
Federalism: Who Actually Runs What?

Bloom's Level: Understand

Standard:

NCSS.C3.6.9-12 — Civic Ideals and Practices

NCSS.C3.9-12.4 — Civic Participation

TEKS §113.44(d)(8)(B) — Understanding Federalism

STUDENT EDITION



Federalism divides power across three levels of government — federal, state, and local — each with its own responsibilities that affect your daily life.

Federalism: Who Actually Runs What?

Why Does It Matter Who's in Charge?

Imagine you're frustrated that your school doesn't offer enough electives, or that the minimum wage at your part-time job feels too

low. You want to do something about it — but who do you actually contact? Do you write to the President? Your governor? Your city

council? The answer depends entirely on which level of government controls that issue. This is the core idea behind **federalism**: a system that divides governmental power between a national (federal) government and smaller state and local

governments. Understanding federalism isn't just a civics exercise — it's a practical map that tells you exactly where power lives and how to use your voice effectively.



Federalism divides power across three levels of government — federal, state, and local — each with its own responsibilities that affect your daily life.

What Is Federalism?

Federalism is the constitutional framework that splits authority between the federal government in Washington, D.C., and the fifty individual state governments. The U.S. Constitution establishes this division, granting certain powers exclusively to the federal government, reserving others for the states, and sharing some between both levels.

The **Supremacy Clause** (Article VI of the Constitution) establishes that federal law is the "supreme law of the land," meaning that when federal and state laws conflict, federal law wins. However, this does not mean the federal government controls everything. The **Tenth Amendment** specifically reserves all powers not granted to the federal government to the states or to the people. This balance was intentional — the Founders wanted to prevent any single authority from becoming too powerful.

It's also worth noting that federalism hasn't stayed frozen in time. Throughout American history, the balance of power between federal and state governments has shifted. Major events like the Civil War, the New Deal era of the 1930s, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s all expanded federal authority in significant ways, reshaping how responsibilities are divided across levels of government.

Three Levels, Three Roles

To understand federalism clearly, it helps to classify the three levels of government and describe what each one typically controls.

The Federal Government

The federal government handles issues that affect the entire nation. Its responsibilities include:

- **National defense and the military**
- **Foreign policy and treaties**
- **Interstate commerce** — meaning trade and economic activity that crosses state lines, such as shipping goods from one state to another or regulating national corporations
- **Immigration and naturalization**
- **Federal currency and taxation**

For example, Congress sets the federal minimum wage — currently \$7.25 per hour — as a national baseline. No state can legally pay workers less than this amount.

State Governments

States have broad authority over issues within their own borders. State responsibilities typically include:

- **Education policy and curriculum standards**
- **State minimum wage laws** (which can exceed the federal minimum)
- **Driver's licensing and vehicle registration**
- **State criminal law and prisons**
- **Public health regulations**

This is why minimum wage varies so dramatically across the country. California's minimum wage, for instance, is significantly higher than the federal floor because California's state legislature chose to set it higher. Neither decision is "wrong" — they reflect different state priorities and costs of living.

Local Governments

Cities, counties, and school districts operate at the most immediate level of daily life.

Local governments control:

- **Public schools** (curriculum decisions, school hours, extracurricular programs)
- **Local police departments**
- **Zoning laws** (what can be built where in your neighborhood)
- **Public parks and libraries**
- **Local taxes and budgets**

When you wonder why your school offers certain classes or follows a particular schedule, the answer usually traces back to your **local school board** — an elected local body — working within guidelines set by your state.

Shared Powers: Where It Gets Interesting

Some powers are **concurrent**, meaning both federal and state governments share them. Taxation is a classic example — you pay both federal income tax and, in most states, a state income tax. Building and maintaining roads is another shared responsibility, with the federal government funding major interstate highways while states and localities manage smaller roads.

This overlap can sometimes create confusion or conflict. When a state law contradicts a federal law, courts must step in to interpret which authority applies. This ongoing negotiation between levels of government is actually a feature of federalism, not a flaw — it keeps power distributed and encourages debate about the best solutions to public problems.

