



# A Constitutional Democracy

## TERMS & NAMES

United States Constitution  
 limited government  
 unlimited government  
 constitutional amendment  
 Bill of Rights  
 federal government

### MAIN IDEA

The founders of the United States drafted a constitution that protected the rights of citizens.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

After more than 200 years, the Constitution continues to protect the freedoms of U.S. citizens.

## DATELINE

**U.S. SUPREME COURT, MAY 17, 1954**—Oliver Brown, an African American, wanted his daughter to attend a nearby all-white school. When the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, refused to admit her, Brown went to court. Today, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate schools for different races violate the equal protection guaranteed by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

In 1896, the Supreme Court had allowed states to provide “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites. The words in the Constitution remain the same, but changes in society have led to a new interpretation of those words.



**Place** • Soldiers and police escort students into a formerly all-white school following this Supreme Court ruling. ▲

## The Law of the Land

The basis for U.S. law is the United States Constitution, written by the country’s first leaders. Amazingly, this document remains the foundation for all laws and the framework for the U.S. government more than 200 years after its creation. The Supreme Court decides whether the actions of states, businesses, and individuals are in accordance with the ideas in the Constitution, as it did in this 1954 case.

### TAKING NOTES

Use your chart to take notes about the United States today.

The United States Today	
History	
Government	

**Forming a New Government** American colonists living under British rule did not have the rights and the protections they wanted. After gaining independence from Great Britain in 1783, they established a nation called the United States of America. The writers of the Constitution designed a government that received its power from the people.

The founders, or early American leaders, wanted to protect people's individual rights and freedoms from government interference. They also knew that a society needs strong laws and a stable government to ensure the common good. They wrote a constitution that achieved both goals. The U.S. Constitution describes and limits the power of the government and its leaders. It also defines the rights of citizens and their role in governing their country. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt explained the relationship between U.S. citizens and their government.

**Reading**  
**Social Studies**

**Making Inferences**

What were two goals that the writers of the Constitution wanted to achieve?

**A VOICE FROM THE UNITED STATES**

The government is us; we are the government, you and I.

*Theodore Roosevelt*

**Limited and Unlimited Governments**

The constitutional republic of the United States is one example of a **limited government**. In other types of government, called **unlimited governments**, the leaders have almost total power. For instance, dictators control their countries' laws and people.

**The WORLD'S HERITAGE**

**The United States Constitution** The U.S. Constitution is the oldest national constitution still in use. It was written in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and ratified in 1789. Ideas that shaped the U.S. Constitution came from many places and times, including Great Britain, France, and ancient Rome. Native American nations, such as the Iroquois Confederacy, may also have influenced political ideas at the time that the Constitution was drafted. This painting, *Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States* by H. C. Christy, hangs in the Capitol in Washington, D.C.



## The Constitution Grows and Changes

The Constitution went into effect in 1789. A condition of ratifying, or approving, it in many states was the promise of a bill of rights. In 1791, the states adopted ten constitutional amendments proposed by Congress. A **constitutional amendment** is a change or addition to the Constitution. This **Bill of**

**Rights** lists specific freedoms guaranteed to every U.S. citizen. Among them are freedom of speech and religion, the right to a fair trial, and the right to gather peaceably. In all, 27 amendments have adapted the Constitution to the country's changing needs. Some amendments passed after the Bill of Rights include ones that ended slavery, gave women the right to vote, and limited a president's terms to two.

## Limiting Powers of Government

Leaders of the new country wanted to limit government power and to preserve each state's right to govern itself. To accomplish these goals, they created a federal system in which power is divided between the **federal government**, or national government, and the state governments. The federal government is a republic headed by the President.

**Place** • Women began the fight for suffrage, or the right to vote, in the early 1800s and continued until they succeeded in 1920. ▲



## Biography

**Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968)** Reverend King was a civil rights leader in the 1950s and 1960s. A gifted speaker, he argued for voting rights, equal opportunities in education and jobs, and justice not based on the color of people's skin. He expressed these hopes in a famous 1963 speech in Washington, D.C., shown at right.

Influenced by his study of Christianity and his admiration for India's civil rights leader Mahatma Gandhi, Reverend King used nonviolent protest. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

On April 4, 1968, he was assassinated. Since 1986, a U.S. holiday has been observed in January to honor him, and he is remembered around the country for his leadership in the civil rights movement.



