

# Seven Principles of the Constitution

When the framers wrote the Constitution in 1787, they couldn't have predicted what the United States—or the world—would look like today. But they did their best to create a framework that could change with the times while still staying true to the principles that guided the nation's founding.

The Constitution is based on seven major principles.

The first is popular sovereignty, or the idea that power belongs to the people. The framers established this principle in the very first words of the Constitution: "We the People." Popular sovereignty means that the average citizen can—and should—participate in the democratic process. The people rule, but indirectly.

That brings us to the second principle of the Constitution: republicanism—not to be confused with the Republican political party. In a republic, citizens exercise their power by electing leaders to represent them in government. They vote for the people and policies they think will be best for the general good of their community and country.

Third: federalism. Governing power is shared among a central government and smaller units of government. In the US, this means the federal, or national, government and the individual state governments. The Constitution delegates specific powers to the federal government, such as printing money and declaring war. It also reserves certain powers for the states, like running elections and creating and maintaining public schools. Some powers, called concurrent powers, are shared between the federal and state governments, like collecting taxes.

The fourth principle of the Constitution is the separation of powers. Articles I, II, and III of the Constitution described how the government would be split into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. The legislative branch, which includes the Senate and House of Representatives, makes and passes laws. The executive branch, which includes the president, enforces the laws. And the judicial branch, made up of the Supreme Court and other federal courts, interprets the laws. The separation of powers ensures that no one

branch of government has too much power over the others.

Related to the separation of powers is the fifth principle of the Constitution: checks and balances. Each branch of government has ways to check, or limit, the other branches' powers. For example, the president can veto a law that Congress passes—but Congress can then override the president's veto with a  $\frac{2}{3}$  vote. If the law is passed, the Supreme Court can declare that it is unconstitutional, or violates the principles of the Constitution. No branch of government can get very far if the other two branches do not approve.

Sixth: limited government. Wanting to avoid a monarchy like the one they had just left, the framers granted specific powers to the federal government—but nothing more. Government leaders can't decide one day that they have extra powers that aren't included in the Constitution. They are also subject to the rule of law. Leaders are not above the law and cannot abuse their powers to serve their own interests. This is an important protection for citizens' liberties...

...which brings us to the seventh and final principle of the Constitution: individual rights. The Preamble to the Constitution states, "to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity," meaning that the Constitution was designed to guarantee freedom to all citizens, current and future. The framers took it a step further by adding the Bill of Rights—the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. These amendments guarantee citizens freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to a fair trial, protection against cruel and unusual punishment, and other individual rights.

These seven principles of government date back hundreds of years, but they're still relevant today. And as we continue to interpret these principles over time, the Constitution evolves. For example, who exactly is included in "We, the People" has changed—from only White male landowning citizens at the time the Constitution was written to today, when people of all races, ethnicities, religions, and genders are included. Since the Bill of Rights, we've added 17 more amendments. That's what we mean when we say the Constitution is a living document—it can grow and adapt while remaining true to the seven principles that guided its creation.