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Seven Principles of the Constitution

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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The United States Constitution we know today was not the nation's first constitution. The Articles of Confederation, written soon after the US declared independence from England, were ratified and adopted by all 13 states in 1781. The Articles united the states into a firm league of friendship with each other in order to promote their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare. Having just left a government they considered tyrannical, Americans were hesitant to put too much power into a central government. Instead, they created strong state governments that were overseen by a national Congress. But there were problems with the Articles of Confederation from the beginning. States functioned more like separate countries, engaging in tax wars over each others' goods and levying heavy taxes on their own citizens. Congress had no real power to enforce its laws on states that did not want to comply. It could not regulate commerce or currency, nor could it protect the rights of states or individuals which was the whole point of the Articles in the first place. In 1787, Congress authorized a convention in Philadelphia for the purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation.

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Notes

Although the original purpose of the Convention was to amend the Articles of Confederation, the delegates voted to scrap the Articles entirely and write a new constitution. They based this document on seven principles of government.

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The first is popular sovereignty. The Preamble to the Constitution begins, "We, the People," meaning that the people of the United States are the authors of the document and have the power to participate in the democratic process. Popular sovereignty is the idea that the average citizen can be trusted to make important decisions about their governance, such as electing representatives.

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The second principle is republicanism. In a republic, citizens exercise their power by electing the leaders who represent them. They vote for what and whom they think will be best for the general good of the public.

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The third principle of the Constitution is federalism. Governing power is shared between a central government and smaller units of government. In the case of the United States, this means the federal government and state governments. The Constitution delegates some powers to the federal government and reserves others for the states. Concurrent powers are those shared by the federal and state governments, such as collecting taxes.

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Separation of powers is the fourth principle. In Articles I, II, and III of the Constitution, the framers described how the federal government would be split into three branches: the legislative, executive, and judicial. The legislative branch, including the Senate and House of Representatives, makes and passes the laws. The executive branch, including the president and the cabinet, enforces the laws. And the judicial branch, which includes the Supreme Court and other federal courts, interprets the laws. This ensures that no one branch of government has too much power over the others.

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The fifth principle, checks and balances, is related to the separation of powers. Each branch of government is checked and balanced by the other two branches. For example, the president can veto a law that Congress passes but Congress can then override the president's veto with a two-thirds vote. Once a law is passed, the Supreme Court has the right to declare it unconstitutional.

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Limited government, the sixth principle, grants specific powers to the federal government but nothing more. Government leaders cannot decide to wield extra powers that aren't included in the Constitution, nor can they abuse their powers thanks to their high position. This principle is an important protection for citizens' liberties.

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The seventh and final principle of the Constitution is individual rights. The Constitution was designed to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, meaning freedom for all citizens and their descendants. The Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments, is an explicit guarantee of individual freedoms, including freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial, protection against unfair searches, and more. Since the Bill of Rights, 17 additional amendments have been ratified.

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