

America at 250:

Celebrating Freedom, Confronting Inequities, and Reimagining Our Constitutional Legacy

In 2026, the United States commemorates 250 years since the Declaration of Independence boldly proclaimed that “all men are created equal” and endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Just eleven years later, in the summer of 1787, a group of visionary yet imperfect leaders gathered in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall to confront a failing government under the Articles of Confederation. Their solution was the United States Constitution—a new framework designed to unite a fragile young nation.

For nearly two and a half centuries, this remarkable document has guided America through wars, economic crises, territorial expansion, and profound social transformations. It established a republic grounded in principles of liberty, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and the rule of law. Its elegant structure has proven remarkably durable, allowing the nation to grow from thirteen states along the Atlantic coast into a continental and global power.

Yet the Constitution was written in an era marked by deep contradictions. While it spoke of freedom and republican ideals, millions of people remained enslaved, women were denied the right to vote or hold political office, Indigenous nations faced displacement, and full citizenship and political participation were reserved for a narrow segment of white male property owners. These realities were not accidental oversights, but deliberate compromises necessary to secure ratification among the states.

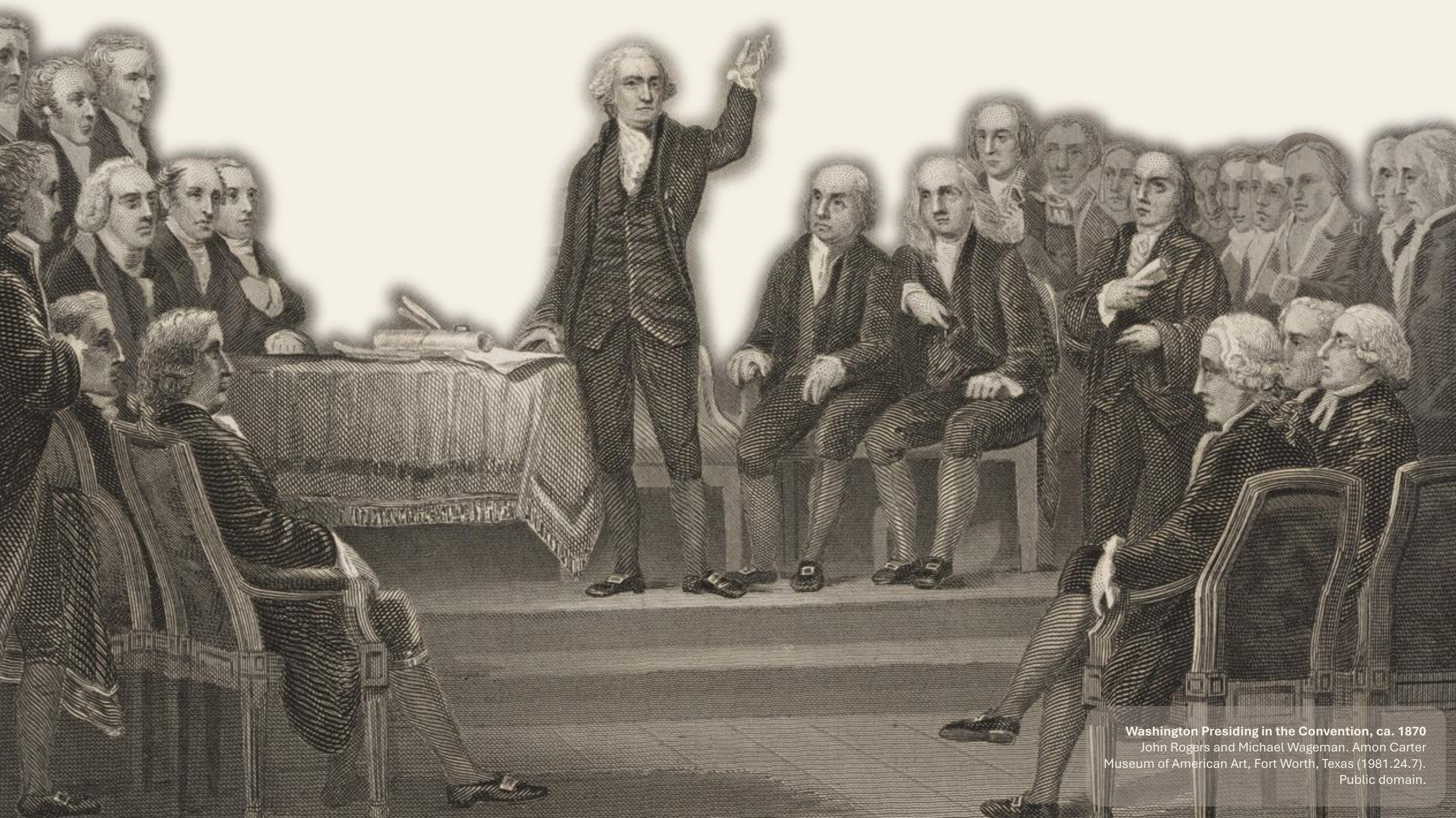
This exhibit invites you to celebrate the Constitution’s enduring genius, with its carefully designed adaptability, its promise of freedom, and its capacity for growth, while honestly confronting the inequities and exclusions woven into its original text. Most importantly, it tells the story of how generations of Americans, through persistence, protest, advocacy, litigation, and civic engagement, have used the very amendment process and democratic tools within the Constitution to challenge injustices, expand rights, and move closer to the Founders’ aspiration of a “more perfect Union.”

