RESCUE OUR DEMOCRACY

LESSON 01

What Is the U.S. Constitution?

Civic Education Series | Constitution & Founding Documents



The foundation of American government, explained.

Free educational guide • Read, save, or print

Educational information only. This guide is not legal advice.

Learning goals

• Explain what the Constitution does and why it was written.

• Identify the seven Articles and three branches of federal government.

• Describe the Bill of Rights and the process for amendments.

• Recognize how constitutional principles affect civic life.

The Constitution: an introduction

1. What is the Constitution?

The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of the United States. It establishes the federal government, distributes authority, and limits government power. It is not the complete list of laws: Congress, states, and local governments also make laws, subject to constitutional limits.

2. Why was it created?

After independence, the United States operated under the Articles of Confederation. That system gave the national government limited powers. Delegates met in Philadelphia in 1787 to draft a new Constitution. Ratification began in 1788, and the new federal government began operating in 1789.

3. What does “We the People” mean?

The Preamble begins with “We the People” and states the purposes of the new government, including establishing justice, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and securing liberty. The Preamble expresses goals; the operative rules are chiefly in the Articles and amendments.

The seven Articles

Article	Main purpose
I	Creates Congress (legislative branch)
II	Creates the presidency (executive branch)
III	Creates the federal judiciary
IV	Governs relations among states
V	Establishes the amendment process
VI	Establishes constitutional supremacy and other obligations
VII	Sets out the ratification process

Three branches and checks and balances

Legislative: Congress makes federal laws. Executive: The president and executive agencies carry out federal laws. Judicial: Federal courts decide cases arising under federal law and the Constitution. Their different powers allow each branch to check the others.

Example: Congress passes a bill; the president can sign or veto it; courts can decide constitutional challenges in cases properly before them.

The Bill of Rights

The Bill of Rights consists of the first ten amendments, ratified in 1791. They protect freedoms including speech and religion, safeguards in criminal proceedings, and other limits on government. Their application depends on constitutional text and court decisions. Lesson 02 explains all ten in detail.

How is the Constitution amended?

Article V allows an amendment to be proposed by a two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress, or by a convention called upon application of two-thirds of state legislatures. Ratification requires three-fourths of the states. The Constitution has 27 amendments.

Why does the Constitution matter today?

The Constitution provides a legal framework for disputes about government authority and individual rights. It affects public policy, elections, courts, and civic life. Understanding its structure helps people evaluate claims about what government officials may or may not do.

Flipper explains: “supreme law”



“Supreme law” means conflicting ordinary laws or government actions cannot override the Constitution. Courts can review constitutional disputes, but not every constitutional question has a simple or uncontested answer.

Quick vocabulary

Ratification: Formal approval.

Amendment: A formal change to the Constitution.

Federalism: Division of governing authority between the national government and the states.

Checks and balances: Powers allowing branches of government to limit one another.

Bill of Rights quick-reference chart

Amendment	Main subject
1	Religion, speech, press, assembly, petition
2	Keep and bear arms
3	Quartering of soldiers
4	Searches and seizures
5	Self-incrimination, due process, takings
6	Criminal trial protections
7	Civil jury trial in certain federal cases
8	Bail, fines, punishment
9	Rights retained by the people
10	Powers reserved to states and people

Knowledge check

1. What document is the supreme law of the United States?

2. Which Article establishes Congress?

3. How many amendments are in the Bill of Rights?

4. What fraction of states must ratify an amendment?

5. Name one example of a check between branches.

Answer key

1. The U.S. Constitution.

2. Article I.

3. Ten.

4. Three-fourths.

5. Examples: presidential veto of legislation; congressional override of a veto; judicial review in an appropriate case.

Primary sources and further reading

- National Archives — Constitution transcript: https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript
- Congress.gov — Constitution Annotated: https://constitution.congress.gov/
- National Archives — Bill of Rights: https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights

Lesson 01 | Rescue Our Democracy | Educational material, not legal advice.