

# 10 Things You Didn't Know About the U.S. Constitution

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Visitors to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., took a quick peek at the [Declaration of Independence](#), the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. See [pictures of the American Revolution](#).

ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

When [Pearl Harbor](#) was attacked in 1941, plunging the United States into World War II, among the security measures taken was the transfer of a document from Washington, D.C., to Fort Knox, Ky. [source: [NCC](#)]. The original U.S. Constitution, all four oversized pages of it, were considered that important to the nation -- as precious, apparently, as all that [gold](#) bullion.

Its value is mostly symbolic, of course. There are countless copies, printed and digital, Americans can rely on should the original be lost. But the actual document, composed in a guarded room in just over three months, signed by the likes of George Washington and [Benjamin Franklin](#), is worth saving -- and celebrating.

On Sept. 17, we remember the document that Revolutionary War general and national assemblyman Marquis de Lafayette called "little short of a miracle" [source: [Constitution Facts](#)]. In this article, in recognition of the Constitution's enduring importance to the United States of America, we'll get to know it a little better.

Here, some bits of Constitution trivia you may not have learned in school, beginning with the very purpose of the Convention ...

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## **10. The Baby with the Bathwater**



The delegates who convened in 1787 weren't even planning on drafting a new constitution.

DOUGLAS GRUNDY/THREE LIONS/GETTY IMAGES

When delegates convened in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, it was not with the purpose of creating a new U.S. constitution. The intent was to make some changes to the existing constitution, known as the [Articles of Confederation](#).

When they began discussing the changes, though, they decided it would be best to just scratch the whole thing and start over.

Next: absentee Founders ...

## 9. There in Spirit

Though they're recognized as "Founding Fathers," John Adams and [Thomas Jefferson](#) did not attend the Constitutional Convention and never signed the document. Adams was U.S. Minister to Britain, and Jefferson was U.S. Minister to France.

Next: one who declined ...

## 8. Thanks, But, No.



Well, you can count on  
James Madison, at least.  
The eventual third  
President of the United  
States is, of course, also  
known as the Father of the  
Constitution.

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Patrick Henry, a prominent figure in the American Revolution ("Give me liberty, or give me [death](#)"), was offered a role in the drafting of the country's constitution, but he decided not to participate. He later explained, "I smelt a rat."

Statesmen George Mason, Elbridge Gerry and Edmund Randolph did attend the convention but were unhappy with the outcome. They decided not to sign the final document.

Next: length-wise ...

## 7. Claim to Fame

The Constitution of the United States is the shortest one in the world. The document drafted in 1787 totaled 4,400 words. The entire original document takes up four pages, each one measuring about 29 by 24 inches (73 by 60 centimeters).

With the signature section, there are 4,543 words, and including all of the amendments brings the total is 7,591.

Next: to err ...

## 6. Well, That's Embarrassing



The single "N" spelling of Pennsylvania even made it on the Liberty Bell.

FRANCESCO RUGGERI/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

By no means a perfect document, the U.S. Constitution contains multiple spellings errors. The most noteworthy of these errors is "Pennsylvania." A delegate from that state left out one of the N's when he signed. (This was not rare at the time; it's spelled that way on the Liberty Bell, too.)

In Article I, section 10, there's an even more embarrassing mistake: "No State shall ... lay any Imposts or Duties on Imports or Exports, except what may be absolutely necessary for executing **it's** inspection Laws."

Next: A framer's work is never done ...

## 5. That's Dedication



Three months cooped up in hose  
and waistcoats?

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During the entire 100 days it took to complete the U.S. Constitution, delegates took only 10 days off. Six days a week, for more than three months, they discussed, debated and voted all day in a hot, stuffy room.

With the windows closed, despite the summer heat, to help ensure secrecy, and delegates dressed in the heavy garments of the day, the chamber in which the Constitution was drafted most likely smelled something like a poorly ventilated locker room.

Next: what's missing ...

## 4. Glaring Omission



The Convention believed pure  
democracy was actually  
dangerous; you'll find no mention  
of it in the document.

ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

There is no mention of "democracy" in the Constitution. In fact, the United States of America isn't a true [democracy](#); it's a republic, which is how the framers intended it.

In a pure democracy, the people make decisions directly. In a republic, the people make decisions indirectly, via representatives. The men at the Convention believed pure democracy to be a dangerous form of government [source: [This Nation](#)].

Next: after all that hard work ...

### **3. This is What You Came Up With?**

The U.S. Constitution was not universally popular when it first went to the States for ratification. In Rhode Island, one vote turned out 237 for ratification, 2,945 against ratification. Rhode Islanders wanted greater state autonomy, favoring the weaker central government established in the Articles of Confederation.

Across the states, too, there was dissent. Some people believe the framers had no right to scrap the Articles of Confederation in favor of a brand-new document. Some felt the Constitution was incomplete without a Bill of Rights (which came later). Still others felt the delegates chosen as framers were not socioeconomically representative of the country of the whole.

Next: about [Thanksgiving](#) ...

### **2. A Day of Gratitude**



Before George Washington declared a holiday to give thanks,

people in New York celebrated the Constitution's ratification with a parade.

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[Thanksgiving](#) was originally made a national holiday with the intention of giving very specific thanks -- for the country's new constitution. President George Washington issued the proclamation in 1789, calling upon the people to acknowledge:

"... a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

Finally, staying power ...

## 1. Against All Odds, the College



Since its ratification, the Constitution has remained a trail-blazing, dynamic document.

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In the Constitutional Convention, delegates had to vote 60 times before the [Electoral College](#) system passed (the other possibilities on the table were legislative decision and popular vote). Its proponents felt it smarter, since they objected to national campaigning, to have the people elect experts who were very knowledgeable about the candidates, and then have those experts elect the [president](#).

Since the Constitution's ratification in 1788, there have been 500 propositions to eliminate the Electoral College system. To this day, it remains.

For better or worse, the United States still runs according to the trail-blazing, four-page document created in 1787. Some believe it should run exactly as that document says; others see the Constitution as more of a guiding framework. But very few think it should be thrown out altogether, and considering how long ago the document was drafted and the social and political changes that have come about since the 18th century, that's about as dramatic an endorsement of a government structure as one can hope for.

For more information on the U.S. Constitution and related topics, look over the links on the next page.

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› [People US Constitution Research](#)

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› [History US Constitution Research](#)

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› [Money US Constitution Research](#)

## **Lots More Information**

### **Related Articles**

- [American Dream Quiz](#)
- [How the American Dream Works](#)
- [How the U.S. President Works](#)

- How the U.S. Vice President Works
- How the Secretary of State Works
- How Presidential Memoirs Work
- How Presidential Pardons Work
- How Senate Confirmations Work
- How Supreme Court Appointments Work
- How the U.S. Postal Service Works
- How the Census Works
- How a Filibuster Works
- Does democracy work?
- Can a good government embrace both capitalism and socialism?

## More Great Links

- Constitution Facts: Quiz: Which Founding Father Are You?
- National Constitution Center: Constitution Day
- Teaching American History: Introduction to the Constitutional Convention

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