

# Reviewing the Constitution's Big Ideas with Primary Sources

Center for Legislative Archives

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## Primary Source Set A:

### Constitutional Clause:

**We the People** of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Source: The Preamble of the Constitution of the United States

### Constitutional Concept:

**Popular Sovereignty:** In the Preamble, the Founders established a government of the people dedicated to pursuing justice, domestic tranquility, defense, the general welfare, and liberty. Domestic tranquility, meaning peace at home, and the general welfare, meaning well-being, are not everyday terms, but they and the other principles in the Preamble introduced a design for a just society free from tyranny. As the heirs to the Founders, Americans today inherit the ideals of the Preamble and the obligation to preserve them. The Preamble's assertion that government is based on the people makes it distinct from the Preamble to the Articles of Confederation which created a union of states.

### Description:

In one powerful sentence the Founders brought the United States, a government created by the people, a permanent union of the people of the several states committed to achieving the principles of justice, domestic tranquility, defense, general welfare, and liberty. Domestic tranquility, meaning peace at home, and general welfare, meaning well-being, are not common terms in today's world, but they and the other principles in the Preamble create a foundation for a peaceful, just society, where people are free from the threat of arbitrary power or tyranny. The preamble is what people today would refer to as a mission statement for America. As the heirs to the Founders, Americans today inherit the privileges it expresses as well as the obligation to preserve them for ourselves and our descendants. The Preamble's assertion that government is based on the people, makes it distinct from the Preamble to the Article of Confederation which created a union of states.

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## Primary Source Set A:

### Constitutional Clause:

No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law; and a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time.

Source: U.S. Constitution Article 1, Section 7, Clause 1

### Constitutional Concept:

**Limited Government:** The Founders believed that government was based on the consent of the governed. They wrote the Constitution to detail the powers the people had granted to the Federal government and to place limits on how the government could exercise its powers. The Founders insisted that the government's power to raise and spend tax money be kept under the control of the people. Therefore, the Constitution says that the only way the government can raise or spend money is if the people's representatives in Congress pass legislation granting the government the authority to do so.

### Description:

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## Primary Source Set A:

### Constitutional Clause:

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.

Source: Amendment 10 to the U.S. Constitution

### Constitutional Concept:

**Federalism:** A system of constitutional government in which power is divided into layers with several states on one level and an overarching federal government above them with authority balanced between the state and federal governments.

### Description:

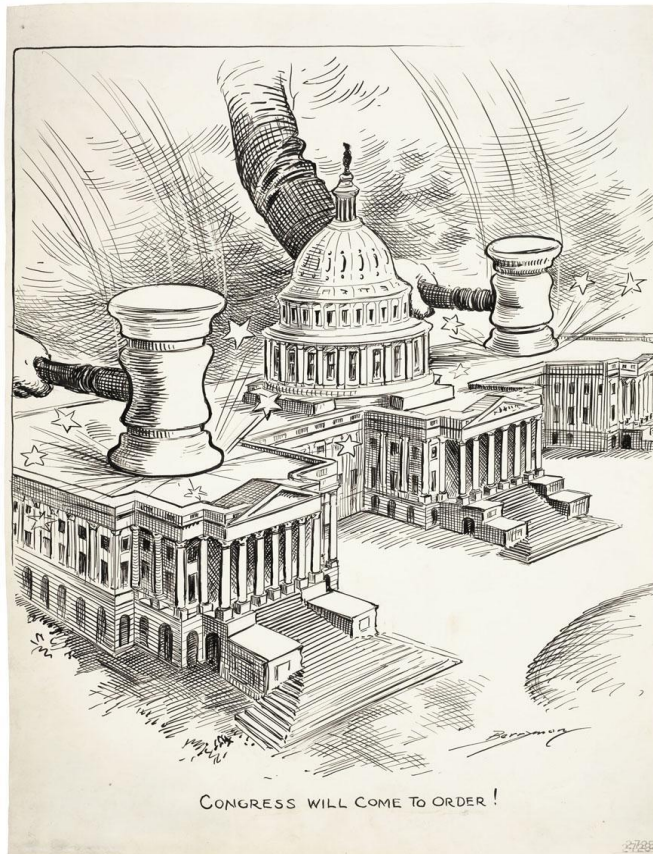
The Tenth Amendment, proposed in 1789, reflected the distribution of powers in a federal system composed of the separate state governments and the national government. It asserts that the powers not granted to the federal government, nor prohibited from the states, are reserved to the states or the people. This helps keep the power of the states separate from those of the Federal government.



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## Primary Source Set B:



Clifford Berryman, December 2, 1912 — [NAID 306178](#)

### Constitutional Concept:

**Republicanism:** A system of government in the United States based in the concept of popular sovereignty and put into practice by the constitutional institutions and processes of representative government.

### Description:

A new Congress convenes every two years when voters elect the entire House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate. The House and the Senate share legislative powers but have different rules and procedures. The House represents the people in their congressional districts, and the Senate represents them as residents of their states. As the representative branch of government, Congress taxes, decides how the government should spend public monies, keeps track of past spending, and serves as a public forum wherein all the great issues facing the nation are debated.

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Clifford Berryman, May 18, 1948 — [NAID 6012421](#)

## Constitutional Concept:

**Separation of Powers:** The Constitution keeps the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) separate. The powers and responsibilities of each is described in a separate Article. Separation makes each Branch the equal of the others.

## Description:

The constitutional design of the Federal Government requires that branches with different powers cooperate to complete many of the essential functions of government. Through checks and balances and separation of powers, the Constitution also gives each branch ways to protect its powers from the encroachment of other branches. In this cartoon, Congress is shown breaching the separation of powers and encroaching on the powers of the executive branch.

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Clifford Berryman, July 14, 1946 — [NAID 6012355](#)

## Constitutional Concept:

**Checks and Balances:** The Constitutionally granted power for one branch of government to block action by an equal branch of government. The Constitution specifies instances in which one of the three branches can stop action by another. Historical precedents have established other instances when a branch can check or balance other branches.

## Description

Veto power—derived from the Latin phrase “I forbid”—gives the President the authority to block legislation. This executive power over a legislative action is an example of a constitutional check by one branch upon the authority of another. The Founders designed the Constitution with multiple checks and balances to ensure that no one branch can independently exert control over the government.

[www.archives.gov/legislative/resources](http://www.archives.gov/legislative/resources)