Congress under the Constitution.

**veto**

*Definition:* To vote against or cancel

*Context:* A two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress is needed to override a presidential veto.

## Academic Standards

### Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Civics – What Are the Basic Values and Principles of American Democracy?: Understands the central ideas of American constitutional government and how this form of government has shaped the character of American society
- Civics – How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?: Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power

### **National Council for the Social Studies**

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Power, Authority, and Governance
  - Civic Ideals and Practices
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### **Support Materials**

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the DiscoverySchool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>
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### *Credit*

Judith Conaway, educational writer, editor, and curriculum designer