

Branches of Power

a game guide for teachers

Welcome to *Branches of Power*! This interactive online video game will give your students the chance to experience the roles of the three branches of government. Rather than simply learning each branch in isolation, students play each of the three branches and learn about how they interact. The goal is to move public policy issues from an idea to a fully formed and tested law.



Learning Objectives

- Simulate the way separation of powers and checks and balances limit government
- Analyze the structure, functions, and processes of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches
- Illustrate the law making process at the local, state, and federal levels

Prerequisites

None—students will learn the material just by learning to play the game successfully. However, it may be helpful for students to have some knowledge of the names and basic functions of the three branches. The last page of this guide has pre- and post-game questions you can discuss with your class. We also suggest teaching the iCivics lesson “Separation of Power: What’s for Lunch?” the day before your class plays the game. You can find that and all of our lesson plans at www.iCivics.org/teachers.

HOW TO START THE GAME

Here’s what happens when you start playing *Branches of Power*:

1. Choose your characters

Select which character will represent you for each of the three branches. (Yes—they should look familiar!)

2. Choose your values

Select which two values are most important to you. These values will represent what your Legislator avatar will care about when crafting a bill.

3. Choose your issues

Select three issues that your president avatar will address during his/her “State of the Union”. These issues become the themes for the initial “issue towers.”

TIP: Choose “Play Tutorial” if you feel that you need more guidance while playing the game.



TIP: *Branches of Power* takes between 30-40 minutes to play. Once the official game ends after 30 minutes, you have the option to continue playing for fun (i.e. no score).

TIP: You can print out a detailed score report when finished that can be used for grading purposes.



HOW TO PLAY THE GAME

When the game opens, you will be playing the role of the Legislator. The three issues you selected during the State of the Union have officially begun; they are "proposed." The other spaces are currently empty green plots with issues listed on them.

TIP: Click on the "map" button in the top right hand corner to see the overall "issue landscape." It illustrates the physical location and status of each issue tower.



1 Switch roles at any time by clicking on the appropriate box at the bottom of the screen. Practice switching roles, and note that when you select a new role, you physically move to the place on the screen where the avatar representing that role is located.

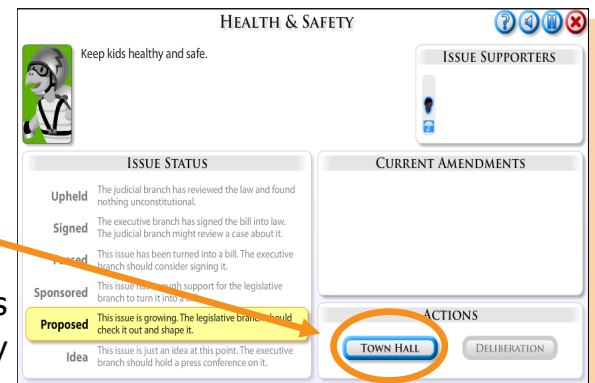
2 Move your Legislator to a "proposed" issue tower and click on it.

People powered

A screen will appear that includes all the details of this issue tower and its current status.

3 Click on "Town Hall."

During the town hall meeting, three citizens will make statements about their opinions. Try to respond to these statements in a way that is consistent with the Legislator's values.



In order to move your issue along, you will need to hold another town hall meeting to get more citizen support. However, if the issue is sponsored, you will be ready to move on.