The Birth of a Constitution: A Bold Experiment in Self-Government

In the summer of 1787, 55 delegates met behind closed doors in Philadelphia's State House, now known as Independence Hall. They faced a growing crisis: the weak Articles of Confederation were failing, leaving the young nation fragmented and vulnerable. Out of their secret deliberations emerged a revolutionary document, the United States Constitution, that created a stronger national government while carefully protecting individual liberties through a system of checks and balances.

The Constitution introduced groundbreaking concepts. It established a written constitution as the supreme law of the land, created three separate branches of government to prevent any one from becoming tyrannical, and embraced federalism by dividing power between the national and state governments. Its stirring Preamble captured the vision and ambition of the era: "We the People of the United States... in Order to form a more perfect Union."

Above all, the Constitution was the product of hard-won compromise and bold vision. It has endured for more than two centuries not because it was a perfect blueprint, but because it was designed as a living framework capable of growth and adaptation through the amendment process.



Reimagining the Legacy: The Power to Amend and Evolve

One of the Constitution's greatest strengths is its built-in ability to adapt and improve over time. Article V establishes a clear, yet demanding amendment process designed to balance stability with the possibility of meaningful change. An amendment must first be proposed by a two-thirds vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, or by a constitutional convention called for by two-thirds of the state legislatures. It then must be ratified by three-fourths of the states. This high threshold makes amendments intentionally difficult to achieve. Hundreds of amendments have been introduced, but the process has only succeeded twenty-seven times since 1789.

Some of these amendments have been truly transformative. The Reconstruction Amendments (the 13th, 14th, and 15th) ratified between 1865 and 1870, struck at the heart of American inequality. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime. The 14th Amendment defined citizenship, guaranteed due process and equal protection under the law, and laid the foundation for many civil rights protections we rely on today. The 15th Amendment prohibited denying the right to vote on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Together, these changes sought to rebuild the nation after the Civil War and extend the promises of liberty to millions who had been denied them.

Decades later, the 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920 after generations of tireless activism by suffragists, finally guaranteed women the right to vote nationwide. Later amendments continued this pattern of expansion, addressing issues such as voting rights for younger Americans, presidential succession and disability, and protections against poll taxes that had long suppressed the voices of poor and minority citizens.

These amendments demonstrate how Americans have repeatedly confronted the gaps between the Constitution's ideals and the realities of daily life. Through protest, advocacy, lawsuits, grassroots organizing, and civic engagement, successive generations have worked to expand the circle of freedom and make the Constitution's promises more inclusive. The process of perfecting the Union remains ongoing. Today, Americans continue to debate questions of voting access, equal rights, fair representation, and what "liberty and justice for all" truly demands in a changing nation.



Woman Suffrage. Pickets at White House, 1917.
Harris & Ewing. Library of Congress LC-DIG-hec-08299.

Amendments To The Constitution

Bill of Rights

Ten Amendments

Proposed by Congress on September 25, 1789;
Fully ratified on December 15, 1791

1. Freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and right to petition the government.
2. Right to keep and bear arms.
3. No quartering of soldiers in private homes.
4. Protection against unreasonable searches and seizures.
5. Rights in criminal cases (grand jury, double jeopardy, self-incrimination, due process, just compensation).
6. Rights in criminal prosecutions (speedy trial, jury, confrontation, counsel).
7. Right to jury trial in civil cases.
8. No excessive bail, fines, or cruel and unusual punishment.
9. Rights not enumerated in Constitution are retained by the people.
10. The federal government possesses only those powers delegated to it through the Constitution, and that all other powers are reserved to the states, or to the people.

11th Amendment

Ratified February 7, 1795

Limits federal courts' jurisdiction over suits against states by citizens of another state or foreign citizens.

12th Amendment

Ratified June 15, 1804

Revises the Electoral College process for electing President and Vice President.

13th Amendment

Ratified December 6, 1865

Abolishes slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime.

14th Amendment

Ratified July 9, 1868

Defines citizenship, guarantees due process and equal protection under the law, and addresses post-Civil War issues like representation penalties for denying voting rights.

