

Civics & Government Final Exam Review

Everything on a typical Civics or Government final, one unit at a time: the principles, powers, amendments and cases you need, the mix-ups that cost the most points, and three practice questions per unit with answers. Start with the quick checks to find your weak units, then use the linked lessons to fix them.

Free from StudyQuest Academy · Updated October 6, 2026 · studyquest.academy/finals/civics

What’s on the Civics & Government final

Civics and Government is usually a one-semester course, often taught in grade 12 as Government or in grade 8 or 9 as Civics, so every unit here is marked Semester 1 and the whole course is on one final. If your school teaches it all year, the first semester usually runs through the three branches and the second covers rights, civil rights, elections and citizenship.

Unit	Lessons
1. Foundations of American government	The American Revolution
2. The Constitution & its principles	U.S. Constitution & Civics, Branches of Government
3. The legislative branch	Branches of Government, U.S. Constitution & Civics
4. The executive branch	Branches of Government, U.S. Constitution & Civics
5. The judicial branch & landmark cases	Landmark Supreme Court Cases, Branches of Government
6. The Bill of Rights & civil liberties	U.S. Constitution & Civics, Landmark Supreme Court Cases
7. Later amendments & civil rights	The Civil Rights Movement, U.S. Constitution & Civics
8. Elections, parties & citizenship	U.S. Constitution & Civics

A two-week study plan

Find your weak units

Do the quick checks for all 8 units without notes. Mark each unit solid, shaky or lost. This tells you where your study time goes.

DAYS 13–6

Fix the lost and shaky units, one a day

Start with the units you marked lost, then shaky. For each one, read the must-know list, work through the linked lesson, and redo that unit's quick checks until you get all three right.

DAYS 5–3

Mixed practice

Finals mix eras and topics together, so practice that way: answer quick checks from different units in random order, and explain how events connect across units.

DAY 2

Timeline and key terms

Put the major events of each unit in order on a timeline, and say each key term and person out loud with why they matter.

DAY 1

Light review and sleep

Redo only the questions you missed before. Then stop: a full night of sleep helps your memory more than a late cram session.

UNIT 1

Foundations of American government

MUST KNOW

- English traditions limited rulers: the Magna Carta (1215) put the king under the law, and the English Bill of Rights (1689) limited the monarch and strengthened Parliament. Colonists practiced self-government in the House of Burgesses and the Mayflower Compact.
- Enlightenment thinkers: John Locke (natural rights to life, liberty and property; government by consent of the governed), Montesquieu (separation of powers) and Rousseau (the social contract and popular sovereignty). Thomas Hobbes argued for a strong ruler to keep order.
- The Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776), written mainly by Thomas Jefferson, says people have unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that governments get their power from the consent of the governed, and that people may replace a government that abuses those rights.
- The Articles of Confederation (ratified 1781) created a deliberately weak national government: a one-house Congress where each state had one vote, no executive, no national courts, no power to tax or regulate trade, and amendments needing all 13 states.
- The Articles' one big success was the Northwest Ordinance (1787), which set up how territories became states. Shays' Rebellion (1786 to 1787) showed the national government could not keep order and led to the Constitutional Convention.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Mixing up the Declaration and the Constitution. The Declaration (1776) announced independence and explained why; the Constitution (1787) set up the government we still use.
- Mixing up Locke and Montesquieu. Locke is natural rights and consent of the governed; Montesquieu is separation of powers.
- Saying the Articles made the national government too strong. The problem was the opposite: it was too weak to tax, enforce laws or keep order.

