

25. Checks and Balances (1789)

Robin has just been elected student council president at her high school. With victory in hand, she begins to make plans with Victoria, her best friend and “political advisor.”

Robin: Can you believe it?! I actually won!

Victoria: Congratulations! Now you need to start thinking about how you can work with the Student Council on getting your idea for our new school mascot design.

Robin: Work with the Council?! I’m not talking to them! If I want to change our mascot from the Wolves to the Robins all I need to do is say so! I’m the president!

Victoria: Wait, I thought you just campaigned to change the wolf costume so it would look meaner!

Robin: We need a new mascot that reflects the glory of our new president. The generations to follow will forever remember my reign!

Victoria: OK, you’re starting to sound like a king, not a president.

Robin: What’s the difference? Where’s my crown?! And why aren’t you kneeling? How dare ye refuse to genuflect before me?!

Victoria: Robin . . .

Robin: Ms. President!!!

Victoria: *(sighs)* Ms. President, I think we need to have a chat about checks and balances.

Robin: I don’t have to listen to this.

Victoria: Quite the contrary. Because of checks and balances, you have to listen to other people. That’s why we based our student government charter on the United States Constitution. The Framers worked in a system of checks and balances that would keep the three branches of government on equal footing. The executive, legislative and judicial branches each have power over one another to keep things balanced. The same goes for the Student Council, Student Council President and the Teacher’s Advisory Board, which is kind of like the US Supreme Court.

Robin: I’m sorry – are you telling me that I have rules to follow?

Victoria: I’m afraid so. Your power is “checked” by two other groups, just like our federal government.



Robin: Just tell me what I have to do to get our mascot changed.

Victoria: Well, that would be an example of passing new legislation, which is the job of the Student Council at our school and the Congress in the US Government.

Robin: I can't pass laws? What is the point of even having a president then?

Victoria: Nothing becomes law unless you sign it! You can reject a piece of legislation with the "veto" power.

Robin: Ah-ha! I'll just veto everything until they bend to my will!

Victoria: Nope! You'd get checked again! Just like Congress, Student Council can override your veto by voting again and passing something with a two-thirds majority.

Robin: How am I supposed to come through with all of my campaign promises? I mean the ones I wasn't lying about?

Victoria: You'll have to use your position to put pressure on Student Council by proposing legislation and convincing the public to lobby them to pass it. They have some power over you, but you have power over them, too! That's the beauty of checks and balances!

Robin: OK, so I see how the President and Congress check each other, but what about the courts? Does our Student Council charter model how I work with the Teacher Advisory Board like how the President works with the Supreme Court?

Victoria: Yep! If any of the teachers step down from the board, you get to nominate a new one, just like the U.S. President does with Supreme Court Justices.

Robin: I can pack the board with all of my favorite teachers!

Victoria: Not so fast, a President's nominees must be confirmed by the Senate. Same with your nominees and the Council I'm afraid.

Robin: How does anything get done if every single branch of our government is checked and balanced by the other two?!

Victoria: Checks and balances forces the three branches to cooperate and keeps any single branch from becoming more powerful than the other two. The last thing the framers wanted was a tyrant like you after fighting a war to get rid of a king.

Robin: So *(pauses)*. . . no King Robin?

Victoria: Sorry. You have a lot of power, but no more than the other two branches of our school government. Now you know why Presidents seem to age so quickly. There's a lot of stress in handling all of that responsibility and advancing your agenda in our style of government.

Robin: I can't have grey hair before I graduate from high school!

Victoria: Well, you should have thought about that before you ran for office. Maybe having a basic understanding of the Constitution would have been a good idea, too . . .

Robin: Ugh! This presidential stuff is actually going to be work.

Victoria: What a tragedy . . .