## Places of Interest in Washington, D.C.

### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting a Map

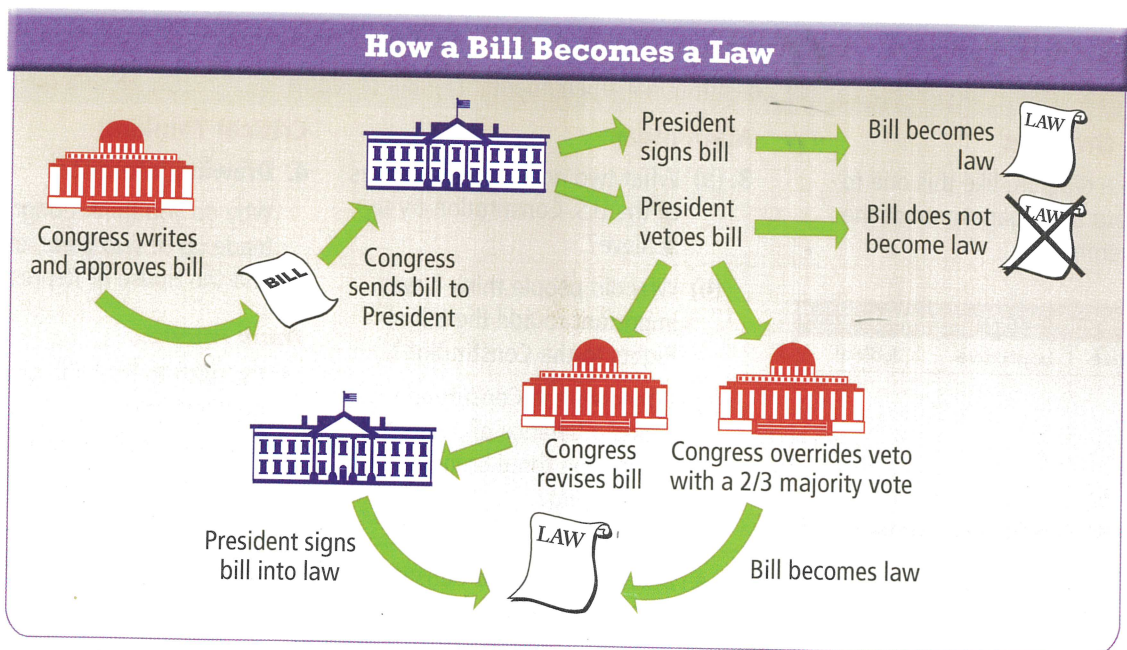
- Location** • On what river is Washington, D.C., located?
- Location** • What is the distance between the Capitol, where Congress meets, and the Supreme Court Building?



**Federal and State Government** The Constitution gives the federal government specific powers, including establishing an army, waging war, raising money through taxes, and making laws to carry out its duties. All other powers are held by the states. The Constitution does not refer to local government, so each state determines the form of town or county rule.

**Checks and Balances** Three branches share the powers of the U.S. government. Each branch checks the power of the other branches. The process by which a bill, or a proposal for a new law, becomes a law shows how this balance of power works.

### How a Bill Becomes a Law

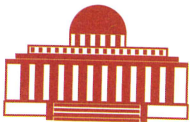


## Three Branches of Government

The Constitution separates powers of government into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Each branch has its own job. All are located in the U.S. capital, Washington, D.C.



**Executive Branch**  
Enforces the laws



**Legislative Branch**  
Makes the laws and controls taxes and spending



**Judicial Branch**  
Decides if laws agree with the U.S. Constitution

**The Executive Branch** The President is elected to head the executive branch. He enforces the laws, serves as commander in chief of the armed forces, and conducts foreign affairs. The Vice-President is elected with the President. The President's cabinet includes the secretaries of the 14 executive departments and other key members of the executive branch.

**The Legislative Branch** Congress is made up of two houses—the Senate and the House of Representatives—and makes national laws. Two senators are elected from each of the 50 states. The House of Representatives has 435 members, elected from each state according to its population. The two houses have some shared responsibilities and some separate ones.

**The Judicial Branch** The judicial branch is the system of federal courts that makes sure all laws and treaties are constitutional, or agree with the U.S. Constitution. The highest federal court, the Supreme Court, has nine justices, or judges, nominated by the President and approved by the Senate.

### SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

#### Terms & Names

1. Explain the significance of:
- |                                |                        |                          |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| (a) United States Constitution | (b) limited government | (c) unlimited government |
| (d) constitutional amendment   | (e) Bill of Rights     | (f) federal government   |

#### Using Graphics

2. Use a diagram like this one to record the organization of the government.

Branches of Government		
Executive	Legislative	Judicial

#### Main Ideas

3. (a) What two goals did the writers of the U.S. Constitution try to achieve?
- (b) Why did people think it was important to add the Bill of Rights to the Constitution?
- (c) Why does the Constitution create a balance of powers among the three branches of government?

#### Critical Thinking

##### 4. Drawing Inferences

Why do you think Congress is made up of two parts, the Senate and the House of Representatives?

##### Think About

- the wish to limit the power of government
- the number of senators and representatives from each state

#### ACTIVITY -OPTION-

If you were going to add an amendment to the Constitution, what would it be? Write a **proposal** for it. Tell what the law would do, whom it would affect, and why people should support it.