



# American Government

Robert Taggart

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# UNIT 2

## The Constitutional Framework



# LESSON 4: Introduction to the U.S. Constitution

**GOAL:** To understand the historical context for the American independence movement and its founding documents

## WORDS TO KNOW

Articles of Confederation

colonists

colony

Constitution

Continental Congress

Declaration of Independence

delegates

president

principles

## What Is the Constitution?

The U.S. **Constitution** is a written document. It explains the rules for running the government of the United States. The Constitution has now been in force for over 200 years. This is longer than any other written constitution of any other nation. Although much has happened in our country, the Constitution has remained much the same. In over 200 years, there have only been 27 amendments to the Constitution.

The Constitution is the supreme law, the highest law of the land. No person in this country is free from following its rules. No part of the United States government is free from following its rules, either.

The Constitution did not spring up overnight. It grew out of the first Americans' fight for freedom. The Constitution is also the result of compromises worked out by the founders of our country.

Although the Constitution is our highest law, that does not mean it cannot be changed. The people who wrote our Constitution wanted to make it flexible. They wanted to make sure it would still make sense as society changed. So, rules within the Constitution allow for changes.

## ■ PRACTICE 12: What Is the Constitution?

Circle the letter of the correct answer to each question.

1. Which U.S. citizens are free from following the Constitution?
  - a. wealthy citizens
  - b. elderly citizens
  - c. government workers
  - d. none of the above
2. Circle the letter of the statement that is TRUE.
  - a. The Constitution can be changed.
  - b. The Constitution can never be changed.
3. How long has our current Constitution been in force?
  - a. over 300 years
  - b. less than 200 years
  - c. over 200 years
  - d. none of the above
4. Circle the letter of the statement that is FALSE.
  - a. There have been no changes to the Constitution in over 200 years.
  - b. The Constitution is our country's highest law.

### ■ TIP



You may come across words in this book that you do not know. When you see an unfamiliar word, look at the text around the word for *context clues*. Context clues can help you understand the meaning of a word you do not know. For example, the text on page 27 uses the word *supreme*. You may not know what this word means. Look at the sentence surrounding the word *supreme*. The phrase *highest law of the land* is used to describe the same thing as *supreme law*. This tells you that *supreme* probably means “highest.”

## The Declaration of Independence

In 1607, England settled its first colony in the “new world” of North America, at Jamestown. A **colony** is a group of people who live in a new territory but are still partly controlled by their home country. The colony at Jamestown did not last. The **colonists**, or people living in the colony, did not know how to provide for themselves in the new land. Also, there was a constant shortage of supplies from England. Still, by the late 1600s, England had settled 13 other colonies. Most of these colonies were in what is today the northeastern United States. The 13 colonies were the following:

Connecticut	New Hampshire	Rhode Island
Delaware	New Jersey	South Carolina
Georgia	New York	Virginia
Maryland	North Carolina	
Massachusetts	Pennsylvania	

On July 4, 1776, these 13 colonies declared their independence from England. The colonists were angry with England. They believed that the English government was ignoring their rights. They decided to form their own government.

The colonists wrote the **Declaration of Independence**. In this document, they argued for their right to form a new nation. They explained the wrongs done to the colonies by the English king. They stated that the 13 colonies were now an independent country.

The Declaration of Independence stated three basic **principles**. These beliefs served as the foundation of the United States government. The three basic principles of the Declaration of Independence are listed below.

- All people are created equal.
- All people have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Government should carry out the wishes of the people.

## ■ PRACTICE 13: The Declaration of Independence

Circle the letter of the correct answer to each of the following questions.

1. Why did the colonists want to form their own government?
  - a. They wanted to go back to England.
  - b. They did not want too much power for themselves.
  - c. They believed that England was ignoring their rights.
  - d. They wanted to become part of Spain.
2. Which of the following is a basic principle of the Declaration of Independence? (*Hint: There is more than one correct answer.*)
  - a. Government should carry out the wishes of the people.
  - b. Government should provide clothing, shelter, and food for the people.
  - c. All people are created equal.
  - d. All people have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

## The Articles of Confederation

In 1777, **delegates**, or representatives, from the 13 colonies wrote the country's first constitution. This group of representatives was known as the **Continental Congress**. The constitution they wrote was called the **Articles of Confederation**.

The Continental Congress worried about giving their new government too much power. They did not want to trade the English king for another harsh ruler. So, the Articles of Confederation called for a weak national government.

In fact, the new government was too weak. At least 9 out of the 13 colonies had to agree on any law. It was rare for so many colonies to agree, so the government had trouble passing laws. The new government also had no **president**, so there was nobody in charge who could carry out the laws. And, the new government had no courts, so there was no way to settle disputes.



## ■ PRACTICE 14: The Articles of Confederation

Circle the letter of the correct answer to each of the following questions.

