

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES



The United States Constitution is the written plan for the government of the United States. It describes the structure and powers of the government. The Constitution was written in 1787 by a group of delegates at the Constitutional Convention. This group is sometimes referred to as the “Framers” of the Constitution. They explored fundamental questions about how the new government would work and used several guiding principles to answer those questions.



Read about some of the U.S. Constitution’s guiding principles. Then answer the questions on page 2.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION	GUIDING PRINCIPLE	EXPLANATION
Who gives the government its power?	Popular sovereignty (also known as self-government)	The government’s power comes from the people. The people vote for leaders to represent their interests.
How is power divided?	Separation of powers	The Constitution divides the government into three branches, each with different powers. The legislative branch makes laws. The executive branch administers and enforces laws. The judicial branch interprets laws.
How is abuse of power prevented?	Checks and balances	The government’s legislative, executive, and judicial branches work together. Each branch has powers that help limit or balance out the powers of the other branches. This system helps to keep any one branch from getting too powerful.
How is the nation governed?	Rule of law (also known as limited government)	The nation is ruled by laws, not by individual people or political parties. The Constitution is described as the supreme law of the land. No individual person or political party is above the law, and the government can only exercise powers that the Constitution gives it.
How is power shared between the federal government and the states?	Federalism	The federal, or national, government has the power to do things necessary to meet the needs of the nation as a whole. But states have the power to address regional and local needs.
How are personal freedoms protected?	Natural rights (also known as individual rights)	People have natural, or universal, rights that the government isn’t allowed to restrict. The Constitution includes a section called the Bill of Rights that protects rights such as the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

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PART I



Match each guiding principle with the description of how it impacts the U.S. government.

A. Popular sovereignty
D. Checks and balances

B. Rule of law
E. Federalism

C. Separation of powers
F. Natural rights

- D 1. Each branch of the government helps to ensure that the other branches don't become too powerful.
- B 2. The nation is governed by laws, not individual people or political parties.
- F 3. The first ten amendments ensure that the government does not violate individual rights such as freedom of speech or assembly.
- A 4. The people exercise their power by voting for elected officials to represent them.
- C 5. The legislative branch makes the laws, the executive branch enforces the laws, and the judicial branch interprets laws.
- E 6. Congress makes federal laws for the whole country, while state governments make laws for their individual regions.

PART II



1. The Framers chose these guiding principles to avoid issues that they had seen in other governments. Identify three issues they might have been trying to avoid. Explain your reasoning.

Answers will vary.

2. Choose a recent event or government decision you think relates to one of the guiding principles. What happened? What principle does it relate to, and how?

Answers will vary.
