

INTRO TO U. S. GOVERNMENT

A Family Study Guide by Kimberly Parsons of Hearth & Gnome

One of my passions at Hearth & Gnome is providing materials for homeschooling families following an eclectic, holistic path. I want the resources I use and the ones I create to be cross-curricular, include art and hands-on projects, and inspire deep thinking and deep feeling. I can think of no topic better suited for deep thinking and deep feeling than United States Government! So, I wrote this block for my own children. I wanted to help them engage with this amazing, complex, inspiring country that is also mind-boggling, heart-breaking, and has such a long way to go to realizing our ideals. Most of all, I wanted them to begin to understand their vital role in the future of our nation.

Target age for this guide is 12, but it is designed for family study. You will find things for a broad spectrum of ages, starting around age 8. I've included a brief introduction to the separation of powers, the Constitution, the functions of each branch, voting, and additional ways for people to be active in politics.

Distilling this topic into a mini guide was nearly impossible. There are so many ideas, historical touch-points, and more that I simply could not include. I surely have left out something you consider essential - *please do add it!* This guide is just *one way* to facilitate a family culture of healthy political discussion and engagement.

I wish you and yours many deep, thoughtful, caring conversations about where we came from, where we might be headed, and how we might best participate in creating a better world. - Kimberly

BLOCK FEATURES

Topics

- Constitutional Convention
- Connecticut Compromise
- Three-Fifths Rule and Slavery
- Three Branches: Legislative, Executive, Judicial
- Pivotal SCOTUS Cases
- Local and State Government
- Voting Requirements
- Voting Rights
- Parties and Platforms
- Electoral College
- Additional Parties and Independents
- Political Action Ideas for Kids

Activities

- Copy Work
- Songs and Poetry with background notes
- Whole-Family Activities
- STEM Activity
- Relevant, high-quality internet links
- Main Lesson Book samples
- Form Drawing sample
- Math Challenges for a variety of ages and stages - addition, subtraction, comparing numbers, rounding, estimating, reading charts
- Writing Prompts
- Artwork study
- Research project ideas
- Word Searches

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Unless specifically stated that one of my guides relies on a particular book, *please use the resources you have on your shelves already or can borrow from your local library!* There is no need to go out and buy a bunch of books.

For this block you will need books about the Presidents and/or SCOTUS justices if your child(ren) chooses to write about one of them. Otherwise, there are no books you *have to have* to enjoy this block.

A More Perfect Union by Betsy and Giulio Maestro. A Mulberry Paperback Book. 1987.

A Young People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn and adapted by Rebecca Stefoff. Seven Stories Press. 2007 and 2009.

Lives of the Presidents: Fame, Shame (and What the Neighbors Thought), by Kathleen Krull. Harcourt, Inc. 1998. This book only goes through President Bill Clinton, but the style (and illustrations) were a big hit here.

My America: A Poetry Atlas of the United States. Lee Bennett Hopkins, ed. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, New York. 2000.

Presidents, Eyewitness Books.

So You Want to Be President? by Judith St. George and David Small. Scholastic, Inc. 2000/.

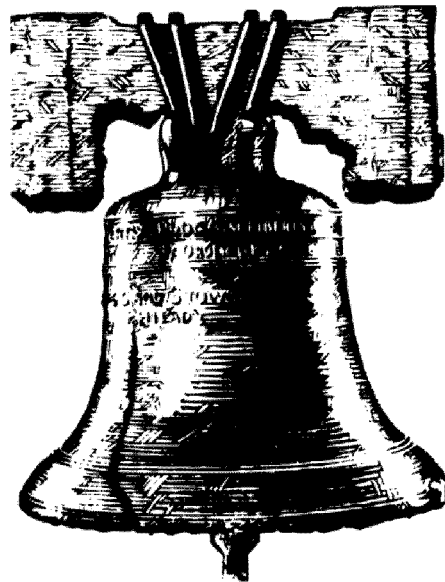
The video series, *Liberty's Kids*.

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is arranged in individual lessons. You might choose to spread these over three weeks with one day each week for field trips or activities. You may find yourself needing more time to dive deeply into some of the material that is just briefly touched on here. Look it over, choose what works for you, add what you like, and make it work for you and your family.

We began our day with our usual morning gathering time. I chose to add the music as a listening activity rather than as songs we sang each day. After our gathering time, we dove into the lesson beginning with a review of the previous day's material. After the lesson and discussion time, we worked on our Main Lesson Book pages. In the afternoons, we enjoyed read-alouds together, many of them books from the suggested resources.