1. Under the Articles of Confederation, how many states had to agree on new laws?
  - a. 13
  - b. 9
  - c. 10
  - d. 8
2. Why did the new government have trouble carrying out laws?
  - a. There was no president.
  - b. There were no courts.
  - c. It was too strong.
  - d. There was no constitution.
3. Why did the new government have trouble settling disputes?
  - a. There was no president.
  - b. There were no courts.
  - c. It was too strong.
  - d. There was no constitution.

### ■ IN REAL LIFE



The act of writing a new constitution may seem like a page from history, but countries around the world are still writing new constitutions today. For example, Czechoslovakia had to write a new constitution when it broke free from the former Soviet Union in 1989. Then, in 1993, Czechoslovakia split into two countries: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. To prepare for this split, the Czech government had to write another new constitution, passed in December 1992.



# American Government

Teacher's Guide

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# Unit 2: The Constitutional Framework

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Unit 2 presents the U.S. Constitution. Lesson 4 examines the historical context for the American independence movement and its founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation. Lesson 5 follows the historical events and compromises involved in the creation of the Constitution. Lesson 6 explores the basic concepts of the Constitution, including self-government, inherent rights, separation of powers, and checks and balances. Lesson 7 explains the structure of the Constitution, including its Preamble, its articles, and the Bill of Rights and the amendment process.

## Lesson 4—Introduction to the U.S. Constitution

**Goal:** To understand the historical context for the American Independence movement and its founding documents

### WORDS TO KNOW

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Articles of Confederation	Constitution	delegates
colonists	Continental Congress	president
colony	Declaration of Independence	principles

## Lesson 5—The Constitutional Convention of 1787

**Goal:** To learn the historical context behind the Constitutional Convention and the major compromises involved in drafting the Constitution

### WORDS TO KNOW

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compromise	Executive Compromise	Senate
Congress	Great Compromise	Three-Fifths Compromise
Constitutional Convention	House of Representatives	Virginia Plan
Electoral College	New Jersey Plan	
electors	regulate	

## Lesson 6—The Philosophy and Principles of the Constitution

Goal: To understand the basic concepts of the United States' most important document of government

### WORDS TO KNOW

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checks and balances

inherent rights

self-government

executive branch

judicial branch

federalism

legislative branch

## Lesson 7—The Structure of the Constitution

Goal: To become familiar with the Preamble, articles, and amendments that make up the U.S. Constitution

### WORDS TO KNOW

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amendments

guarantee

ratify

article

preamble

Bill of Rights

prohibited

### Notes on Application Activity in Student Text

Activity	Skills Applied	Product
In Your Own Words	evaluating information, thinking critically, preparing a written presentation	amendments written in their own words

### Additional Activity Suggestions

- Lesson 7 of Unit 2 introduces students to Amendments 15, 19, 24, and 26—all amendments that expanded voting rights to various groups of people. Have each student or group of students choose one of these amendments and research the people and events that led to its ratification. For example, students researching Amendment 19 would gather information on key people and events in the women's suffrage movement. Students could present their information in oral and/or visual presentations.

- Have students copy the Preamble of the Constitution, skipping a line after each line of their writing. Then, have them write the meaning of each line of the Preamble (in a different-colored pen or pencil), using their own words. They should refer to a dictionary as needed. Encourage them to memorize and recite the Preamble.
- Work with students to reproduce part of the Declaration of Independence. You may first want to gather library books with pictures of the original document to show learners. Then have them copy the opening paragraph and first short section onto a piece of paper. Encourage them to use “elegant” writing in black ink. Using a slightly damp, used tea bag, they can pat the paper to give it a parchment effect. Then they can use a lighted incense stick to sear the edges and make the paper look old. Finally, they can mount their paper on cardboard.
- Most students will know little about the original 13 colonies and their governments before the Declaration of Independence. Have each student pick a colony to research. Ask them to find out when the colony was founded, who provided financial backing for the colony, and what type of government the colony had before the American Revolution. As part of their research, encourage students to visit Colonial Williamsburg’s Internet site (<http://www.history.org/>).
- Have each student write a “bill of rights” for his or her classroom or household. Explain that the purpose of each bill of rights should be to protect the basic freedoms of each member in a student’s class or family. Students should use the U.S. Bill of Rights as an example, but should rewrite each amendment based on their own classrooms or households.
- Have students pick one of the following events: the Boston Massacre, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitutional Convention. Divide students into pairs; have each pair role-play coanchors who are reporting the news “live” on national television.



### **Fascinating Facts**

- Students may be interested to know that the names of all those who signed the Declaration of Independence were kept secret by the colonists for almost a year. This was done because the British government considered those who signed the document to be guilty of treason against England. A \$2,500 reward was offered by the British government to anyone who could provide the names of the signers. When you consider that \$150 per year was a livable wage at the time, a reward of \$2,500 would be more like \$250,000 today!



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Workbook

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