15th Amendment

Ratified February 3, 1870

Prohibits denying the right to vote based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

16th Amendment

Ratified February 3, 1913

Authorizes Congress to levy a federal income tax.

17th Amendment

Ratified April 8, 1913

Direct election of U.S. Senators by popular vote.

18th Amendment

Ratified January 16, 1919

Established nationwide Prohibition of alcohol manufacture, sale, and transportation.

19th Amendment

Ratified August 18, 1920

Grants women the right to vote.

20th Amendment

Ratified January 23, 1933

Moves the start of presidential and congressional terms to January 20 and January 3 and addresses presidential succession.

21st Amendment

Ratified December 5, 1933

Repeals the 18th Amendment, ending Prohibition.

22nd Amendment

Ratified February 27, 1951

Limits presidents to two elected terms.

23rd Amendment

Ratified March 29, 1961

Grants the District of Columbia electoral votes for President.

24th Amendment

Ratified January 23, 1964

Prohibits the revocation of voting rights based upon failure to pay taxes.

25th Amendment

Ratified February 10, 1967

Addresses presidential disability, succession, and filling vice presidential vacancies.

26th Amendment

Ratified July 1, 1971

Lowers the voting age to 18 in all elections.

27th Amendment

Ratified May 7, 1992
(originally proposed in 1789)

Prevents members of Congress from receiving a pay raise until after the next election.

Confronting the Inequities: A Document of Its Time

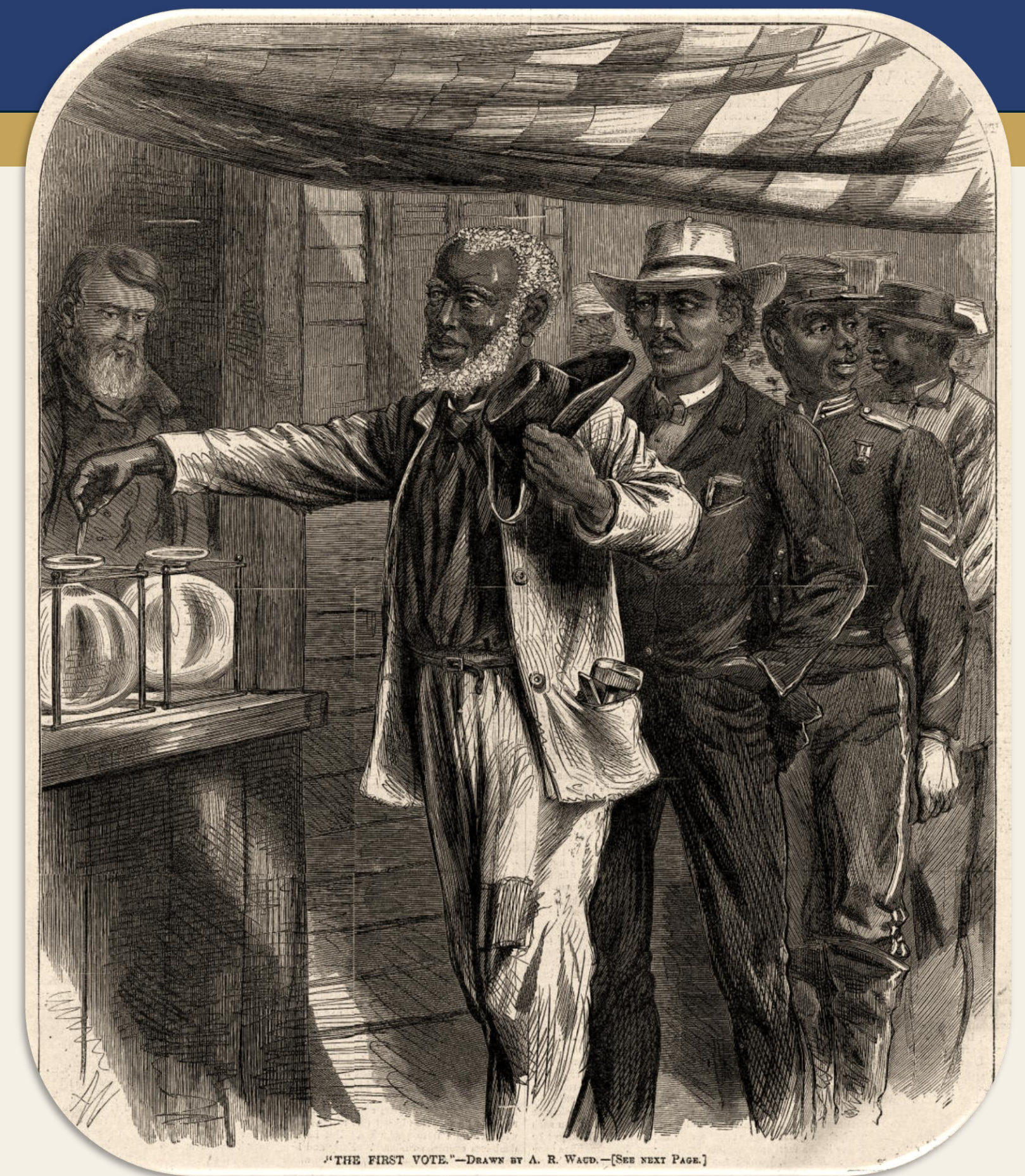
The Framers were brilliant political thinkers whose ideas still shape our world today, yet they were also products of their time: white men of the 18th century living in a society built on deep inequalities. While crafting a document designed to secure liberty and justice, they made serious compromises that protected and even entrenched profound inequities.

