

We the People
insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common Defence
and our Posterity, We ordain and establish this Constitution

Learning About the United States

The United States is a democracy, and citizens here play a very important role in governing the country. In this section, you will learn about how citizens help shape the U.S. government, how the United States began and developed, and how our government operates.

We The People: The Role of the Citizen in the United States

In the United States, the government gets its power to govern from the people. We have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Citizens in the United States shape their government and its policies, so they must learn about important public issues and get involved in their communities. Citizens vote in free elections to choose important government officials, such as the President and Vice President. All citizens can call their elected officials to express an opinion, ask for information, or get help with specific issues.

Our government is based on several important values: freedom, opportunity, equality, and justice. Americans share these values, and these values give us a common civic identity.

Government in the United States protects the rights of each person. The United States is made up of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and religions. Our government and laws are organized so that citizens from different backgrounds and with different beliefs all have the same rights. No one can be punished or harmed for having an opinion or belief that is different from that of most other people.

OF, BY, AND FOR THE PEOPLE: WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?



The word “democracy” means “government by the people.” Democracy can have different forms in different countries. In the United States, we have what is called “representative democracy.” This means that the people choose officials to represent their views and concerns in government.

How the United States Began

The early colonists and settlers who came to the United States were often fleeing unfair treatment, especially religious persecution, in their home countries. They were seeking freedom and new opportunities. Today, many people come to the United States for these same reasons.

Before it became a separate and independent nation, the United States was made up of 13 colonies that were ruled by Great Britain. People living in the colonies had no say in which laws were passed or how

they were governed. They especially objected to “taxation without representation.” This means that people had to pay taxes, but they had no say in how their government operated.

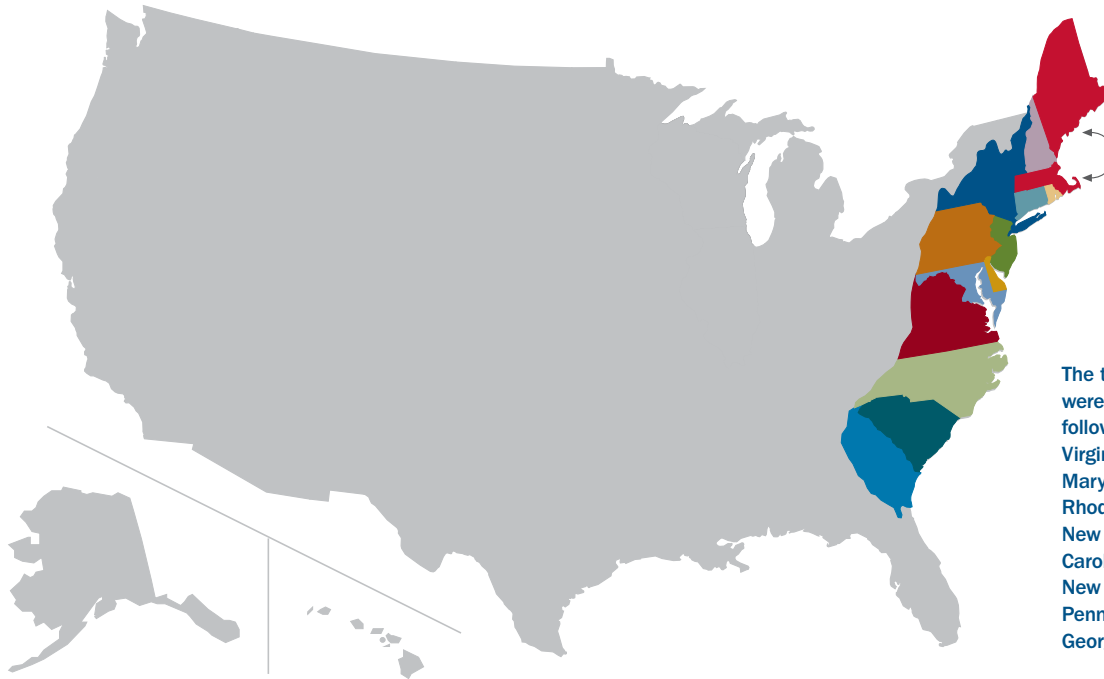
By 1776, many people felt that this was unfair and that they should govern themselves. Representatives from the colonies issued a Declaration of Independence. This important document declared that the colonies were free and independent and no longer tied to Great Britain. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. He later became the third president of the United States.

WHAT YOU CAN DO



As an LPR, you have many rights and freedoms. In return, you have some responsibilities. One important responsibility is to get involved in your community. You should also learn about the American way of life and our history and government. You can do this by taking adult education classes and reading the local newspaper.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE ORIGINAL THIRTEEN COLONIES



The thirteen colonies were founded in the following order:
Virginia, Massachusetts, Maryland, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Georgia.