I'd love to see your work! Find me on social media @hearthandgnome or email me at kimberly@hearthandgnome.com. Best wishes on your journey!



LESSON 1: GOVERNMENT

Discuss: Who is in charge in your family - i.e. who makes which kinds of decisions? What powers does each person have? What responsibilities? Does anyone have more power or responsibility than other members? Why or why not? What happens when someone doesn't follow through or when the others in the family don't like what they are doing?

Are any of these rules written down? If so, how is that helpful? Has it ever created a tough situation? If your family government isn't written down, do you think writing it down is a good idea? Why or why not? What would be challenging about writing it down?

Activity: Family Governance

Choose just *one* situation in your family to tackle - screen time rules, chores, or allowances. Work together to create written rules for that situation. This may be a lengthy process! Once you have all agreed, put the rules in place for a short, agreed-upon time. After the time period is over, discuss what worked, what didn't work, and what changes you might make to the rules you created.

LESSON 5: EXECUTIVE & JUDICIAL BRANCHES

In this lesson, we will learn about the other co-equal branches of government. They are the Executive and Judicial branches.

The Executive Branch is led by the President. It includes the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet, and the Executive Office.

Have you ever thought about running for President? Here are the qualifications as set forth in the Constitution:

The president must be:

- 1. A natural-born citizen of the United States.*
- 2. Be at least 35 years old.*
- 3. Have been a resident of the United States for 14 years.*

Natural born means they were born in the United States. The age requirement is pretty straight-forward. But the residency requirement may seem a little odd these days. What's the big deal if a citizen has lived overseas for a long time? Well, it was a big deal when the Constitution was written! In those days, wealthy people would often send their sons to Europe to attend universities, manage family business interests, and more. The founders worried that someone who had spent their adult life in Europe might be more favorable to European interests than to the interests of his own countrymen. They wanted to make sure that anyone elected President would have deep roots in the United States and no foreign loyalties!

In addition to the power of signing or vetoing legislation, what can the President do? Here are the primary responsibilities:

1. *Head of State, diplomacy with other nations, signs treaties*
2. *Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces*
3. *Enforce and implement laws enacted by Congress via executive branch departments and agencies. The President appoints leaders of these agencies as well as Cabinet members.*
4. *May grant pardons to individuals convicted of federal crimes*

And how do the other branches check and balance the President's powers? Here are some examples.

The President is the Head of State and our Commander-in-Chief *but* the Constitution grants Congress the sole power to actually declare war.

The President appoints lots of people - executive branch agencies, Cabinet members, and members of the judicial branch, *but* the Senate has to *approve* those selections.

The judicial branch is the third branch of government. It is made up of judges and courts. Many judges are appointed, some are elected.

What do these people do? Judges and courts decide:

1. *The meaning of laws;*
2. *How laws should be applied in real-life situations; and*
3. *If a law is unlawful - that is, if a law passed by the legislative branch and signed by the executive branch actually breaks the rules in the Constitution.*

That last part is one big check and balance on the other branches of government!

The United States Supreme Court or SCOTUS is the highest court in our country. It is made up of 9 judges called *justices*. The President nominates judges to serve on the Court and the Senate can choose to confirm or not confirm their choices. Supreme Court appointments are for life or until the justice decides to retire.

The SCOTUS typically decides cases that have to do with laws or interpretations of laws that might violate the Constitution. These are cases that have been heard and decided in lower courts, but have been appealed to higher courts. It typically takes years for a case to make its way to the high court! *Once the SCOTUS has decided a case, it can only be changed by a future SCOTUS ruling or by changing the Constitution itself!*

Here are some links to kid-friendly information about just a few important SCOTUS decisions throughout history.

The Dred Scott Case of 1847 is perhaps the best example of the SCOTUS getting it wrong - and the aftermath of their decision.

Dred Scott Case, 1847

Background: <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Dred-Scott-Decision/384643>

Video from PBS: <https://lpb.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/dred-scott-case-video/a-more-or-less-perfect-union/>

In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* of 1954, the Court determined that segregation by race was illegal. The ripple effects of this decision are still being felt in daily life and political discourse.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954

Background: <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Brown-v-Board-of-Education-of-Topeka/627788>

Video from PBS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTGHLdr-iaK>

Lily Ledbetter's suit is a fantastic recent example of a time the SCOTUS' decision forced Congress to act.

Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., 2007

Background: https://kids.kiddle.co/Lilly_Ledbetter

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMxsYqaFwAo>

Important Note: In the last seconds of this video, Ms. Ledbetter makes an appeal for the reelection of then-President Barack Obama. Hearing her own story in her own words and voice seemed more important to me than avoiding an out-of-date partisan appeal. - KP

The SCOTUS is not the only court in the land. There are many levels of courts in the United States. Read more details about that here:

<https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/court-role-and-structure>

[From Lesson 8)

Math Extension Activity for Older Kids: Gerrymandering!

For this activity, you need a grid, 2-3 different colored markers, and some string. A checkerboard and checkers work perfectly.

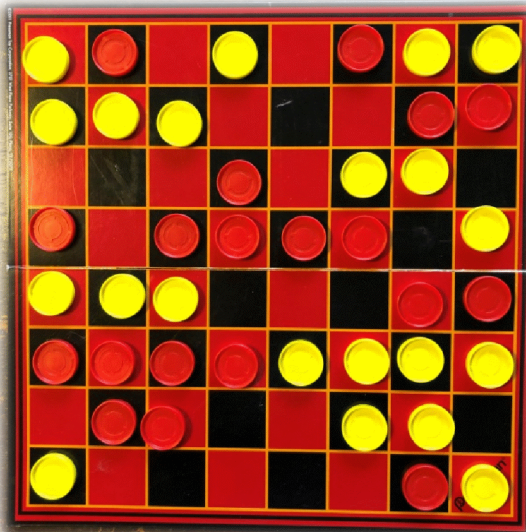
Alternatively you could use graph paper, and colored pencils, or geoboards with play clay to mark the pegs and rubberbands.

Prepare your paper or boards ahead of time as follows:

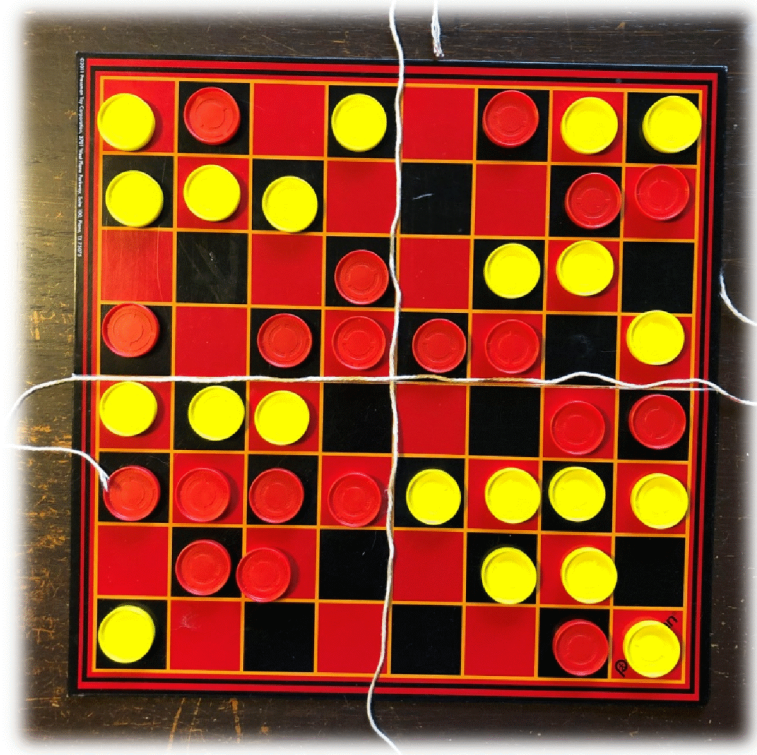
On the checkerboard, disburse the marker on the board. Create some large clusters of single colors as well as some outliers.

If you are using the paper option, draw a grid and then shade squares one of three colors. For younger children, create fewer squares.

If you are using geoboards, create your clusters by attaching bits of clay to each peg.



Next, tell your children they have to arrange the string or rubber bands to create four equal zones on the grid or paper. Each zone must have the same number of *squares*, *not tokens*. They will likely form some kind of cross or X.