QUICK CHECK

1.1 Which phrase in the Declaration of Independence expresses the idea of popular sovereignty?

1.2 Why did the authors of the Articles of Confederation make the national government so weak?

1.3 What did Shays' Rebellion reveal about the Articles?

UNIT 2

The Constitution & its principles

MUST KNOW

- The Constitution was written in 1787 and ratified in 1788. Federalists supported it and Anti-Federalists opposed it; the Federalist Papers argued for it, and the promise of a Bill of Rights (1791) won it support.
- Structure: the Preamble ("We the People") states its goals, then seven articles: I Congress, II the president, III the courts, IV the states, V amendments, VI the supremacy clause, VII ratification. There are 27 amendments.
- Core principles: popular sovereignty, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism, republicanism and individual rights.
- Federalism divides power between national and state governments. Delegated (enumerated) powers belong to the national government, like coining money and declaring war; reserved powers belong to the states (10th Amendment), like running schools; concurrent powers are shared, like taxing and borrowing.
- The Supremacy Clause (Article VI) makes the Constitution and federal laws the supreme law of the land. The Necessary and Proper (Elastic) Clause lets Congress make laws needed to carry out its listed powers, which creates implied powers.
- Amendments are proposed by a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress (or a convention called by two-thirds of the states) and ratified by three-fourths of the states.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Mixing up separation of powers and checks and balances. Separation of powers gives each branch its own job; checks and balances lets each branch limit the others.
- Mixing up federalism and separation of powers. Federalism splits power between national and state levels; separation of powers splits it among three branches.
- Swapping the amendment fractions. It takes two-thirds to propose an amendment and three-fourths of the states to ratify it.

QUICK CHECK

2.1 Classify each power as delegated, reserved or concurrent: printing money, running public schools, collecting taxes.

2.2 How many of the 50 states must ratify a new amendment?

2.3 A state law conflicts with a valid federal law. Which one wins, and why?

UNIT 3

The legislative branch

MUST KNOW

- Congress is bicameral. The House has 435 voting members divided among the states by population after each 10-year census; members serve 2-year terms and must be at least 25 and citizens for 7 years. The Senate has 100 members, two per state, serving 6-year terms; senators must be at least 30 and citizens for 9 years.
- Article I, Section 8 lists Congress's powers, including to tax, borrow money, regulate trade between states and with other nations, coin money, declare war, and raise an army and navy.
- Special House powers: revenue (tax) bills must start there, and it impeaches officials by majority vote. Special Senate powers: approving treaties (two-thirds vote), confirming appointments (majority) and holding impeachment trials (two-thirds to convict).
- How a bill becomes law: it is introduced, studied in committee, debated and passed by both houses in the same form, and sent to the president, who signs or vetoes it. Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds vote in both houses.
- The Speaker of the House leads the House. The vice president is president of the Senate and votes only to break a tie. In the Senate, a filibuster can block a vote unless 60 senators vote for cloture.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Thinking "impeached" means removed. The House impeaches (brings charges); removal happens only if two-thirds of the Senate votes to convict.
- Swapping House and Senate details. House: 2-year terms, age 25, seats by population. Senate: 6-year terms, age 30, two per state.
- Saying every bill must start in the House. Only revenue bills must; other bills can start in either house.

QUICK CHECK

3.1 Why does California have many more representatives than Wyoming but the same number of senators?

3.2 The president vetoes a bill. What can Congress do?

3.3 Which chamber approves treaties, and by what vote?

UNIT 4

The executive branch

MUST KNOW

- The president must be a natural-born citizen, at least 35 years old and a U.S. resident for 14 years. The term is four years, and the 22nd Amendment (1951) limits a president to being elected twice.
- Roles of the president: chief executive (carries out laws), commander in chief, chief diplomat (makes treaties and appoints ambassadors with Senate approval), head of state, and legislative leader (State of the Union, signing and vetoing bills).
- The president appoints federal judges, cabinet members and other officials with Senate confirmation, can pardon people for federal crimes, and issues executive orders that direct federal agencies. Courts can strike down executive orders, and later presidents can reverse them.
- The cabinet is made up of the heads of the 15 executive departments, such as the Secretary of State and the Attorney General. Agencies of the federal bureaucracy carry out laws day to day.
- The line of succession starts with the vice president, then the Speaker of the House, then the president pro tempore of the Senate, then the Secretary of State. The 25th Amendment (1967) covers filling a vice-presidential vacancy and presidential disability.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Saying the president can declare war. Only Congress declares war; the president commands the military once it is raised.
- Saying the 22nd Amendment limits presidents to two consecutive terms. It limits them to being elected twice, consecutive or not.
- Saying the president makes laws. Congress passes laws; the president signs or vetoes them and then enforces them.