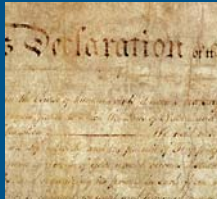


The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776. This is the reason that Americans celebrate July 4th every year as Independence Day: it is our nation's birthday.

The United States had to fight for its freedom from Great Britain in the Revolutionary War. General George Washington led the military forces of the American Revolution. He is known as the "Father of Our Country." Later he became the first president of the United States.

After the colonies won the war, they became states. Each state had its own government. The people in these states wanted to create a new form of government to unite the states into a single nation. Today, this central government, our national government, is called "the federal government." The United States now consists of 50 states, the District of Columbia (a special area that is the home of the federal government), and the territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL"



Many Americans know these words from the Declaration of Independence by heart:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

This means that all people are born with the same basic rights. Government does not create these rights, and no government can take these rights away.

Creating “A More Perfect Union”

For several years after the American Revolution, the states tried different ways to join together in a central government, but this government was too weak. So representatives from each of the states gathered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1787 to develop a new, stronger central government. This meeting was the Constitutional Convention. After much debate, leaders from the states drafted a document describing this new

government. This document is the U.S. Constitution, one of the most important documents in American history. The Constitution described how the new government would be organized, how government officials would be chosen, and what rights the new central government would guarantee to citizens.

The members of the Constitutional Convention approved the Constitution on September 17, 1787. Next, all 13 states had to approve it. Some people felt

“OLD GLORY”—THE UNITED STATES FLAG



The United States flag has changed over our history. Now it has 13 stripes to represent the original 13 American colonies, and it has 50 stars, one for each state. The American national anthem was written about the flag and is called “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The flag is also called the “Stars and Stripes,” and a favorite American song is called “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

that the Constitution did not do enough to protect the rights of individual people. The states agreed to approve the Constitution if a list of individual rights were added to it. The states approved the Constitution in 1789. This list of individual rights, called the Bill of Rights, was added to the Constitution in 1791. Changes to the Constitution are called “amendments.” The Bill of Rights is the first 10 amendments to the Constitution.

The United States is a nation governed by laws. Government officials make decisions based on those laws. The Constitution is known as the “supreme law of the land,” because every citizen, including all government officials, and every law that is created must uphold the principles of the Constitution. Laws apply equally to everyone. The federal government has limited powers. Powers not given directly to the federal government by the Constitution are held by the states.

“WE THE PEOPLE”



“We the People” are the first three words of the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution begins by explaining why it was written and what it was intended to accomplish. This section is called the “preamble.” Here is the preamble to the Constitution:

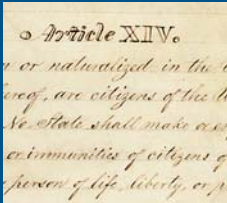
“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

The Bill of Rights: The First 10 Amendments

The first changes to the Constitution were made to protect individual citizens and to limit the power of government. The Bill of Rights lists important freedoms that are promised to the American people. In most instances, these rights limit what government can do to individual people. These rights include:

- Freedom of speech. The government cannot tell people what to say or not say. People can say what they want about public issues without fear of punishment.
- Freedom of religion. The government cannot tell people what place of worship to attend. People can choose to worship—or not worship—as they please.
- Freedom of the press. The government cannot decide what is printed in newspapers or heard on radio and TV.
- Freedom to gather in public places. The government cannot stop people from holding lawful public gatherings for many different purposes.

CHANGING THE CONSTITUTION



The U.S. Constitution is called a “living document” because the American people, acting through their state and national representatives, can change it when necessary. These changes are called “amendments.” It is a long and difficult process to change the Constitution, so it has been changed only 27 times over the course of our history. Besides the Bill of Rights, some important amendments are the Thirteenth, which forbids slavery, and the Fourteenth, which guarantees all citizens equal protection under the law. The Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote.

- Freedom to own firearms. The government cannot prevent people from owning guns.
- Freedom to protest government actions and demand change. The government cannot silence or punish people who challenge government actions they don't agree with.

The Bill of Rights also guarantees “due process.” Due process is a set of specific legal procedures that must be followed when someone is accused of a crime. Police officers and soldiers cannot stop and search a person without good reason, and they cannot search people’s homes without permission from a court. Persons accused of a crime are guaranteed a speedy trial, by a jury made up of people like themselves. They are guaranteed legal representation and can call witnesses to speak for them. Cruel and unusual punishment is also forbidden.

How the Federal Government Works

The original 13 colonies had lived under the total power of the British king. In their new central government, Americans wanted to prevent a concentration of power in one government official or one office. The Constitution created three branches for the federal government, so that power would be balanced. The three branches have separate responsibilities. We call this the system of “checks and balances.” No single branch of government can become too powerful because it is balanced by the other two branches.



THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The three branches of the federal government are:



The Legislative branch:
the U.S. Congress and
related offices



The Executive branch:
the President, Vice President, and
departments of the federal government.



The Judicial branch:
the Supreme Court of the United States
and federal courts across the country.

The Legislative Branch: Congress

Citizens of the United States vote in free elections to choose people to represent them in the U.S. Congress. Congress has the responsibility of making the laws for our nation. Congress is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The U.S. House of Representatives

People in each state vote to choose members of the House of Representatives. There are 435 members of the House of Representatives, which is often called “the House.” The number of representatives from each state depends on how many people live in that state. States are divided into districts. People living in each district vote for someone to represent their district in the House. Each representative serves for two years, and then

people have another chance to vote for them or for a different person to represent them. Representatives can serve in Congress for an unlimited period of time.

There are five additional members in the House. These are the representatives of the District of Columbia and the territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. They may participate in debates,

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SERVE THE PEOPLE



In the United States, everyone can call their elected Representative and Senators. You can call 202-224-3121 and ask for your Representative's or Senators' offices. You can write to your Representative or Senators to ask questions or give your opinion about legislation and the federal government, or if you have a problem and need help with federal benefits.

To write to your Representative:
The Honorable (add Representative's full name)
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

To write to your Senator:
The Honorable (add Senator's full name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

You can visit the websites of Congress to learn about current activities in the House and Senate and about your own Representative and Senators, including their website addresses.

- For the House of Representatives, visit <http://www.house.gov/>.
- For the Senate, visit <http://www.senate.gov/>.

but they cannot participate in the formal votes of the entire House.

The House of Representatives makes laws, but it has some special responsibilities. Only the House of Representatives can:

- Make laws about taxes.
- Decide if a government official accused of committing a crime against the country should be put on trial in the Senate. This is called “impeachment.”

The U.S. Senate

There are 100 Senators in the U.S. Senate. People in each state vote to choose two Senators to represent them in Congress. Senators serve for six years, and then people have another chance to vote for them or for a different person to represent them. Senators can serve in Congress for an unlimited period of time. Senators make laws, but they also have special responsibilities. Only the Senate can:

WHAT YOU CAN DO



Learn about your Representative and Senators and what they are doing to represent you in Congress. You can do this by looking for stories about them in your local newspaper and visiting the websites for Congress. All Senators and Representatives have local offices in their home communities; you can find these listed in the blue pages of the phone book. If you visit Washington, DC, you can take a free tour of the U.S. Capitol, where Congress works.

You can learn about the President and his wife, the First Lady, by visiting the website for the White House, the President’s home. Visit <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

- Say “yes” or “no” to any agreements the President makes with other countries or organizations of countries. These are called “treaties.”
- Say “yes” or “no” to any person the President chooses for high-level jobs, such as Supreme Court judges or officials to run the federal departments, such as the Department of Education or the Department of Health and Human Services.
- Hold a trial for a government official who commits a crime against the United States.



The Executive Branch: The President



The President is the leader of the executive branch and is responsible for upholding and enforcing the laws of the country. The President has many other responsibilities, too, such as setting national policies, proposing laws to Congress, and choosing high-level officials and members of the Supreme Court. The President is also the leader of the U.S. military, called the Commander-in-Chief.

People vote in elections for the President and Vice President every four years. The President can only serve in office for 2 four-year terms. The Vice President becomes President if the President becomes disabled or dies.

The Judicial Branch: The Supreme Court

The Constitution created the Supreme Court, the highest court in the United States. There are nine judges on the Supreme Court. They are called “justices.” The President chooses the members of the Supreme Court, and they serve as long as they are able. The Supreme Court can overrule both state and federal laws if they conflict with the Constitution. There are other federal courts, such as the U.S. District Courts and the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

To learn more about the U.S. Supreme Court, visit <http://www.supremecourtus.gov>.

State and Local Government

In addition to the federal government, each state has its own Constitution and its own government. Each state



government also has three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial.

The leader of the state executive branch is called the “governor.” The people of each state vote in elections to choose their governor and their representatives to the state legislature. The state legislature makes the laws that



apply in each state. These laws cannot conflict with the U.S. Constitution, and each state judicial branch upholds the laws of that state.

Each state also has local governments. There are city or county governments or sometimes both. They provide and oversee many serv-

ices in your local community, such as public schools and libraries, police and fire departments, and water, gas, and electric services. People in local communities usually vote for local government officials, but some local officials are appointed. Local governments have different forms. Some have mayors as their leaders; some have city councils or county councils. Local communities also have school boards, citizens who are elected or appointed to oversee the public schools.

WHAT YOU CAN DO



Many local government meetings are open to the public. Many are held at night so that anyone can attend. For example, you can go to a city council meeting or a school board meeting to learn more about what is going on in your community. These meetings and their times and locations are usually listed in the local newspaper. Some local government meetings also are on television on local cable stations.

