

THE PLAN FOR AMERICA

America is a big house.

As a country, the United States has many rooms, different floors, old wings and additions going off in new directions.

It is more than 230 years old, and its structure is admired throughout the world.

Like any house, the United States didn't just happen. It was designed with a thoughtful plan drawn up by the nation's founders.

That plan was the U.S. Constitution.

Adopted at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the Constitution was the blueprint for a nation.

It divided national power into three branches of government and established the idea of "checks and balances."

It dealt with the rights of individual states and the relationship of states to the national government.

It outlined what powers leaders should have and how they could be removed for abusing power.

It addressed issues that would be important years in the future such as copyrights and scientific discoveries.

And in its first 10 amendments—the Bill of Rights—it spelled out some of the most important freedoms Americans have.

In later amendments, it demonstrated that a powerful nation can—and should—make changes to address past wrongs.

The 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865 and the 15th Amendment gave people of all races the right to vote in 1870. The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote in 1920, and in 1971 the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age for all citizens to 18.

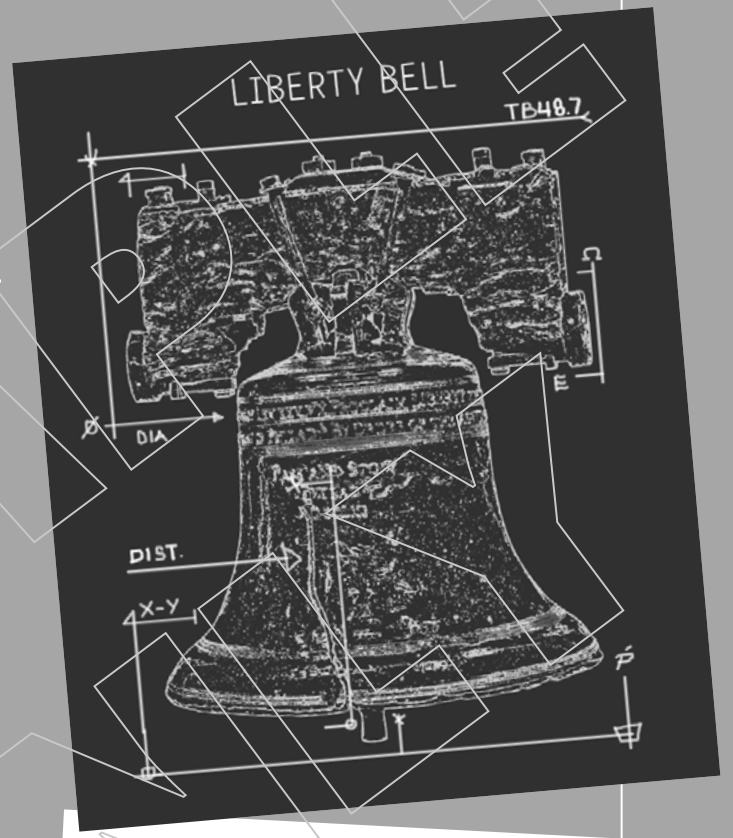
For more than 200 years this blueprint has kept America strong and made its system of government a model for the rest of the world.

It has demonstrated that the rule of law can carry a nation through crisis, war and times of change.

It has shown that balanced power and open debate can make a nation stronger.

And it has shown, most of all, what incredible architects the nation's founders were.

Their blueprint not only worked in their time, but in a future they could not have imagined.



Constitution Day

The U.S. Constitution was adopted by a convention of the nation's founders on September 17, 1787. That day is now observed as Constitution Day, and since 2004, a national law has required that schools teach about the Constitution as part of their classes that day.

This Newspaper in Education supplement has been created to explain the three branches of government set up by the Constitution and to explore the freedoms established in the Bill of Rights.

It also will show students how great a role the Constitution plays in their lives and the lives of their families. From Bill of Rights freedoms, to the actions of the courts and Congress, to the use of power by the President, the Constitution is a presence every day in the lives of Americans.

That has made the United States a great nation and has inspired other nations to seek greatness.

That is cause for celebration—today and every day.

CONSTITUTION FACT:

Since the U.S. Constitution was adopted, there have been a total of 27 amendments to change it.

THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

The Legislative Branch of the federal government is headed by the U.S. Congress, which consists of the 435-member U.S. House of Representatives and the 100-member U.S. Senate.

