

Summary: The Constitution

A Plan for Government

In the Preamble of the Constitution, the writers listed the purposes of the Constitution. The Constitution tells us that our government is a democracy. It divides the government into three branches. The legislative branch, or Congress, makes laws and raises money. Congress also collects taxes to pay for services. The executive branch suggests and carries out the laws. The President is the head of this branch. A new President is elected every four years. The judicial branch is made up of courts. They decide what laws mean and whether they have been followed.

Limits on Government

The Constitution includes checks and balances. They keep one branch from becoming stronger than the others. The President makes treaties and chooses judges. Congress can reject these treaties or judges. Congress makes laws. The President can veto these laws. The courts can decide if a law follows the Constitution. A law that is found unconstitutional is no longer in effect.

The Constitution creates a federal system. The national government has power over national issues. This includes defense, printing money, the postal service, and trade. State governments have power over local issues. States control education and elections. Both systems share power as well, such as collecting taxes. Federal laws are stronger than state laws. The highest law is the Constitution itself.

Changing the Constitution

An amendment is a change to the Constitution. The first ten amendments are the Bill of Rights. They protect rights, such as freedom of speech. The tenth amendment limits the power of the federal government. Many Americans wanted a Bill of Rights added to the Constitution so that the Constitution could be changed as the country changed. In 1790, the Constitution did not protect the rights of all Americans. People have fought for their rights and won. Today the Constitution gives equal protection to more citizens.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

Preamble *noun*, the introduction to the Constitution

democracy *noun*, a government in which the people have the power to make political decisions

legislative branch *noun*, the part of the government that makes laws for the country

executive branch *noun*, the part of the government that carries out laws made by Congress

judicial branch *noun*, the part of the government that resolves conflicts about the meaning of laws and whether laws have been followed



After You Read

REVIEW What are the jobs of each branch of the national government? Circle the jobs of each branch.

REVIEW Why did the authors of the Constitution create checks and balances? Highlight the sentence that explains checks and balances.

REVIEW Why did many Americans want a Bill of Rights added to the Constitution? Draw a box around the sentence that tells the answer.