

Separation of Powers

The separation of powers is a fundamental principle of a constitutional republic. By dividing authority among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, it prevents any one person or group from controlling the entire government. This classroom catalog entry explores the historical roots of the idea and examines key moments during the Constitutional Convention when delegates debated how to distribute power across the branches.

Essential Question

How did the delegates in the Constitutional Convention separate the powers of government to prevent tyranny?

Vocabulary

Tyranny—arbitrary or unrestrained exercise of power at the expense of the rights of the people.

Separation of powers—the constitutional principle of dividing governmental power among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, each with specific duties to prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful.

Checks and balances—the constitutional principle in which each branch of government shares some of the powers of the other branches to limit their actions.