Slavery stood at the heart of these compromises. Although the words “slave” and “slavery” never appear in the original text, several key provisions gave strength and political power to slaveholding states. The Three-Fifths Clause counted each enslaved person as three-fifths of a free person for purposes of representation in Congress, boosting the influence of the South without granting rights to those held in bondage. The Fugitive Slave Clause required the return of escaped enslaved people even in free states, and the Constitution protected the international slave trade until at least 1808. These measures helped secure ratification but safeguarded the institution of human bondage for generations.

Voting and citizenship rights were left almost entirely to the states. In practice, this meant political participation was largely restricted to white male property owners. Women, free Black Americans, Indigenous peoples, and many others were systematically excluded from full citizenship and a meaningful political voice. The Constitution offered no national standard for suffrage, allowing these barriers to persist.

The document is also notably silent on the status of women, reflecting a society in which they possessed few independent legal rights. Married women had limited control over property or earnings, and no national right to vote would be secured until the 19th Amendment in 1920.

These exclusions and protections were not mere oversights. They were deliberate compromises, carefully negotiated to win support from enough states for ratification. The result was a Constitution that boldly promised liberty and a more perfect union—yet simultaneously denied those ideals to millions of people living within the nation’s borders.



The First Vote, 1867. Alfred R. Waud. Harper's Weekly.
Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-37947.



The story of the United States Constitution is ultimately not just about the document drafted in 1787, but about the countless Americans who refused to accept its original limitations. Through marches and protests, grassroots organizing, landmark litigation, legislative battles, and acts of profound courage, ordinary citizens and visionary leaders have worked across generations to make the Constitution's promises more inclusive and its protections more universal.

Freedom is not a gift automatically inherited from one generation to the next. It is continually earned, actively defended, and deliberately expanded through persistent effort and civic engagement. From the abolitionists who fought to end slavery, to the suffragists who secured the vote for women, to the civil rights activists who demanded equal protection under the law, each generation has taken up the challenge of closing the gap between the nation's founding ideals and the realities experienced by its people.

As we reflect on this living document in 2026 with the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we are reminded that the work of perfecting our Union remains unfinished. What inequities and exclusions will future generations look back on us and ask why we did not confront them? What rights will we help secure, and what barriers will we help tear down? The Constitution gives us the tools. The question is whether we, like those who came before us, will have the wisdom and the will to use them.

“If in the opinion of the People, the distribution or modification of the Constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this, in one instance, may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed.”

– George Washington’s Farewell Address, September 17, 1796



“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.”

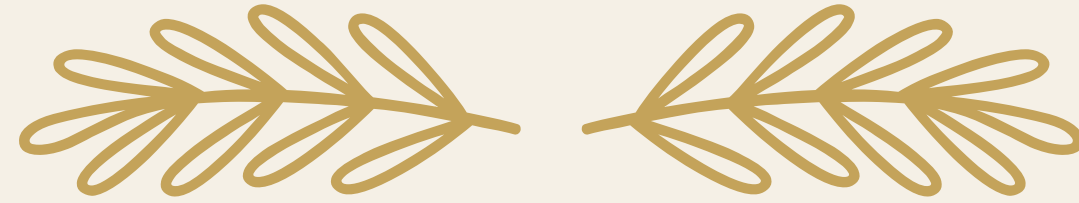
– Preamble to the U.S. Constitution,

1787



“...In the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”

– Abigail Adam’s letter to John Adams,
March 1776



“I do not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever "fixed" at the Philadelphia Convention. Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the framers particularly profound. To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation to attain the system of constitutional government, and its respect for the individual freedoms and human rights, that we hold as fundamental today ... "We the People" no longer enslave, but the credit does not belong to the framers. It belongs to those who refused to acquiesce in outdated notions of "liberty", "justice", and "equality", and who strived to better them.”

– Thurgood Marshall, 1987

“A constitution, as important as it is, will mean nothing unless the people are yearning for liberty and freedom.”

– Ruth Bader Ginsburg,
2012

“A prime part of the history of our Constitution is the story of the extension of constitutional rights to people once ignored or excluded.”

–Ruth Bader Ginsburg,
2016