Real-World Connections: Federalism in Your Daily Life

Federalism shapes your life in ways you might not immediately recognize:

- **Your school curriculum:** Your state's department of education sets learning standards, but your local school district decides many day-to-day details.
- **Your paycheck:** Federal law sets the minimum wage floor; your state may set it higher.
- **Speed limits:** The federal government once set a national speed limit, but today states control their own speed limits on most roads.
- **Voting rules:** While federal law protects voting rights, states largely control how elections are run — including registration deadlines and polling hours.

Understanding this structure tells you something powerful: **if you want to change something, you need to know who controls it.** Want better school programs? Attend a school board meeting or contact your state representative. Want a higher minimum wage? Your state legislature may be the right audience.

Summary: Power Is Shared, Not Stacked

Federalism describes a system where governmental authority is deliberately divided among federal, state, and local levels. The federal government manages national concerns; states govern within their borders; and local governments handle the most immediate community issues. Some powers are shared, and courts help resolve conflicts when levels overlap. And as American history shows, the exact balance of that power continues to evolve over time.

The most important takeaway is this: knowing who controls what transforms you from a passive observer into an informed, effective citizen. When you understand the structure of power, you know exactly where to direct your energy when you want to make a difference.

Lesson Objective

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to explain how governmental power is divided among federal, state, and local levels under the U.S. system of federalism. You will also be able to describe the roles and responsibilities of each level of government and identify which level controls specific issues that affect your daily life.

Standard: NCSS.C3.6.9-12 — Civic Ideals and Practices;
TEKS §113.44(d)(8)(B) — Understanding Federalism

Bloom's Level: Understand

Bloom's Goal: Students will demonstrate understanding of federalism by explaining how power is distributed across federal, state, and local governments and what that means for civic participation.

Explanation: The 'understand' level of Bloom's Taxonomy asks students to make sense of information by explaining ideas in their own words and connecting concepts to real-world examples. In this lesson, students move beyond simply recalling facts about federalism to genuinely grasping why the division of power matters and how it shapes their ability to participate as citizens.



Understanding which level of government controls issues like minimum wage or school curriculum helps citizens know exactly who to contact when they want change.

Application Questions

Read each question carefully and use what you have learned about federalism to explain your thinking in your own words.

1. Your state's minimum wage is \$10 per hour, but the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. A local business owner argues that the state has no right to set a wage higher than the federal government's. Using what you know about federalism, explain whether the state is acting within its authority and why.

Think about: Consider what powers are reserved for states under the Tenth Amendment and how state minimum wage laws relate to the federal minimum wage floor described in the article.

2. A student wants to change the elective courses offered at her school. She writes a letter to the President of the United States asking him to require all schools to offer more elective options. Based on your understanding of federalism, explain why this approach may not be the most effective and identify which level of government she should contact instead.

Think about: Think about which level of government — federal, state, or local — typically controls public school curriculum and daily decisions, and why directing civic action to the right level matters.

3. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the federal government stepped in to override certain state laws that denied citizens equal rights. How does this historical example help explain the role of the Supremacy Clause in the federal system, and what does it suggest about how the balance of power between federal and state governments can change over time?

Think about: Recall what the Supremacy Clause says about conflicts between federal and state law, and consider how major historical events have shifted the balance of power described in the article.

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Primary Source Analysis (DBQ)

Read the primary source excerpt below carefully. Then answer the four analysis questions that follow. Use evidence from the source and your knowledge of federalism to support your responses.

James Madison, Federalist No. 45 [Essay]

The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite. The former will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will, for the most part, be connected. The powers reserved to the several States will extend to all the objects which, in the ordinary course of affairs, concern the lives, liberties, and properties of the people, and the internal order, improvement, and prosperity of the State. The operations of the federal government will be most extensive and important in times of war and danger; those of the State governments, in times of peace and security.

— James Madison, Federalist No. 45, published in the New York Packet, January 26, 1788

1. Who wrote this document, and what was his purpose in writing it? How might his role as a Founder and supporter of the Constitution influence the argument he makes about the division of power between federal and state governments? [Sourcing]

2. This essay was written in 1788, shortly before the Constitution was ratified. What concerns did many Americans have at that time about a strong central government, and how does Madison's argument in this excerpt attempt to address those concerns?

