

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION:

The Foundation of American Government

The Constitution is the document that created the present government of the United States. It was written in 1787 and went into effect in 1789. It establishes the three branches of the U.S. government, which are the executive (headed by the president), the legislative (the Congress), and the judicial (the Supreme Court and other federal courts). The first 10 amendments to the Constitution (the Bill of Rights) explain the basic rights of all American citizens.

You can find the constitution on-line at:

WEB SITE <http://www.nara.gov/eshell/characters/constitution/constmain.html>

The Preamble to the Constitution

The Constitution begins with a short statement called the Preamble. The Preamble states that the government of the United States was established by the people.

"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 Articles

The original Constitution contained seven articles. The first three articles of the Constitution establish the three branches of the U.S. government.

Article 1, Legislative Branch

Creates the Senate and House of Representatives and describes their functions and powers.

Article 2, Executive Branch

Creates the office of the President and the Electoral College and lists their powers and responsibilities.

Article 3, Judicial Branch

Creates the Supreme Court and gives Congress the power to create lower courts. The powers of the courts and certain crimes are defined.

Article 4, The States

Discusses the relationship of the states to one another and to the citizens. Defines the states' powers.

Article 5, Amending the Constitution

Describes how the Constitution can be amended (changed).

Article 6, Federal Law

Makes the Constitution the supreme law of the land over state laws and constitutions.

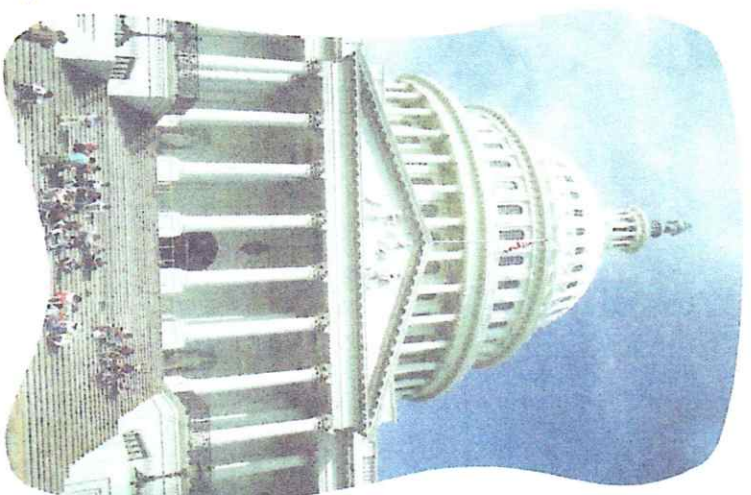
Article 7, Ratifying the Constitution

Establishes how to ratify (approve) the Constitution.

THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH: CONGRESS

The Congress of the United States is the legislative branch of the federal government. Congress's major responsibility is to pass the laws that govern the country and determine how money collected in taxes is spent. It is the president's responsibility to enforce the laws. Congress consists of two parts—the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The Capitol, where Congress meets ▶



THE SENATE

The Senate has 100 members, two from each state. The Constitution says that the Senate will have equal representation (the same number of representatives) from each state. Thus, small states have the same number of senators as large states. Senators are elected for six-year terms. There is no limit on the number of terms a senator can serve.

The Senate also has the responsibility of approving people the president appoints for certain jobs, for example, cabinet members and Supreme Court justices. The Senate must approve all treaties by at least a two-thirds vote. It also has the responsibility under the Constitution of putting on trial high-ranking federal officials who have been impeached (see next page) by the House of Representatives.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

The House of Representatives has 435 members. The number for each state depends on its population. But each state has at least one representative, no matter how small its population. The first House of Representatives in 1789 had 65 members. As the country's population grew, the number of representatives increased.

Since the 1910 census, however, the total membership has been kept at 435. After the results of Census 2000 has been added up, the number of representatives from each state may go up or down.

You can reach the Senate and the House on-line at:

WEB SITE <http://www.senate.gov>

<http://www.house.gov>