

Core Democratic Values

DOCUMENTS THAT SHAPE OUR DEMOCRACY

The Core Democratic Values are shaped by documents in our history. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights are briefly outlined here. These are cornerstones for our rights and freedoms.

Our Constitution

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.

You've just read the preamble, or opening statement, to the U.S. Constitution. This really long sentence is the part you read or hear most often. It's a statement by this country's founders explaining why a new type of government was being formed. The words you hear the most are "We the People." The Constitution starts that way because the founders wanted everyone to know that the ultimate power belongs to the people, not to the government.

Why do we have a constitution?

The United States has a constitution to protect freedom and to spell out how decisions will be made.

More than 200 years ago, leaders of the United States agreed that a constitution was needed for their new country.

What is a constitution?

A constitution is a statement of basic laws and principles.

The Constitution spells out an agreement, or contract, between the leaders who make decisions and the people they govern.

The contract describes what rules the two groups will follow when dealing with each other.

When the United States was new, it needed a constitution that would explain what the new government could and could not do. The people who wrote it were afraid of making the new government too powerful or too big. So they made sure decision-making would be shared by giving the president, the Congress and the courts different powers.

How is the power shared?

When the writers of the Constitution spelled out how the government would work, they put in writing a federal system with three branches of government.

The branches are the executive, legislative and judicial.

The executive branch is the president, who is elected by the people every four years. The president is also commander-in-chief of the U.S. military.

The legislative branch is the Congress, which is made up of people elected to make laws.

The judicial branch is the courts, which make legal decisions.

This three-part system allows for a leader who is chosen by the people, but the system keeps the leader from becoming too powerful.

What are the Articles of the Constitution?

The Constitution is made up of seven articles, or plans, which outline how the new government would work.

The articles spell out the rules. For example, articles 1 through 3 give the rules for the legislative branch, the executive branch and the judicial branch.

Article 5 allows for amendments, or changes, to the Constitution.

Check out the Constitution yourself. Every article is important because together, they set up the framework for how our government works today.

Did you know that the actual document is on display in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.? But you can also see it and read it online. Go to the National Archives and Records Administration's Web site, www.nara.gov.

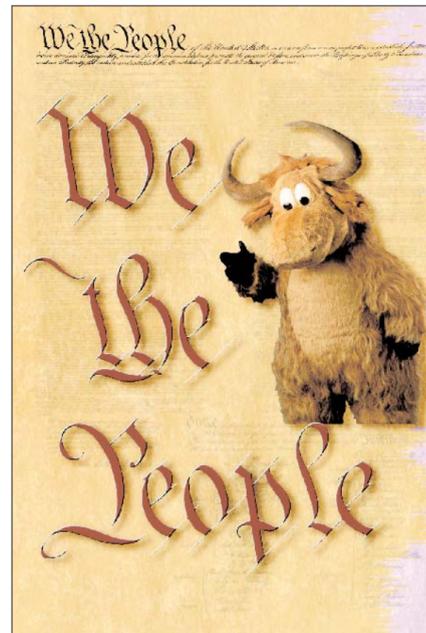


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KENT PHILLIPS

WE THE CHANGING PEOPLE

One of the things the Constitution spells out is a census, or count of the people. The Constitution says the government must conduct a count every 10 years so we know how many government representatives each state gets. Today states get one representative for every 600,000 or so people.

The first census was taken in 1790. That year, 3,929,200 people were counted. In the 2000 census, more than 261 million people were counted. The census showed that our population is more diverse than ever before. The latest census showed that Hispanic people are the fastest-growing group in the United States. There are also many more Asian Americans than before. To see how our country is changing, look at census results at www.census.gov.

By Janis Campbell and Cathy Collison

THE BIG 10: The Bill of Rights

OK, it's 1789 and the United States has a constitution that provides a great outline for how the new government will work. But not everyone is happy with the document. Some citizens of the new country don't think the U.S. Constitution does enough to protect people's rights.