[Context]

3. According to Madison, what types of powers belong to the federal government, and what types belong to the states? Use specific words or phrases from the excerpt to support your answer. [Close Reading]

4. Madison argues that state powers are "numerous and indefinite" while federal powers are "few and defined." How does this claim connect to the Tenth Amendment and the concept of reserved powers described in the lesson? Do you think Madison's description still accurately reflects how federalism works in America today? Explain.

[Corroboration]

Civic Action Scenario

Read the civic scenario below carefully. Identify the stakeholders involved and answer all three questions using what you have learned about federalism and civic participation. Write in complete sentences and support your answers with reasoning.

Scenario: The students at Jefferson High School are frustrated because their school does not offer enough elective courses, and many feel the existing curriculum does not reflect the needs of their community. A group of students decides to take civic action, but they are unsure whether to contact the President, their governor, their state legislature, or their local school board. Meanwhile, the state recently passed a new education funding law that limits how much local districts can spend on non-core courses, making it harder for the school board to add electives even if it wants to. Some parents believe the federal government should step in and require schools nationwide to offer a broader range of courses. The students must figure out which level of government actually controls school curriculum decisions and how to most effectively make their voices heard.

Stakeholders: Students at Jefferson High School who want more elective course options | Local school board members responsible for curriculum and budget decisions | State legislators who passed the education funding law limiting district spending | Parents who believe federal intervention is needed to improve school programs

1. Based on what you know about federalism, which level of government — federal, state, or local — has the most direct authority over school curriculum decisions? Explain why that level of government holds this power.

2. The parents in this scenario believe the federal government should require all schools to offer more elective courses. Using your understanding of the Tenth Amendment and the division of powers, explain whether this would be an appropriate use of federal authority and why.

3. If you were one of the students in this scenario, what specific civic actions could you take to address the lack of electives at your school? Identify at least two actions and explain which level of government each action targets.

Hypotheticals

Read each scenario carefully, then answer both questions using what you have learned about federalism and the division of power between federal, state, and local governments.

Scenario 1: Marisol is a 9th grader who is upset that her school recently cut the art and music programs due to budget shortfalls. She wants to fight to get these programs restored. Her older cousin tells her to write a letter to the President, but her civics teacher suggests a different approach. Marisol is not sure who actually has the power to make decisions about her school's programs.

a) Based on what you know about federalism, which level of government most directly controls decisions about public school programs like art and music? Explain why.

b) What specific civic action could Marisol take to try to restore these programs, and who should she contact to make her voice heard most effectively?

Scenario 2: Darius works a part-time job at a local grocery store and earns the state minimum wage, which is higher than the federal minimum wage. His coworker argues that the state has no right to set its own minimum wage because the federal government already set one. Darius is not sure who is correct.

a) Is Darius's coworker correct that states cannot set their own minimum wage? Use your understanding of federalism to explain why or why not.

b) If Darius wanted to advocate for an even higher minimum wage in his state, which level of government should he focus on, and what civic actions could he take to make an impact?

Short Answer

Answer each question in 1-2 complete sentences using what you learned from the lesson.

1. What is federalism, and why did the Founders create this system instead of giving all power to one central government?

2. Explain how the minimum wage is an example of how federal and state governments share or divide power under federalism.

3. If a student wanted to change the elective courses offered at their school, which level of government would they most likely need to contact, and why?

Reflection Questions

Answer each question in your own words, using what you learned from the article to support your thinking.

1. In your own words, explain why the United States uses a federal system that divides power between national, state, and local governments instead of giving all power to one central government.

Think about: Think about what the Founders were worried about and what the Tenth Amendment was designed to do.

2. Explain why the minimum wage can be different from state to state, even though there is a federal minimum wage. What does this tell you about how federalism works in practice?

Think about: Consider the roles of both the federal government and state governments when it comes to setting wages, and what the federal minimum wage actually represents.

3. If you wanted to push for more elective classes at your school, which level of government would you most likely need to contact, and why? How does understanding federalism help you take effective civic action?

