

## **Constitution Day 2020 Q&A Follow Up**

### **Constitution Day**

#### **Why do we celebrate Constitution Day? Why did it start?**

Constitution and Citizenship Day honors the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1787. The practice dates back to 1940, but the current celebration began with passage of a federal law in 2004. For more details, see this [overview](#) from the Library of Congress.

### **Purpose of a Constitution**

#### **Why is it called the Constitution?**

A constitution is the basic law of a nation or state, and that is its purpose.

#### **Why do we need a Constitution?**

The Constitution is a plan for government. It defines what the government may do and its relationship with the people. The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of the land, meaning that no law may go against what the Constitution says.

#### **What does the Constitution protect us from?**

As originally written, the U.S. Constitution listed the powers of government. The federal government could only do what was listed in the Constitution. The Bill of Rights – the first ten Amendments added in 1791, also guaranteed rights for the people.

#### **Should citizens have power over a government?**

The term “popular sovereignty” means that the authority of government comes from the people. The Declaration of Independence uses the phrase “consent of the governed.” (See the [phrase](#) highlighted in materials from the Library of Congress.) The U.S. Constitution continues this idea. It begins with “We the People” because citizens of the United States had to ratify (approve) it to make it official. In Michigan, the first section of the state Constitution says: “All political power is inherent in the people,” the citizens of Michigan. ([Const 1963, Art 1, Sec 1](#))

### **Constitutional Convention**

#### **When was the Constitution written? Where? How long did it take?**

The Constitution was written at the Constitutional Convention, which began May 14, 1787, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and ended with the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1787. Learn more about the Constitutional Convention in [this video](#) from the National Constitution Center.

**How many states took part in making the Constitution?**

Twelve states participated in writing the Constitution even though there were 13 states in 1787. Rhode Island was the only state that didn't send delegates to the Constitutional Convention.

**Who were the founders of the Constitution? Who signed the Constitution?**

The founders, sometimes called the framers, of the Constitution, were delegates – men sent by their states – to the Constitutional Convention. Fifty-five delegates attended but only 39 signed the Constitution. The National Archives lists their biographies [here](#), and you can download an image of the Constitution to see their signatures [here](#).

**Where did they get all the ideas for the Constitution? How did they even come up with it?**

The Constitution was based on the experience of living under the weaker Articles of Confederation. It also came from ideas written in the Declaration of Independence, which made the United States a nation separate from Great Britain, and ideas from Enlightenment thinkers about how governments should work. For more information, watch [this video](#) from the Bill of Rights Institute.

**Who wrote most of the Constitution?**

The Constitution was written by many different delegates working together, but James Madison is sometimes called the Father of the Constitution. Before attending the Constitutional Convention, he wrote the Virginia Plan, which became a framework for the Constitution. William Paterson also presented the New Jersey Plan to represent the interests of the small states, and Alexander Hamilton also had a plan. More information and images of [these documents](#) are available from the Library of Congress.

**Was anybody not given credit for the Constitution?**

The National Constitution Center has written that [Oliver Ellsworth](#) was an underrated founder and that [James Wilson](#) was a forgotten founder.

**Were there arguments?**

Yes – if you think of an argument as a discussion of differing views on issues or ideas (not the same as a disagreement with harsh words). The discussions at the Constitutional Convention are usually called “debates” and often required compromise to settle. To learn more, read [5 Issues at the Constitutional Convention](#) from George Washington's Mount Vernon.

**Why was the Preamble created?**

The Preamble explains the purposes of the Constitution and establishes it as a lasting document. Read [this essay](#) from the Constitution Annotated, a congressional publication.

**Why did they divide government into the three branches?**

The founders separated the powers of government into three branches with checks and balances so one part or person would not become too powerful.

**What do you feel is the main reason that slavery was not included or abolished by the Constitution?**

The issue of slavery divided the delegates into two groups – those who supported slavery and those who opposed it. Some of the most active delegates were slaveholders themselves. The issue threatened to stop all progress. The delegates who opposed slavery chose to compromise rather than see the convention fail entirely. [Read more](#) from the National Constitution Center, including a quotation by Virginia delegate Edmund Randolph.

**Is there a part of the Constitution against slavery?**

In the mid-1800s, abolitionists (people who were against slavery) debated whether the Constitution was a pro-slavery or anti-slavery document. This [essay](#) from the National Archives describes William Lloyd Garrison’s view that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document, while [this article](#) from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) discusses how Frederick Douglass changed his views to see the Constitution as an anti-slavery document. The abolition of slavery was accomplished through the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, following the Civil War. Read the [text and interpretations](#) from the National Constitution Center.

**What about growth in the federal government workforce and in the ranks of federal bureaucrats?**

Over time, federalism has gone back and forth in how much it affects government. For more on this topic, read [this essay](#) on Article I, Section 8, from the National Constitution Center.

**Ratification**

**What did people think about the Constitution?**

Some people, called Federalists, wanted the Constitution to be ratified (approved) because they thought a stronger national government would protect liberty. Others, called Anti-Federalists, opposed the Constitution because they thought it would not protect liberty. Many Anti-Federalists wanted a bill of rights to protect individual liberties. You can learn more about these competing views through this [blog post](#) from the Bill of Rights Institute and the [Race to Ratify game](#) from iCivics.