4 Click on "Deliberation."

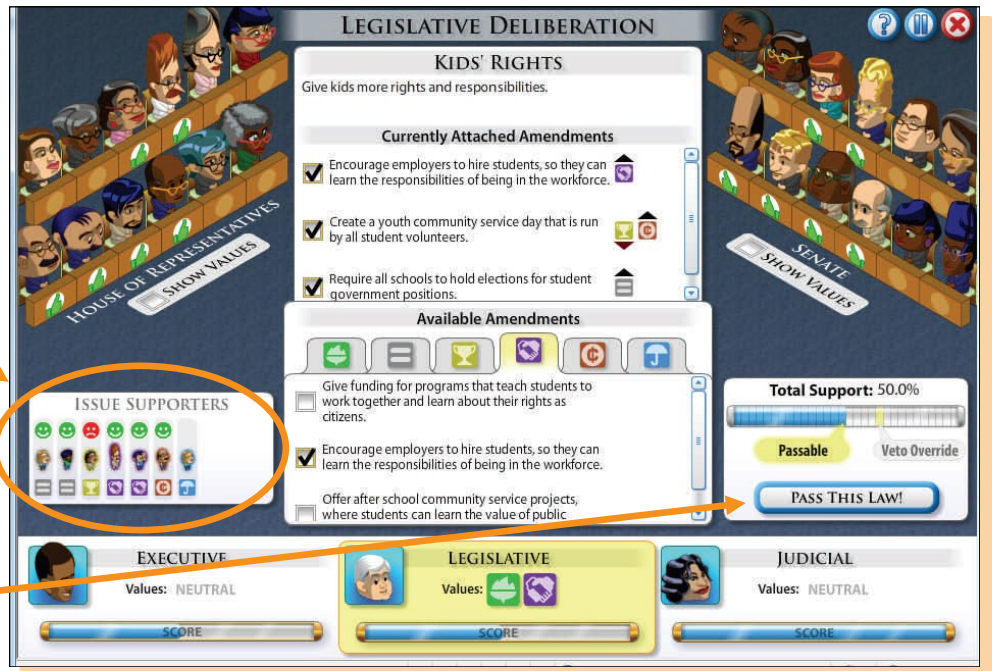
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Deliberate!

During "Deliberation," craft a bill that is either "passable" or "veto-proof" by choosing amendments that meet Congress' values.

TIP: Pay attention to how the "issue supporters" feel because this impacts whether the President will sign or veto a bill!

5 When a bill is "passable," Click the "Pass This Law!"



Time to stamp that bill

After you pass a law, a message from the President will appear in the lower left corner of the screen telling you whether this bill has citizen support. Switch to the executive branch role and move the President to the tower, then click on it.

TIP: If you don't switch quickly, the computer will play this role for you.



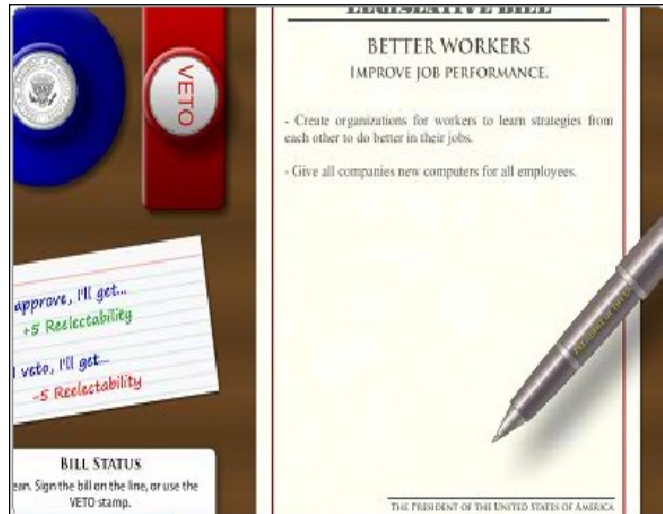
The screen with all the details of the issue tower appears again. Click on "Sign or Veto Bill."

In the lower left-hand corner of the screen, you will see information about how popular the bill is with supporters. You will be awarded for signing popular bills and punished for signing unpopular ones.

7 To veto the bill, click on the veto stamp, move it over the bill, and click again.

TIP: For bills that were passed with a veto-proof majority, the veto stamp will be ineffective.

8 Click on the stamp and put the official presidential seal on the bill with another click.



6 To sign the bill into law, click on the pen and sign the bill.

TIP: Bills are considered passable when 50 percent or more of Congress support it.