Think about: Think about which level of government controls public schools and day-to-day school decisions, and why knowing that matters for civic participation.

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Multiple Choice

Choose the best answer for each question based on your understanding of federalism and the division of governmental power in the United States.

1. What is the main purpose of federalism in the United States?
 - A. To give the President complete control over all government decisions
 - B. To divide governmental power between the national government and state governments
 - C. To ensure that local governments have more power than state governments
 - D. To allow Congress to override all state and local laws at any time
2. Which constitutional provision establishes that federal law is the supreme law of the land?
 - A. The First Amendment
 - B. The Tenth Amendment
 - C. The Supremacy Clause in Article VI
 - D. The Commerce Clause in Article I
3. According to the Tenth Amendment, powers not granted to the federal government are reserved for whom?
 - A. The President and the Cabinet
 - B. The Supreme Court
 - C. The states or the people
 - D. The Senate and the House of Representatives

4. Which of the following is an example of a power that belongs primarily to the federal government?

- A. Setting school curriculum standards
- B. Issuing driver's licenses
- C. Managing foreign policy and treaties
- D. Establishing zoning laws for neighborhoods

5. A student notices that the minimum wage in California is higher than the federal minimum wage. What does this best illustrate about federalism?

- A. California is breaking federal law by setting a higher wage
- B. States can set their own minimum wage as long as it meets or exceeds the federal minimum
- C. The federal government has no authority over wage laws
- D. Local governments are responsible for setting all wage standards

6. Which level of government would a student most likely contact if they wanted to change the elective courses offered at their public school?

- A. The President of the United States
- B. A U.S. Senator
- C. The local school board
- D. The U.S. Department of Defense

7. Taxation is described in the article as a concurrent power. What does concurrent mean in this context?

- A. Only the federal government has the authority to collect taxes
- B. Both the federal government and state governments share the power to collect taxes
- C. Local governments are the only level allowed to collect income taxes
- D. Tax laws must be approved by all fifty states before taking effect

8. Which historical event is mentioned in the article as an example of how the balance of power between federal and state governments has shifted over time?

- A. The American Revolution
- B. The signing of the Declaration of Independence
- C. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s
- D. The founding of the United Nations

9. When a state law conflicts with a federal law, what typically happens according to the principles of federalism?

- A. The state law automatically takes priority because states have more local knowledge
- B. Both laws remain in effect and citizens choose which one to follow
- C. Courts step in to interpret which authority applies, and federal law generally prevails
- D. The President decides which law should be enforced on a case-by-case basis

10. Why is understanding federalism described in the article as important for civic participation?

- A. It helps citizens memorize the names of all elected officials in the country
- B. It allows citizens to identify which level of government controls an issue so they can direct their efforts effectively
- C. It proves that the federal government is always the most important level to contact
- D. It shows that most government decisions are made without any input from ordinary citizens

True / False

Read each statement carefully. Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false.

1. Federalism is a system that divides governmental power between a national government and state and local governments.

True False

2. The Supremacy Clause means that the federal government has complete control over all areas of law and policy in the United States.

True False

3. The Tenth Amendment reserves powers not granted to the federal government to the states or to the people.

True False

4. State governments are prohibited from setting a minimum wage higher than the federal minimum wage.

True False

5. Local governments, such as school boards, have authority over day-to-day decisions in public schools.

True False

6. Taxation is an example of a concurrent power because both federal and state governments can collect taxes.

True False

7. The balance of power between federal and state governments has remained unchanged since the Constitution was first ratified.

True False

8. Immigration and naturalization are responsibilities of the federal government, not individual state governments.

True False

9. When a state law conflicts with a federal law, the state law takes priority under the Supremacy Clause.

True False

10. Understanding which level of government controls a particular issue helps citizens know where to direct their civic engagement.

True False

Vocabulary

Review the following key terms from the lesson on federalism. Read each definition carefully and be prepared to use these terms when discussing how governmental power is divided in the United States.

Federalism

A system of government that divides power between a national (federal) government and smaller state and local governments.

Explain in your own words:

Supremacy Clause

The part of Article VI of the U.S. Constitution that establishes federal law as the supreme law of the land, meaning federal law wins when it conflicts with state law.

