

1. American Government

What do you know about the American government?

1. Who was the first president of the USA?
2. What is the Constitution?
3. What are the three branches of the US government?
4. Who elects the president?
5. Who makes the laws in the USA?
6. How many senators are there in Congress?
7. What is the Bill of Rights?
8. How many Supreme Court justices are there?
9. In what year was the Constitution written?
10. Who is the commander-in-chief of the United States military?

2. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights

In 1776 the thirteen British colonies in America told that from now on they would be free and independent states. They decided that it was their right to choose their own form of government. The statement that governments should receive their powers only “from the consent of the governed” was a radical one at that time.

The former colonies, now “the United States of America” operated under an agreement called the Articles of Confederation from 1781. It was a loose agreement among the states that didn’t work well. In 1787 delegates from the states met in Philadelphia and wrote a completely new document, the Constitution. It was finished in the same year and officially adopted in 1789.

The Constitution divides the powers of the government into three separate branches: the Executive, headed by the president, the Legislative, which includes both houses of Congress (the Senate and the House of Representatives), and the Judicial, which is headed by the Supreme Court. The Constitution limits the role of each branch to prevent any one branch from gaining undue power. It is still the “supreme law of the land”.

The first ten Constitutional Amendments are called the Bill of Rights. These amendments came into effect in 1791. They assure individual rights and freedoms of all citizens, residents and visitors on United States territory. They guarantee the freedom of religion, speech, and the press, the people’s right to keep and bear arms, the right of peaceful assembly, the freedom to petition the government to correct wrongs. Other rights guard the citizens against unreasonable searches, arrests, and seizures of property, and established a system of justice guaranteeing orderly legal procedures, that means the right of trial by jury.

The ten amendments play a central role in American law and government and remain a fundamental symbol of the freedoms of the nation.

Bill of Rights

Amendment I

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Amendment II

A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

Amendment III

No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Amendment IV

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Amendment V

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the militia, when in actual service in time of war or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Amendment VI

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.

Amendment VII

In suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

Amendment VIII

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Amendment IX

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

Amendment X

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.

from:

<http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/constitution.billofrights.html>

Assignments.

1. Read the text carefully and look up the unknown words.
2. What is guaranteed in each of the ten amendments?
3. The Bill of Rights can be divided into three groups of amendments, depending upon whose rights they were designed to protect. Find the groups and explain what the amendments in each group have in common.