We the People Unit Descriptions

**Unit One: What Are the Philosophical and Historical Foundations of the American Political System?**

This unit provides an overview of some important philosophical ideas and historical events that influenced the writing of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It is particularly important to understand the content of this unit because it provides a frame of reference and a basis for understanding the other units in this text. You will appreciate why our history as a people has been a great adventure in ideas and in trying to make these ideas a reality

**Unit Two: How Did the Framers Create the Constitution?**

After declaring their independence from Great Britain, Americans had to decide how they would govern themselves. The Articles of Confederation, which were the first attempt to establish a national government, proved inadequate in the eyes of many leading citizens. Fifty-five men met in Philadelphia in 1787 and drafted the U.S. Constitution. These men became known as the Framers. The Constitution was not universally acclaimed, and its adoption and ratification provoked discussions of the most basic questions about political life and government institutions.

In this unit you will learn why the Articles of Confederation were replaced by the Constitution. You will learn why the Framers created the United States government as they did. And you will learn how the debates over the adoption of the Constitution raised issues that are debated to this day.

**Unit Three: How Has the Constitution Been Changed to Further the Ideals Contained in the Declaration of Independence?**

The Constitution of 1787 has been changed in several important ways. The Framers provided mechanisms for some of those changes, including a process for amending the Constitution. Other changes are not explicitly provided for in the text of the Constitution but have played a significant role in the constitutional system. The Civil War produced three amendments that transformed American federalism and moved the Constitution toward the ideals of equality contained in the Declaration of Independence.

In this unit you will learn how judicial review and political parties, neither described in the Constitution, affect American constitutionalism. You also will learn about the constitutional issues that helped cause the Civil War and how that war created what is often called a second American constitution. That transformation emphasized due process of law, equal protection of the laws, and expansion of the right to vote.

**Unit Four: How Have the Values and Principles Embodied in the Constitution Shaped American Institutions and Practices?**

The Constitution was a plan for the new national government. It described the organization of the national government in terms of its powers and limits. The Framers purposely wrote the Constitution as a general framework. They left out many details that they knew would need to be added in the future. They also knew that they needed to reconcile the tension between the national government and the state governments. Therefore they devised a new system called federalism.

In this unit you will learn how the three branches of the national government embody constitutional principles and how they operate. You also will learn how federalism remains a dynamic characteristic of American government.

**Unit Five: What Rights Does the Bill of Rights Protect?**

The Bill of Rights commonly refers to the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The Bill of Rights contains twenty-seven provisions that protect a variety of rights and freedoms. Originally the Bill of Rights protected individuals only from the misuse or abuse of power by the national government. Through the process of selective incorporation (see Lesson 18) the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that most of the rights in the Bill of Rights also protect individuals from the misuse or abuse of power by state governments.

A few provisions of the Bill of Rights no longer seem very important. The Third Amendment protection against the involuntary quartering of soldiers in civilian homes in time of peace is one example. Other provisions, such as First Amendment protection of freedom of expression and procedural protections of individuals in the Fourth and Fifth Amendments, have become more important since 1791, when they took effect.

A number of important rights also are included in the body of the Constitution and in constitutional amendments added after the Bill of Rights, as discussed in Lessons 15 and 17. Together, these rights sometimes have been called the "extended Bill of Rights."

After studying this unit, you should have a better understanding of why the rights contained in the body of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and subsequent amendments are so important to Americans, and why the interpretation and application of these rights often is controversial.

**Unit Six: What Challenges Might Face American Constitutional Democracy in the Twenty-first Century?**

The U.S. Constitution has proven to be remarkably resilient. It has survived more than two centuries because it has been able to accommodate massive transformations in American life, including the increasing diversity and size of the nation and a traumatic civil war. The constitutional system provides Americans many opportunities to participate in local, state, and national affairs. At home and abroad its principles and ideals have inspired people. In this, the twenty-first century, its resilience will continue to be tested.

In this unit you will learn about American citizenship and opportunities for participation in local, state, and national government. You also will learn how the American constitutional model has influenced other countries and international organizations. Finally, you will consider some challenges facing American constitutionalism in the future