QUICK CHECK

4.1 If the president dies and the vice presidency is also vacant, who becomes president?

4.2 Name one check the president has on Congress and one on the courts.

4.3 How does the 25th Amendment fill a vacancy in the vice presidency?

UNIT 5

The judicial branch & landmark cases

MUST KNOW

- Article III creates the Supreme Court and lets Congress create lower courts. Federal judges are nominated by the president, confirmed by the Senate and serve for life during good behavior. Congress sets the number of justices, which has been nine since 1869.
- Federal courts have three main levels: district courts hold trials, courts of appeals review them, and the Supreme Court has the final say. Most cases reach the Supreme Court on appeal, and it agrees to hear only a small share.
- Marbury v. Madison (1803) established judicial review, the power to strike down laws that violate the Constitution. McCulloch v. Maryland (1819) upheld Congress's implied power to create a national bank and barred states from taxing it.
- Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) upheld "separate but equal." Brown v. Board of Education (1954) overturned it for public schools: separate schools are inherently unequal.
- Gideon v. Wainwright (1963): states must provide a lawyer to defendants charged with serious crimes who cannot afford one. Miranda v. Arizona (1966): police must tell suspects of their right to remain silent and to a lawyer before questioning.
- Tinker v. Des Moines (1969): students keep free speech rights at school, including wearing armbands in protest, unless the speech substantially disrupts school. United States v. Nixon (1974): executive privilege is not absolute, and Nixon had to turn over the tapes.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Mixing up Gideon and Miranda. Gideon is the right to a free lawyer at trial; Miranda is the warning police give before questioning a suspect in custody.
- Putting Brown before Plessy. Plessy (1896) allowed segregation; Brown (1954) overturned it nearly 60 years later.
- Thinking the Supreme Court can strike down a law whenever it wants. It rules only on real cases that are brought to it.

QUICK CHECK

5.1 What power did Marbury v. Madison establish?

5.2 In Tinker v. Des Moines, what did the Court decide?

5.3 Why do federal judges serve for life?

UNIT 6

The Bill of Rights & civil liberties

MUST KNOW

- The Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments, was ratified in 1791. It first limited only the federal government; the Supreme Court later used the 14th Amendment's Due Process Clause to apply most of it to the states.
- The 1st Amendment protects freedom of religion (no established church and free exercise), speech, the press, assembly and petition.
- The 2nd protects the right to bear arms, the 3rd bars quartering soldiers in homes in peacetime, and the 4th bans unreasonable searches and seizures and requires warrants based on probable cause.
- The 5th: grand jury, no double jeopardy, no forced self-incrimination, due process, and just compensation when government takes property. The 6th: speedy and public trial, an impartial jury and a lawyer. The 7th: jury trials in civil cases. The 8th: no excessive bail or cruel and unusual punishment.
- The 9th says people keep rights not listed in the Constitution; the 10th reserves powers not given to the national government to the states or the people.
- Rights have limits. *Schenck v. United States* (1919) said speech creating a "clear and present danger" can be restricted, and *New Jersey v. T.L.O.* (1985) let schools search students with reasonable suspicion instead of probable cause.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Mixing up the 4th and 5th Amendments. Searches and warrants are the 4th; refusing to testify against yourself is the 5th.
- Thinking the First Amendment stops private companies or employers from limiting speech. It limits government, not private businesses.

QUICK CHECK

6.1 Police search a home with no warrant and no emergency. Which amendment is at issue?

6.2 A defendant refuses to testify at her own trial. Which amendment protects her?

6.3 Why did Anti-Federalists insist on a Bill of Rights?

UNIT 7

Later amendments & civil rights

MUST KNOW

- The Reconstruction Amendments: the 13th (1865) abolished slavery, the 14th (1868) made everyone born in the U.S. a citizen and guaranteed due process and equal protection of the laws, and the 15th (1870) barred denying the vote because of race.
- Amendments that expanded voting: the 17th (direct election of senators, 1913), the 19th (women, 1920), the 23rd (electoral votes for Washington, D.C., 1961), the 24th (no poll taxes in federal elections, 1964) and the 26th (voting age 18, 1971).
- Other amendments to know: the 16th (income tax), the 18th (Prohibition) and the 21st, which repealed it, the 22nd (presidential term limit) and the 25th (succession and disability).
- Brown v. Board of Education (1954) used the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause to end legal school segregation.
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned segregation in public places and banned job discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended literacy tests and sent federal examiners to register voters where discrimination had been worst.
- Later laws extended protections: Title IX (1972) bans sex discrimination in schools that receive federal money, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) bans discrimination against people with disabilities.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Mixing up the 13th, 14th and 15th. Remember the order: freedom (13), citizenship and equal protection (14), voting regardless of race (15).
- Thinking the 15th Amendment let Black men vote freely from 1870 on. Southern states blocked them with poll taxes, literacy tests and violence until the 24th Amendment and the Voting Rights Act.
- Mixing up the 15th and 19th Amendments. The 15th is about race; the 19th gave women the right to vote.

