Ideas Behind Limits

Trace how different traditions shaped the Constitution.

USG.C.1.3.D "Evaluate how religious traditions, moral philosophy, and enlightenment principles contributed to the development of key American founding ideas, such as natural rights, liberty..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one idea about government from each tradition, then circle the constitutional choice it helps explain. Number each idea and its matching choice so you can compare their effects.

Why Limit Government?

1. In 1787, delegates argued over what a national government should be allowed to do. Religious traditions offered one reason to limit its reach: many Americans believed conscience answered to God rather than to officials. The experience of religious minorities also showed the harm of state favoritism. The Constitution barred religious tests for federal office. That rule did not end established churches in every state, but it kept the federal government from making a person's faith a qualification for office.

2. Moral philosophy raised a different problem: even a government chosen by the people might serve selfish leaders. In republican thought, civic virtue meant putting the public good above private gain. Delegates could not simply assume that every officeholder would act virtuously. They gave Congress, the president, and the courts different roles, with ways to check one another. This design tried to protect liberty by making it harder for any one group of officials to abuse power.

3. Enlightenment writers supplied another argument for limits. John Locke argued that people have natural rights and form governments to protect them; political authority depends on consent. Montesquieu argued that dividing governmental powers helps prevent tyranny. At the Convention, delegates built a federal government with listed powers and divided its authority among three branches. Their Constitution reflected these principles, though it did not secure liberty equally for everyone: slavery persisted, and women could not vote in most states.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did a belief about conscience help support the ban on religious tests for federal office?

2. Why might a believer in civic virtue still favor checks between branches?

3. Which of Montesquieu's ideas appears in the Constitution's design, and what danger was it meant to reduce?

4. Did the Constitution's limits on government secure liberty equally for everyone? Use one design choice and one fact from the passage to explain.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine delegates propose giving the president sole power to make and enforce laws. Write four or five sentences advising them. Use ideas from two different traditions in the passage, and explain one limit of the safeguard you recommend.

ANSWER KEY

Ideas Behind Limits

HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.1.3.D

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one idea about government from each tradition, then circle the constitutional choice it helps explain. Number each idea and its matching choice so you can compare their effects. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did a belief about conscience help support the ban on religious tests for federal office?	**If conscience answers to God rather than officials, the federal government should not make faith a condition for holding office.**
2	Why might a believer in civic virtue still favor checks between branches?	**Leaders might act selfishly despite the ideal of serving the public good. Checks make it harder for them to abuse power.**
3	Which of Montesquieu's ideas appears in the Constitution's design, and what danger was it meant to reduce?	**Dividing power among branches reflects his idea that separated powers help prevent tyranny.**
4	Did the Constitution's limits on government secure liberty equally for everyone? Use one design choice and one fact from the passage to explain.	**No. Dividing authority among branches could help prevent abuses of power, but slavery persisted, so liberty was not secured equally.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Do not give the president both powers. Republican moral philosophy warns that leaders may put private gain ahead of the public good. Montesquieu's Enlightenment argument suggests that separating powers can help prevent tyranny. Let Congress make laws and the president enforce them, with checks on both. This safeguard alone would not secure liberty equally if laws still permitted slavery.

Accept other passage-supported connections between a tradition, a constitutional choice, and its effect. For the open task, the proposed safeguard and its limit should be distinct.