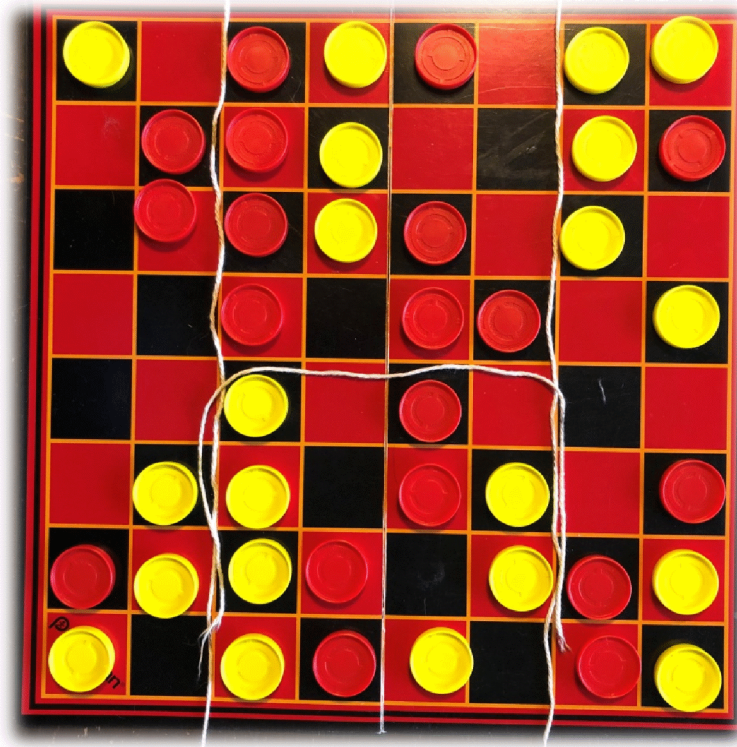


In this example, the quadrants are exactly equal - 16 squares - with no regard to red or yellow.

Now ask your kids to count how many of each color ended up in each quadrant. Which color won in each quadrant? In the above example, yellow wins upper-left and lower right. Red wins lower left. It is a tie in upper right.

Now, assign your child(ren) a color. Tell them they will once again create four equal zones, but this time, the goal is to have all four zones have a majority of their assigned color. They may arrange the yarn or rubber bands *any way they like* as long as each of the four sections has an *equal number of squares or pegs*. This may take awhile! Let them play!

Here is one result.



In this example, all four quadrants have the same number of squares - 16. But, yellow takes both the long, skinny sections *and* one of the middle ones. Red wins only one quadrant and there is no tie.

When they have finished, it's time to discuss everyone's favorite political animal - the gerrymander!



This is the original cartoon created by Elkanah Tisdale (1771-1835) called "The Gerry-Mander Edit." It was originally published in the Boston Centinel in 1812. The district depicted in the cartoon was created by the Massachusetts legislature to favor the Democratic-Republican party candidates over the Federalists in 1812.

LESSON 11: BEYOND TWO PARTIES

Many countries have more than two major parties. Here in the United States, we also have additional parties, but so far, none of them have come close to winning a federal election.

In 1992, we had three major candidates for President: Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush, Democrat Bill Clinton, and Independent Ross Perot. Here was the outcome by popular and electoral vote. The letter after their name is for their party (Republican, Democratic, Independent) and the extra "I" stands for incumbent. The incumbent is the person who holds the office already and is running again.

	Popular Votes	Electoral Votes
George H. W. Bush R-I	39,104,545	168
William J. Clinton D	44,909,889	370
Ross Perot I	19,742,267	0

Math Minute: Which candidate received the most popular votes? How many people did *not* vote for the winner?

Learn more here: https://www.270towin.com/1992_Election/

In 2020, we had *five* candidates for President! Here was the outcome by popular and electoral vote.

	Popular Vote	Electoral Vote
Donald J. Trump R	62,984,828	304
Hillary Rodham Clinton D	65,853,514	227
Gary Johnson L	4,489,341	0
Jill Stein G	1,457,218	0
Evan McMullin I	731,991	0

Math Minute: Which candidate received the most popular votes? How many people did *not* vote for the winner?

Learn more here: https://www.270towin.com/2016_Election/

Remember those candidates with just one "I" beside their names? Remember that stands for "Independent." This means they do not consider themselves members of any major party. They have their own ideas about how things should be done. Some voters consider themselves Independents as well.

In the 2020 election, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont) ran for the Democratic nomination for President as an Independent. As a Senator, he caucuses - i.e. works and votes most of the time - with the Democratic Senators.

Discuss: *Some people say that voting third party is "throwing away your vote" because, as things stand currently, there is little to no chance a third-party candidate will receive enough votes to take the electoral college. Some people say that this will never change unless people do vote for third party candidates. What do you think? Why?*

Activity: Third and Fourth Parties

Read the Green and Libertarian party platforms here. You could do the same activity you did before with the Democratic and Republican parties if you wish.

Green Party Platform: <https://www.gp.org/platform>

Libertarian Party Platform: <https://www.lp.org/platform/>