Explain in your own words:

Tenth Amendment

The constitutional amendment that reserves all powers not granted to the federal government to the states or to the people.

Explain in your own words:

Federal Government

The national level of government, based in Washington, D.C., that handles issues affecting the entire country such as national defense, foreign policy, and immigration.

Explain in your own words:

Interstate Commerce

Trade and economic activity that crosses state lines, such as shipping goods between states or regulating national corporations, which is regulated by the federal government.

Explain in your own words:

Concurrent Powers

Powers that are shared by both the federal and state governments, such as the ability to collect taxes or build and maintain roads.

Explain in your own words:

Local Government

The most immediate level of government, including cities, counties, and school districts, which controls things like public schools, local police, and zoning laws.

Explain in your own words:

Local School Board

An elected local body that makes decisions about public schools in a community, such as curriculum details, school hours, and extracurricular programs.

Explain in your own words:

Zoning Laws

Local government rules that determine what types of buildings or activities are allowed in specific areas of a community.

Explain in your own words:

Naturalization

The legal process by which a person who was not born a U.S. citizen becomes one, which is controlled by the federal government.

Explain in your own words:

Exit Ticket

Answer both questions in 1-2 sentences each. Use what you learned from today's lesson to support your answers.

1. Explain why a state like California can have a higher minimum wage than the federal minimum wage. What does this tell you about how power is divided under federalism?

2. If you wanted to change the elective courses offered at your school, which level of government would you most likely need to contact, and why?



Federalism divides power across three levels of government — federal, state, and local — each with its own responsibilities that affect your daily life.



Understanding which level of government controls issues like minimum wage or school curriculum helps citizens know exactly who to contact when they want change.

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE



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CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

4. The legal process by which a person who was not born a U.S. citizen becomes one, which is controlled by the federal government.
6. A system of government that divides power between a national (federal) government and smaller state and local governments.
8. An elected local body that makes decisions about public schools in a community, such as curriculum details, school hours, and extracurricular programs.
9. The constitutional amendment that reserves all powers not granted to the federal government to the states or to the people.
10. Powers that are shared by both the federal and state governments, such as the ability to collect taxes or build and maintain roads.

DOWN

1. Trade and economic activity that crosses state lines, such as shipping goods between states or regulating national corporations, which is regulated by the federal government.
2. The part of Article VI of the U.S. Constitution that establishes federal law as the supreme law of the land, meaning federal law wins when it conflicts with state law.
3. Local government rules that determine what types of buildings or activities are allowed in specific areas of a community.
5. The national level of government, based in Washington, D.C., that handles issues affecting the entire country such as national defense, foreign policy, and immigration.
7. The most immediate level of government, including cities, counties, and school districts, which controls things like public schools, local police, and zoning laws.

Federalism: Who Actually Runs What?

WORD SEARCH

Y N N I N T E R S T A T E C O M M E R C E Y C A
C Y A V K X Q G S I I F Q S M V I I N F R Z J H
H B T V Y A K H V B K Q T S I X N Z U W W R V R
P F U V T E G R I F N L K V N U C P B Y I C M L
J Q R C B I H N S A V A P A B Z Y V J A U E V O
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M O I A U C R O W Y A G L D V O I Z B V G J V L
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X R O T E L O C A L G O V E R N M E N T D B I O
T E N Y T Z D M J G C A C Z F H G K H S E F J L
A N H Q J M E E O E N I Q E S S O U K T T E C B
M T F U F X K G T T P B K Z Y F G H Z X F D S O
U P M Z O N I N G L A W S S G M S W T K C E B A
B O U P W J P E J V X K T V G U J I U L V R Q R
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J E M W Z C N D V S F V Y X G B L I H R G L B I
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U S U P R E M A C Y C L A U S E H M S Z Y M U C
I O D D O S L F E D E R A L G O V E R N M E N T

FIND THESE WORDS

Interstate Commerce
Local Government
Federalism

Federal Government
Supremacy Clause
Zoning Laws

Concurrent Powers
Naturalization

Local School Board
Tenth Amendment