**How long did it take to have the U.S. Constitution ratified after it was written?**

On June 17, 1788, New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the Constitution and make it the official framework of the United States government. Rhode Island became the 13th state to ratify on May 29, 1790. For more details, see this [blog post](#) from the National Constitution Center.

**What would have happened if the Constitution failed?**

The Articles of Confederation (the previous written plan for government) remained in effect until the Constitution was ratified.

## **Amendments**

### **Has the Constitution been rewritten? Has it been changed? How many times?**

The Constitution has not been rewritten, but it has been amended (changed) 27 times. The Twenty-Seventh Amendment was approved in 1992; see [this essay](#) from the National Constitution Center.

### **Did the changes to the Constitution make a big difference? What would happen if there were no amendments?**

Many significant changes were incorporated in the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights in 1791, which were included to help convince more people to support ratification of the Constitution. Without any amendments, the Constitution would remain the same as in 1787. The National Constitution Center's [Interactive Constitution](#) lists the amendments with phrases that describe their purpose to show what changed.

### **Did the Founding Fathers base any of the Bill of Rights on problems caused by the colonial period?**

In the colonial period, the colonists only had the rights the King of England gave them. After independence, most states included a bill or declaration of rights in their constitutions (every state has its own constitution). Many were based on the [Virginia Declaration of Rights](#), which you can read from the National Archives.

### **Is World War II (1941–1945) in the Constitution?**

No amendments were ratified during World War II, but the Twenty-Second Amendment, which limits the President to two terms, was passed in 1947. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who served during the war had been elected to three terms. Learn more in [this essay](#) from the National Constitution Center.

### **What do you think is the most important amendment?**

Amending the Constitution is very difficult, so all of them are significant in their own right. Many people have their own idea of which amendment is the most important, but the Constitution, with all of its amendments, is important to all people.

## **About the Document**

### **Where is the Constitution now?**

The National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C., displays the Constitution in the [Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom](#) alongside the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

### **How long would it take to read?**

Part of the answer depends on how fast you read and how well you know the words used in the Constitution. A good estimate for an adult reading something out loud is 250 words a minute. The original Constitution is more than 4,000 words long.

**How many sentences are there in the Constitution?**

You can read a [transcript](#) of the original document and count up the sentences.

**Why is the Constitution in cursive?**

When the Constitution was created, devices like computers and tablets did not exist, and most people who could write used cursive. In fact, some people had jobs writing out (engrossing) official documents. The Constitution at the National Archives was copied by [Jacob Shallus](#).

**What kind of paper was the Constitution written on?**

The Constitution was written on parchment, not wood-based paper like we use today. Parchment is usually made from calf, goat, or sheep skin. You can [read more](#) from the National Archives.

**Which is longer, the U.S. Constitution or the Michigan Constitution?**

You can find out by comparing transcripts of these documents.

- U.S. Constitution [transcript](#)
- Constitution of Michigan of 1963 [transcript](#) (PDF)

**Was the Constitution initially intended for men only?**

In the early Republic men and women had separate roles, with politics reserved for men. For a scholarly discussion of this issue, read this excerpt from [Women of the Republic](#) by Linda Kerber, hosted by the Museum of the American Revolution.

## **Michigan Supreme Court**

**How long is a term for a Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court?**

Eight years ([Const 1963, Art 6, Sec 2](#)).

**How does the election work? Does it matter if you are a Republican or Democrat?**

Justices of the Michigan Supreme Court are elected on a non-partisan ballot after being nominated by a party, as prescribed by law. ([Const 1963, Art 6, Sec 2](#)).

**Justice Richard H. Bernstein ([Biography](#))**

**How long have you served on the Michigan Supreme Court?**

Since 2015.

**Can you tell us about yourself? How does it feel to be a Justice? Do you like your job? I've heard you are very athletic.**

[This article](#) from the October 2, 2019, issue of the *Grand Rapids Legal News* discusses Justice Bernstein's work on the Michigan Supreme and his goals as a runner. This [10-minute interview](#) with Michigan Radio's Stateside on June 12, 2019, details how he approaches his work.

Justice Bernstein is an avid runner. He has completed 22 marathons – including 13 New York City marathons – the full Ironman triathlon in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho in 2008, and the Israman triathlon’s half Ironman in Eilat, Israel in 2011.

## **Other**

### **How did they get from Britain to America, like how did they transport themselves?**

Immigrants to early America had to cross the Atlantic Ocean by ship. To learn more, visit this [online exhibit](#) from the Smithsonian.

### **What people wrote their names on the Declaration of Independence?**

Learn about the [signers of the Declaration of Independence](#) from the National Archives.

### **Who made Republicans and Democrats?**

Read about and see [documents](#) at the Library of Congress related to the formation of political parties after ratification of the Constitution.

### **Why was Mount Rushmore carved?**

Learn more about [Mount Rushmore](#) from the National Park Service.

### **Why are there so many holidays to celebrate the United States?**

Learn more about [civic holidays](#) from the National Constitution Center.