Nine states have approved the Constitution, which makes it official, but four others are saying they will not ratify, or approve, it until they are promised more guarantees of individual rights.

That's why the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution. The Bill of Rights is what we call the first 10 amendments, or additions, to the Constitution. These amendments protect our rights and freedoms.

Some of our most important rights are protected in the First Amendment.

These rights include freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of the press.

When you give your opinion about an issue in a class discussion, you are exercising your right of freedom of speech.

If you go to a mosque, church or synagogue, you are using your right to freedom of religion. The United States was the first country to give its citizens the right of freedom of religion.

When you're reading Yak's Corner or other newspapers, you are enjoying the right to a free press. That means the press is allowed to publish stories and photographs without interference by the government.

What else is protected by the Bill of Rights?

✦ **Second Amendment:** This protects the right of citizens to bear arms, or own guns. There is a lot of controversy about gun control and Second Amendment rights today.

✦ **Third Amendment:** You don't hear much about this one today, but it was very important after the Revolutionary War. It states that the government cannot force people to turn over their homes to soldiers. (Great Britain made people do that during



PHOTOS BY ROMAIN BLANQUART

Sixth-grade students in Mary Ellen Caruso's class, Trisha Osborne, left, and Kelly Cameron wore some red and white for the class's red, white and blue day.

the Revolutionary War).

✦ **Fourth Amendment:** This states that police or government agents cannot enter your home for a search without a special court order called a warrant.

✦ **Fifth Amendment:** This amendment protects you if you ever go to court. It's very important.

First, it states that people are considered innocent of a crime even if they're accused. They must be proved guilty in court. Secondly, a person has the right to refuse to answer a question about his or her activities if it might hurt him or her.

✦ **Sixth Amendment:** Everyone has the right to a fast and public trial if accused of a crime, and everyone has the right to be represented by a lawyer.

✦ **Seventh Amendment:** Everyone has the right to a trial by jury.

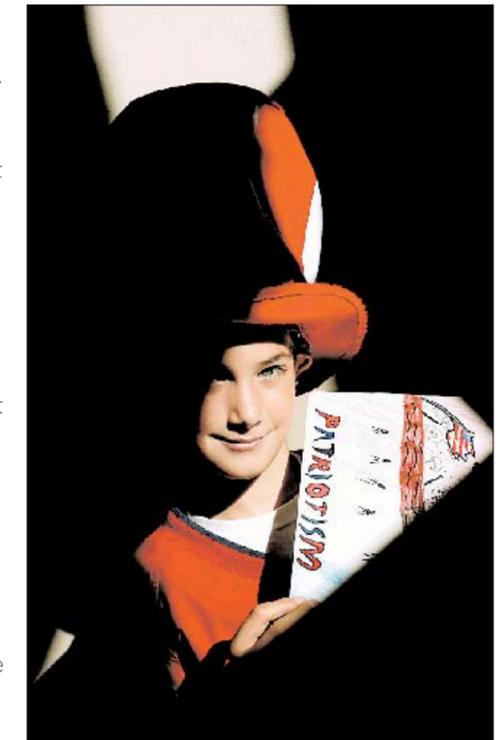
✦ **Eighth Amendment:** This protects the rights of people who are arrested. If they go to jail, they cannot be treated or punished cruelly.

✦ **Ninth and 10th Amendments:** These deal with individual and state rights. People have more rights than just the ones listed in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. And states have the power to offer additional rights and protections to their citizens beyond what is listed in the Bill of Rights.

✦ **And more amendments**

Since the Bill of Rights was drafted and accepted in 1791, seventeen more amendments have been made to the Constitution. The most important of these are the 13th Amendment, which ended slavery; the 19th Amendment, which allowed women to vote, and the 26th Amendment, which made the voting age 18. You can read the complete list of amendments in almanacs or history books, or online at www.legislate.com.

By Cathy Collison and Janis Campbell



Aaron Gouth, a sixth-grade student at Washington Elementary School in Wyandotte, holds a drawing representing his favorite democratic value: patriotism.