

The Constitution and Our Large Republic

Grade Level: 10-12

Time Required: 1 hour

Historical Thinking Skill: Analysis

Objective: In this exercise, students will analyze five key parts of the Constitution and assess how realistically and effectively they could work in a large republic in 1787 and into its future. This module works best when students have background knowledge of the limitations of 18th century travel. To prepare students for this activity, consider assigning the Large vs. Small Republics: Time and Space in Colonial America module first. Students should also think about how these Constitutional provisions might be problematic in our country today.

Directions: As a class, read the background information, and then for each Constitutional provision (or excerpted provision) students will consider the question: “is this appropriate and workable for a geographically large and diverse nation?” and give it a rating between 0-10 (0 is totally unsuited and 10 is exceedingly well-suited). Instruct them to provide one or two examples or reasons to support their assessments. If desired, you can have students work as groups and present their decisions to the rest of the class.

Example Exercise:

Article I, Section 8: “To regulate commerce with foreign nations...”

Score: 5 (moderately well-suited)

Justification:

- A. Since this allows the federal government to set tariffs, it can have an unfair impact on some states. For example, duties on imported cars help states like Michigan protect jobs and wages, but they provide no benefits to a state such as Wyoming, which does not produce them, and its residents must pay higher costs. Citizens in Wyoming may feel penalized by a distant government and believe it does not understand or care about their interests.
- B. On the other hand, it is well-suited for a large republic. Since we have diverse economies and regions, it is necessary to have one standard trading policy that applies to the whole country. If the U.S. did not have a consistent trade policy, states would create their own trade policies. For example, California might place tariffs on imported high tech products. In that case, an exporter, such as Japan or China, might simply sell them through non-tech states such as Louisiana. With a patchwork of state tariffs, foreign nations would likely adopt this strategy and could play one state against the other.

Background: After the Constitutional Convention, Americans engaged in a spirited and intense debate over the question as to whether a small or a large republic was more likely to endure and avoid collapse into tyranny. Previous republics, such as Athens in the classical era and Venice in the Middle Ages, had been small and compact. The only vast one, Rome, eventually fell under the control of emperors. Thus, the United States would be, by far, the biggest nation since Rome to attempt a large republican government. Yet the country’s geographic, linguistic, regional, ethnic, and

racial diversity made the success of such an experiment seem unlikely. Many of these same issues remain major challenges even today.

Directions: Have students complete the activity for the following examples. Sample justifications are provided.

1. Article I, Section 8: “To establish Post Office and post Roads...”
 - A. The federal government may not establish Post Offices and roads evenly across all states. State governments would be better equipped to establish their own Post Offices and roads efficiently and in the most ideal locations.
 - B. It is necessary for mail to be able to travel across state lines. If Post Offices and roads are not established with some uniformity, mail from one state may not make it to its intended destination.

2. Article I, Section 8: “To raise and support armies...”
 - A. Some states would oppose paying to protect others from a foreign threat. For example, Georgians might not wish to help New England states with a border dispute with British Canada. Likewise, New England states might not want to pay to help Georgia with a dispute it may have instigated with Spanish Florida.
 - B. Today, unlike 1787, we are a global power so a large republic can support a large military and be a force for good in the world. Think of World War II and the destruction of Nazism.

3. Article I, Section 8: “To borrow money on the credit of the United States...”
 - A. Some states might believe that money being raised by the federal government does not benefit them or their region.
 - B. This allows the federal government to meet an emergency or crisis.

4. Article II, Section 2: “The President shall be commander in chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several states, when called into the actual service of the United States...”
 - A. In 1787 many felt that such a figure would have too much power in a large republic. The President reminded them of King George III.
 - B. The President as Commander in Chief enables unity if the republic is threatened. Citizens would not want different commanders in each state.



5. Article III, Section 3: “The judicial power of the United States, shall be vested in one Supreme Court...”
 - A. In a large, diverse republic one ruling might not suit everyone. Citizens in Massachusetts have a different economy and culture than those in South Carolina. National rulings could become very diverse. States courts are better suited to a large republic.
 - B. A patchwork of state rulings would make it impossible to unify the new nation. In a republic, citizens must accept viewpoints and policies they don't agree with.