QUICK CHECK

7.1 Which clause of which amendment was the basis for Brown v. Board of Education?

7.2 Which amendment lowered the voting age to 18, and what argument helped pass it?

7.3 Which law suspended literacy tests for voting?

UNIT 8

Elections, parties & citizenship

MUST KNOW

- You can become a citizen by birth (born in the U.S., under the 14th Amendment) or by naturalization: be at least 18, usually be a permanent resident for 5 years, pass English and civics tests, and take the Oath of Allegiance.
- Duties are required by law: obey laws, pay taxes, serve on a jury when called, and for men 18 to 25, register with Selective Service. Responsibilities are expected but voluntary: voting, staying informed and volunteering.
- The U.S. has a two-party system, Democrats and Republicans. Parties nominate candidates through primaries and caucuses, adopt a platform at a national convention, and run campaigns. Third parties rarely win but can shift issues and outcomes.
- The Electoral College has 538 electors: each state gets as many as its House and Senate seats, and Washington, D.C. gets 3. A candidate needs 270 to win. Most states give all their electors to the statewide winner; Maine and Nebraska can split theirs.
- If no candidate wins a majority of electoral votes, the House chooses the president, with each state delegation casting one vote (12th Amendment). A candidate can win the national popular vote and still lose, as happened in 2000 and 2016.
- Citizens also influence government through interest groups, lobbying, political action committees, the media and public opinion.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Mixing up duties and responsibilities. Jury service and paying taxes are required duties; voting is a responsibility, not a legal requirement.
- Mixing up primary and general elections. A primary picks each party's candidate; the general election in November picks the winner among the parties' candidates.

QUICK CHECK

8.1 A state has 14 members in the House of Representatives. How many electoral votes does it have?

8.2 Name two requirements to become a naturalized citizen.

8.3 Why do third-party candidates rarely win presidential elections?

Answer key

Unit 1: Foundations of American government

1.1 "Consent of the governed." Government gets its power from the people, an idea from Locke and the social contract.

1.2 They had just fought a war against a powerful king and Parliament, so they feared any strong central government and kept most power with the states.

1.3 Without the power to tax or raise an army, the national government could not put down an armed uprising, which convinced leaders to rewrite the system in 1787.

Unit 2: The Constitution & its principles

2.1 Printing money is delegated (national), running public schools is reserved (state), and collecting taxes is concurrent (both).

2.2 38. Ratification takes three-fourths of the states, and three-fourths of 50 is 37.5, so 38 are needed.

2.3 The federal law, because the Supremacy Clause in Article VI makes the Constitution and federal laws the supreme law of the land.

Unit 3: The legislative branch

3.1 The Great Compromise: House seats are based on population, while every state gets two senators.

3.2 Override the veto with a two-thirds vote in both the House and the Senate; then the bill becomes law without the president's signature.

3.3 The Senate, by a two-thirds vote.

Unit 4: The executive branch

4.1 The Speaker of the House, who is next after the vice president in the line of succession.

4.2 On Congress: the veto. On the courts: nominating federal judges, including Supreme Court justices.

4.3 The president nominates a new vice president, who takes office after being confirmed by a majority of both houses of Congress.

Unit 5: The judicial branch & landmark cases

5.1 Judicial review: the courts can declare a law or government action unconstitutional and refuse to enforce it.

5.2 Students who wore black armbands to protest the Vietnam War were protected by the First Amendment, because their protest did not substantially disrupt school.

5.3 So they can decide cases by the law without worrying about losing their jobs to public or political pressure.

Unit 6: The Bill of Rights & civil liberties

6.1 The 4th Amendment, which protects against unreasonable searches and seizures.

6.2 The 5th Amendment, which protects against self-incrimination ("pleading the Fifth").

6.3 They feared a strong national government would trample individual liberties, so they wanted specific rights written down as limits on its power.

Unit 7: Later amendments & civil rights

7.1 The Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

7.2 The 26th (1971). During the Vietnam War, 18-year-olds could be drafted to fight but could not vote.

7.3 The Voting Rights Act of 1965, passed after the marches from Selma to Montgomery.

Unit 8: Elections, parties & citizenship

8.1 16. It gets one elector for each House seat plus two for its senators: $14 + 2 = 16$.

8.2 Any two: be at least 18, be a permanent resident (usually for 5 years), pass the English and civics tests, show good moral character, and take the Oath of Allegiance.

8.3 Winner-take-all rules give all of a state's electors to whoever finishes first, so a third party can win many votes and still get no electors. Voters also worry about wasting their vote.