

Summary: The Constitution

A Plan for Government

The Constitution tells us that our government is a democracy. It divides the government into three branches. The legislative branch, or Congress, makes laws. Congress also collects taxes to pay for services. The executive branch 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. Everyone, including the government and its officials, must follow the laws.

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 A law that is found unconstitutional is no longer in effect.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 three levels of government are national, state, and local. 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 collect taxes and set up courts. Federal laws are stronger than state laws. The highest law is the Constitution itself.

Changing the Constitution

The Constitution was written so that it can be changed as the country changes. An amendment becomes law when two-thirds of the members of the House and Senate vote for it. Three-fourths of the states also have to ratify it. 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. 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.

Constitution *noun*, our written plan of government

levels of government *noun*, national, state, and local governments

federal *adjective*, a system under which the national and state governments each have certain powers

amendment *noun*, a change to the Constitution

Bill of Rights *noun*, the first ten amendments to the Constitution listing the rights of citizens



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 and a federal system? Circle the sentence that explains checks and balances.

REVIEW Why does the Constitution include a way to make amendments? Circle the sentence that tells what happens as the country changes.