



# American Government

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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.