# THE CONSTITUTION

## Why a constitution?

The need for the Constitution grew out of problems with the Articles of Confederation, which established a “firm league of friendship” between the States and gave most power in a Congress of the Confederation. Each State sent a delegation of between two and seven members to the Congress, and they voted as a bloc with each State getting one vote. But any decision of consequence required a unanimous vote, which led to a government that was paralyzed and ineffectual. A movement to reform the Articles began, and invitations to attend a convention in Philadelphia to discuss changes to the Articles were sent to the State legislatures in 1787.

## The Constitutional Convention

An objective of the Constitution was to create a government with enough power to act on a national level, but without so much power that fundamental rights would be at risk. One way that this was accomplished was to separate the power of government into three branches, and then to include checks and balances on those powers to assure that no one branch of government gained supremacy. This concern arose largely out of the experience that the delegates had with the King of England and his powerful Parliament.

Much of the debate, which was conducted in secret to ensure that delegates spoke their minds, focused on the form that the new legislature would take. Two plans competed to become the new government: the Virginia Plan, which apportioned representation based on the population of each State, and the New Jersey plan, which gave each State an equal vote in Congress. The Virginia Plan was supported by the larger States, and the New Jersey plan preferred by the smaller. In the end, they settled on the Great Compromise, in which the House of Representatives would represent the people as apportioned by population; the Senate would represent the States apportioned equally; and the President would be elected by the Electoral College. The plan also called for an independent judiciary.

## The Bill of Rights

The process set out in the Constitution for its ratification provided for much popular debate in the States. The Constitution would take effect once it had been ratified by nine of the thirteen State legislatures; unanimity was not required. During the debate over the Constitution, two factions emerged: the Federalists, who supported adoption, and the Anti-Federalists, who opposed it.

One of the principal points of contention between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists was the lack of an enumeration of basic civil rights in the Constitution. James Madison introduced 12 amendments to the First Congress in 1789. Ten of these would go on to become what we now consider to be the Bill of Rights.

An amendment may be proposed by a two-thirds vote of both parts of Congress. The amendment must then be ratified by three-fourths of the State legislatures.

*The Constitution,   
The White House Website  
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