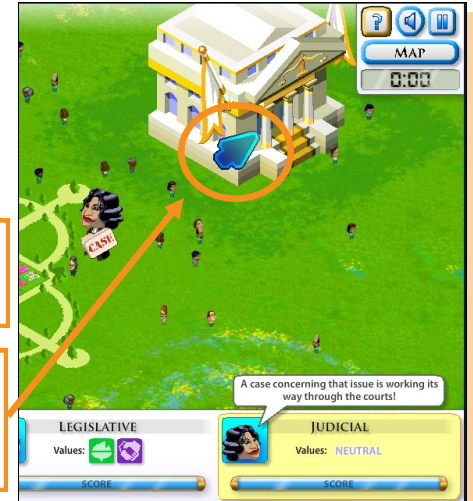


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Take it to the courts

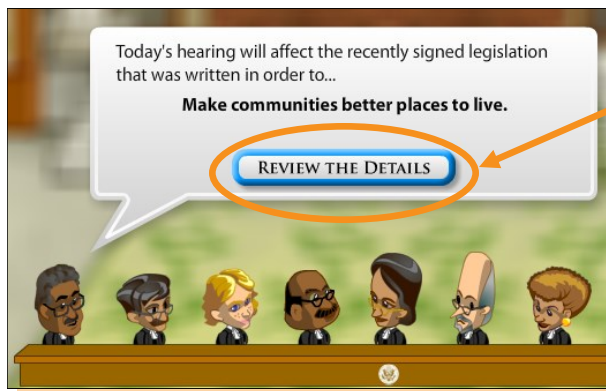
The bill is now a law! The tower's label says "signed," and it has grown!

If a court case arises from the law, it would happen now. A message will pop up on the right hand side indicating that there is a case.



9 Click on the judicial branch box at the bottom of the screen and shift over to this role.

10 Follow the arrows to lead the Justice to the case, and then follow the arrows to lead the Justice back to the Supreme Court building to consider it.



11 Click on "Review the Details" to see the content of the new law. You will evaluate the individual amendments and decide if they are constitutional or not.

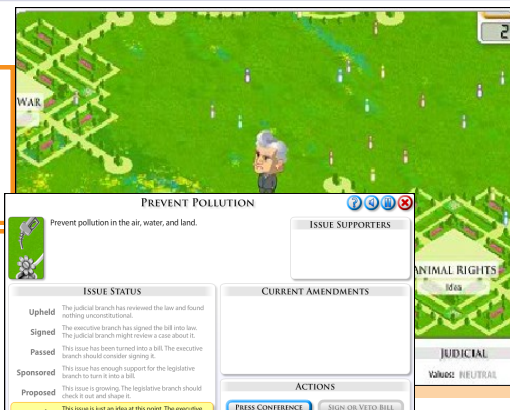
The other eight justices on the Court then share their collective opinion, and you will know immediately if you correctly evaluated the amendments. (Don't worry, they aren't hard constitutional questions!)

If the Supreme Court decides the law is constitutional, then the issue tower is 100 percent complete! Congratulations! If any part of the law is unconstitutional, however, then the entire law is overturned, and the Legislator must craft a new bill in a new "Deliberation" session.

The fun's not over!

12 Click on the role of a president to begin a brand new issue tower.

14 A screen will appear that includes all the important details of this issue tower. Click on "Press Conference."



13 Click on an empty issue plot.

15 Three reporters will ask the President simple yes or no questions, and you will answer them. If you get all three questions right, then the issue is "proposed." If not, you must try again.

TIP: After you have your press conference, then switch to the legislative branch to have a town hall and start the process again.



ADDITIONAL TIPS ON BRANCHES OF POWER

Instructions for game

To find initial instructions on how to play the game, click on “Instructions” on the opening screen of *Branches of Power*. This option will provide detailed directions for playing as well as the accompanying screen shots.

What do I need to know about the game?

The central goal of *Branches of Power* is to build as many issue towers as possible; ten is the maximum possible. The issue towers are symbolic of a bill becoming a law. Each one begins as just an idea, depicted as an empty square labeled with an issue. As you make decisions and the bill moves through the legislative process, the tower grows larger. Once the Supreme Court upholds a law, then the issue tower is complete!

Wait—I started to play the game, and it’s hard!

Don’t worry! Each time you play, you will get better at it. And this guide will provide you with a clear overview of how the game works. You do not need to be an expert on this game to enjoy it and learn from it.

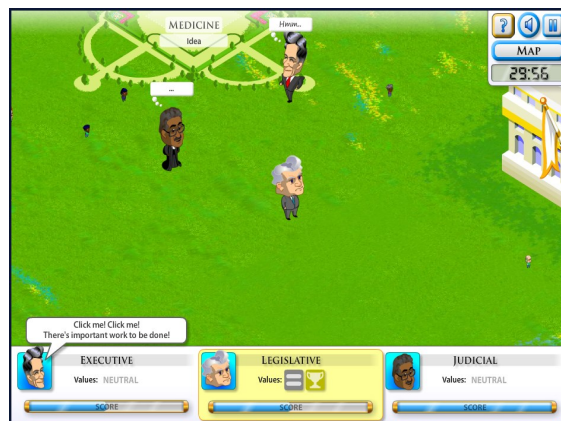
Want a simpler version to play?

