



Chapter-in-Brief

Scan all headings, photographs, charts, and other visuals in the chapter before reading the section summaries below.

Section 1 The Six Basic Principles (pp. 55-59)

The Constitution of the United States is the "supreme law of the land," the nation's fundamental law. It is the framework on which the government is built. The Constitution does not describe in great detail how the government is to work. Rather, the Constitution sets out six basic principles that shape and guide its operations.

1. Popular sovereignty: The people are sovereign; they are the only source for the authority of government.
2. Limited government: Government is not all-powerful; it may do only those things the people have given it the power to do.
3. Separation of powers: Government's legislative, executive, and judicial powers are divided among three independent, coequal branches.
4. Checks and balances: The three branches are tied together through a complex system of checks (restraints) which each can use against the other.
5. Judicial review: The courts have the power to determine the constitutionality of governmental actions.
6. Federalism: The powers of government are distributed on a territorial basis, between the National Government and the several States.

Section 2 Formally Amending the Constitution (pp. 60-63)

Since 1787, when the Constitution was written, this nation's population has grown from about 4 million people to over 250 million. The nation was then 13 States stretched along the Atlantic seaboard; it now extends across the continent and

beyond. How has the Constitution survived such change?

One reason the Constitution has endured is that it contains a built-in mechanism by which it can be adjusted to meet the changing needs of the nation. This is the constitutional amendment process, which includes four formal methods of amending the Constitution. Each of these methods reflects the principle of federalism—amendments may be proposed at the national level, and they can be ratified only at the State level.

The process of amending the Constitution is not easy. More than 10,000 resolutions calling for amendments have been introduced over the years. Only 27 amendments have thus far been added to the Constitution. The first 10 amendments—the Bill of Rights—were all ratified at the same time, in 1791.

Section 3 Informal Amendment (pp. 65-67)

The Framers wrote much of the Constitution in brief, even outline-like terms. So, the real key to 200 years of constitutional change and development in the United States lies in the informal amendment process, the many changes that have been made in the Constitution but that have not involved changes in its written words.

An almost countless number of informal amendments have been added to the Constitution in five ways: (1) the passage of basic legislation by Congress, (2) actions taken by Presidents, (3) decisions of the Supreme Court, (4) the activities of political parties, and (5) custom.

These informal amendments are the product of the day-to-day, year-to-year experiences of government under the Constitution.