
Glossary

Amend

To alter, modify, rephrase, or add to or subtract from by formal procedure.
Article V of the Constitution allows us to change, or amend, the Constitution.

American Revolution

The war between Great Britain and its American colonies, 1775–83, by which the colonies won their independence.

Articles of Confederation

The first constitution of the 13 American states, adopted in 1781 and replaced in 1789 by the Constitution of the United States

Article V

Describes the process how the Constitution can be amended.

Article V.:

“The Congress, whenever two thirds of both Houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose Amendments to this Constitution, or, on the Application of the Legislatures of two thirds of the several States, shall call a Convention for proposing Amendments, which, in either Case, shall be valid to all Intents and Purposes, as Part of this Constitution, when ratified by the Legislatures of three fourths of the several States, or by Conventions in three fourths thereof, as the one or the other Mode of Ratification may be proposed by the Congress; Provided that no Amendment which may be made prior to the Year One thousand eight hundred and eight shall in any Manner affect the first and fourth Clauses in the Ninth Section of the first Article; and that no State, without its Consent, shall be deprived of its equal Suffrage in the Senate.”

Bill of Rights

A formal statement of the fundamental rights of the people of the United States, incorporated in the Constitution as Amendments 1–10, and in all state constitutions.

Federalism

A system of government in which power is divided between a national (federal) government and various regional governments. As defined by the United States Constitution, federalism is a fundamental aspect of American government, whereby the states are not merely regional representatives of the federal government, but are granted independent powers and responsibilities. With its own legislative branch, judicial branch, and executive branch states are empowered to pass, enforce, and interpret laws, provided they do not violate the Constitution.

The First Congress

The Congress of the United States established by the Constitution met for the first time at New York City’s Federal Hall on March 4, 1789. It is arguably the most important Congress in U.S. history. To this new legislature fell the responsibility of passing all the legislation needed to implement the new system, solving the difficult political questions left by the Constitutional Convention, setting up the rules and procedures of the House and Senate, and establishing the roles of its officers such as Speaker of the House and President of the Senate.

Incorporation

When the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, its protections of Americans' rights constrained only the Federal Government. State governments could still encroach on fundamental rights such as free speech or press. It was not until the 20th century that the Supreme Court began to interpret the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment to require that states also protect individual rights. Case by case over decades, the Supreme Court ruled that most of the Bill of Rights applied to the states—a process referred to as “incorporation.”

Joint Resolution

A resolution adopted by both branches of a bicameral legislative assembly and requiring the signature of the chief executive to become law.

Ratify

To confirm by expressing consent, approval, or formal sanction.

For constitutional amendments, after an amendment is proposed by Congress three-fourths of states need to approve or ratify it before it can be added to the Constitution.

Suffrage

The right to vote, especially in a political election. Five of the 27 amendments to the Constitution have expanded suffrage for citizens.

United States Constitution

The fundamental or organic law of the United States, framed in 1787 by the Constitutional Convention. It went into effect March 4, 1789.