There is a “Beginner” version of the game, which allows you to create one issue tower to get a sense of how the game works. On the start screen, click on the “Play Tutorial” button. In this version, the different characters of the branches direct you through the process of passing a bill and determining its constitutionality.

TIP: If students have questions on what a current screen means, they can click on the question mark icon in the top right corner of the screen. This gives the student directions for that particular component of the game. Clicking this symbol also turns the overall directions for the game on or off.

During the game, messages will appear at the bottom of the screen next to a particular branch. These indicate when the other branches have roles to play. Students need to pay attention to them and take care of all three branches’ responsibilities to win the game!

Messages on the screen



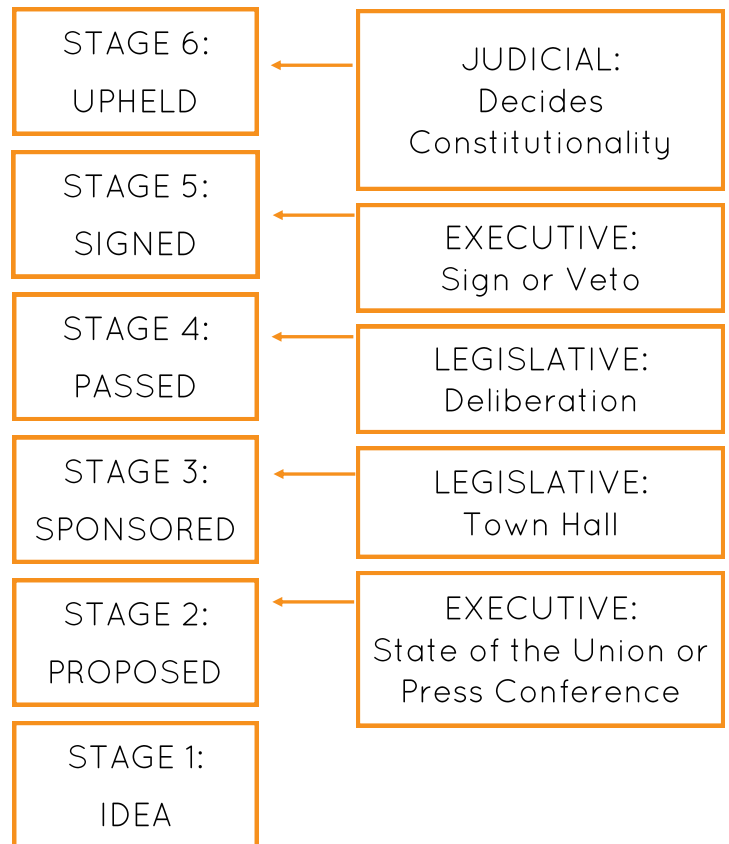
There are also messages that appear in the top left corner of the screen. These explain either what just happened with the role students are currently playing, what is happening with the other two branches that students are not currently playing, or what the citizens are doing.

Finally, there are messages at the bottom of the screen highlighting points students earned for particular actions.

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Moving through the issue tower stages

This diagram illustrates the actions each branch must take to move the issue tower to the next level:



Explaining the values

One of the key components of this game is teaching students that legislators have different values that shape bills. The six values in this game are:

- ↳ **Liberty:** means that people have the freedom to do things that they want to do
- ↳ **Equality:** means that everyone is treated fairly and has an equal chance
- ↳ **Competition:** means that people are encouraged to compete to succeed
- ↳ **Cooperation:** means that people are encouraged to work together to get things done
- ↳ **Cost Saving:** means that the government is not spending a lot of money
- ↳ **Generosity:** means that the government is providing large benefits or services to citizens

The values were designed to oppose each other in the following way: liberty vs. equality, competition vs. cooperation, and cost saving vs. generosity. The values students select will be shown on the screen through the game as well as during the town hall meetings. If students want to refresh their memory on the definitions of the values, they can pause the game at anytime, and this information will appear on the screen.

TIP: If students want a particularly hard challenge and bonus points (!), they can choose conflicting values for their legislator.

Legislative Branch—Town Halls

Before writing bills, the Legislator needs to gather support among the citizens for a specific topics. During the town hall meeting, three citizens make statements about their opinions on the issue. Students will earn two supporters when they respond in a way that is consistent with their values. They will earn one supporter for all other answers. If students read the questions carefully, they will notice that some are consistent with their values, and some oppose them.

NOTE: There is a third option students can choose during the town hall meeting, which is “Change the Subject.” If they select this option, then no supporters will be added to the group of citizen supporters.