Under the Constitution, all federal legislative powers are held by Congress and laws must be passed by both the House and Senate to take effect.

Congress has the power to collect taxes, issue money, regulate commerce and declare war.

The Legislative Branch was created in Article I of the Constitution to be the voice of the people. The Legislative Branch gives voters from every state a say in national government through the elected members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.

Together, the House and Senate make up the U.S. Congress, which takes its name from a word that means "coming together."

Each branch of Congress has the power to propose new laws (the proposed laws are introduced for approval as bills). For any law to take effect, however, it must be approved by both the House and the Senate.

The Senate is in charge of approving or rejecting people that the President wants to make part of the Supreme Court, or add to his Cabinet. The Senate also approves treaties with other nations.

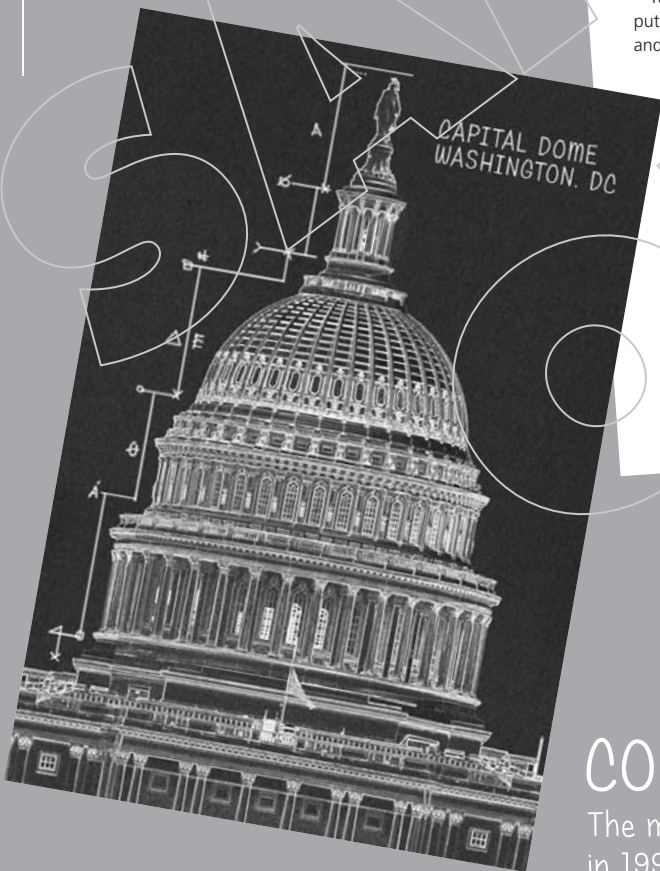
The House of Representatives has a unique responsibility. Only the House can make proposals for taxes to raise money to run the national government.

There are 100 senators in the Senate. Each state, no matter how big it is or how many residents it has, sends two senators who have been elected by the people of the state. Each Senator serves a term of six years, with one third of the Senate seats filled by voters every two years.

All 435 seats in the House of Representatives are up for election every two years, requiring that House members go back to the voters for approval if they want to continue in office.

The number of representatives that a state gets to elect is based on how many people live in the state, but each state elects at least one. For example, both Delaware and Montana elect one representative because both have small populations. California, which has more people than any other state, now elects 53.

Representatives and senators can be re-elected as many times as the people of their states want to put them in office. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina served in the Senate for more than 47 years, and John Conyers Jr. of Michigan has been serving in the House of Representatives for 42 years.



THE CONSTITUTION & YOU

Illegal downloading of music and movies is an issue that gets a lot of attention today. It's also an issue that involves a right guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Article I, Section 8 grants to authors, artists and inventors "the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries." This "copyright protection" is broken when people download music or movies from the Internet without paying for them. As a class, discuss what things students use most that are covered under copyright law. Should music and movies be covered when they can be so easily shared on the Internet?

NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY

The debate and actions of the U.S. Congress make news every day. Look through the newspaper and find a story about an issue or bill before either the House or Senate in Congress. Write a paragraph summarizing the important points of the bill or issue. Then write a paragraph giving your opinion on the issue or bill, and whether you would support it if you were a member of Congress.

CONSTITUTION FACT:

The most recent amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1992. This amendment regulates pay raises in Congress.



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