

Introduction



What does our Constitution mean to you, and why should you bother studying it? When it comes to your rights and liberties, it would be dangerous to be indifferent. True, the U.S. Constitution has stood the test of time for more than two hundred years, preserving our rights, preventing despotism, and adjusting to the needs of an evergrowing nation. Yet despite its appearance of strength and stability, time and again constitutional rights and liberties have been imperiled and might have crumbled if taken for granted.

The U.S. Constitution has never been perfect. Like all laws, constitutions involve compromises. The original Constitution was a remarkable document, wise in construction and broad and balanced in powers, but it contained serious flaws. The First Congress addressed a flaw of omission by hastily adding the Bill of Rights to the Constitution. A decade later Congress quickly repaired problems that had surfaced with the electoral college. The Constitution's most damaging compromise was its tolerance of slavery, an issue that eventually led to a constitutional breakdown and terrible Civil War. Out of that war came amendments to the Constitution abolishing slavery and guaranteeing the equal protection of the law to all citizens, regardless of race.

There were other unresolved issues that required additional amendments. Women struggled for a century to achieve political equality with men by gaining the right to vote. Young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one were subject to the military draft without having the right to elect the leaders who might send them into combat. States charged poll taxes that prevented poor people from casting ballots. Some issues were more structural, but still had significant consequences for every citizen because they involved national leadership: the long delay between a Presidential election and the inauguration; the ability of Presidents to run for an unlimited number of terms; the succession to the Presidency and Vice Presidency if the incumbent became ill, died, or resigned.

Beyond amendments, our lives have been influenced by thousands of laws enacted in Congress, by executive orders signed by Presidents, and by judicial decisions of the Supreme Court. These affect your education, your wages and hours, your taxes, and your pensions. The continuing

debates over how to interpret the Constitution influence your freedom to worship, to read what you want, to speak your mind, and to protest injustices. They involve your life, liberty, and property, everything that you consider valuable. For these reasons, it is in your interest to know your constitutional rights. You will have the opportunity to choose your leaders—and perhaps to become one yourself. That carries with it a civic responsibility to understand how government works, to know its powers and its limits, and the meaning of a constitution written in the name of “we the people.”