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TIP: These questions do not have right or wrong answers, but there might be different strategies as to how to answer them.

The supporters are important for two purposes. First, once the Legislative Branch has sufficient support among the people, then the bill is officially “proposed,” and it moves to the next stage of the legislative process, which is “legislative deliberation.” Second, it is important in the legislative deliberation to make the supporters happy. This means that the best thing to do is to try to get supporters with your values by agreeing with the statements that match them.

Legislative Branch—Deliberation

During this phase, students will evaluate specific policies or “amendments” and decide which ones to attach to the bill. The goal is to choose a combination of amendments that will create a bill that will pass Congress. There are two levels at which bills can pass. “Passable” means the bill has at least a simple majority (51%) of support. “Veto-Proof” means the bill has at least two-thirds support. There are several factors that need to be balanced. They include:

TIP: The more critical thinking students put into the legislative deliberation stage, the better they will do in the game overall.

- ✦ **Getting the Bill Passed:** Find a combination of amendments that gets enough support in both houses of Congress to pass
- ✦ **Pleasing the Issue Supporters:** The issue supporters are important because the President looks at them to weigh public support for a bill. For popular bills signed into law, the Legislator earns points. If the President vetoes a bill for lack of public support, then the Legislator loses points.
- ✦ **Supporting Your Own Values:** If a bill gets passed that includes amendments consistent with the Legislator’s values, then the student is rewarded with points.
- ✦ **Ensuring Constitutionality:** Students need to read the amendments they select before passing the bill and consider if they are constitutional. By passing a bill that includes unconstitutional amendments, they will lose points later in the game when the Supreme Court strikes it down.



SCORING THE GAME

While each branch is scored individually, to win the game, students need to keep all three branches active! The game can end in three ways:

- ✦ **Victory!** The student builds all 10 issue towers to completion.
- ✦ **Draw!** The student kept all three branches successfully engaged in the game, but she or he does not complete all 10 towers.
- ✦ **Defeat.** If the student does not keep all branches engaged in the game, the student loses. When a particular branch is in danger of this happening, its score bar will turn red as a warning to the student. (NOTE: The printed score report will provide details regarding how well the student kept each branch operating successfully during the game.)

And how are the branches scored?

- ✦ The Legislative Branch's score reflects successfully passing bills that are: (1) consistent with the Legislator's values, (2) signed by the President (and therefore probably popular with the issue supporters), and (3) constitutional.
- ✦ The Executive Branch earns points for signing into law constitutional bills that are popular with the issue supporters. Bonus points are allotted for creating laws on the three issues selected during the State of the Union.
- ✦ The Judicial Branch earns points for correctly interpreting the constitutionality of new laws.

Continue playing?

If students want to continue playing after the timer runs out, they do have this option. However, official scoring will not continue beyond the timed portion of the game.

Final Certificate

When the timed portion of the game is over, a final score will appear. Students can print out a more detailed certificate for grading and/or class participation purposes.



TIP: Students can also earn bonus points for how quickly they play the game, how many towers are signed or upheld, and if they played with conflicting values.

CLASSROOM CONVERSATION STARTERS

Pre-Game Questions

You can use these questions to lead into playing *Branches of Power* in the classroom:

- What are the three branches of government?
- What is the role of each branch of government?
- What is the purpose of having three separate branches?
- What does constitutional mean?
- How do the branches work together to create constitutional laws?



Post-Game Questions

Use these questions as a way to debrief the individual experiences of playing *Branches of Power*:

- If you were going to be a member of a branch of government, which one would you want to be part of? Why?
- Why do you think you have to pick three issues at the beginning of the game for the executive to focus on? How is that like real life?
- What would be the advantage of having one branch that does everything? What would be the disadvantage?
- How is the lawmaking process affected if the president and Congress have different values?
- The legislators in the game held town halls to find out what people think. Why do legislators care what people think? The Supreme Court member did not hold any town halls to find out what people think. Why not?



CLASSROOM CONVERSATION STARTERS

Activity Idea

Put a check in the branches' column for each statement that is true of that branch. More than one box can be checked for each question.

	Executive	Legislative	Judicial
Includes the President			
Includes the Supreme Court			
Includes Congress			
Declares laws unconstitutional			
Vetoes laws			
Creates laws			
Elected			
Appointed			
One person is in charge			
Nine people work together			
Many people work together			
Creates amendments			