

Explore More—State Constitutions

Directions: Listen to your teacher talk about how state constitutions that were established after 1776 embodied the ideals of the War for Independence and helped serve as models for the U.S. Constitution. Circle any words you don't understand. Underline or highlight important ideas in the text. Write notes in the margins to help you understand key points. Then answer the questions in your own words.

Why did states write their own constitutions?

During the War for Independence, the Continental Congress began to think about the future. What would happen after the war was over? To help prepare for the development of a new government and new laws, they asked each state to write its own constitution.

What was included in the state constitutions?

The Patriots agreed they did not want a powerful king running the country. They wanted people to have control over their own lives. This is why they wrote the Declaration of Independence and fought the War for Independence.

State constitutions divided the power between a state congress or assembly, a governor, and courts. This was the beginning of the separation of powers in American government. The state constitutions emphasized that no one part of the government should have too much power. Many state constitutions dealt with issues such as freedom of speech and religion, voting rights, education, and slavery. The discussions that evolved as these state constitutions were written were part of a new way of thinking about government.

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Did state constitutions have a bill of rights?

Yes, each state constitution also had a bill of rights. Virginia's bill of rights—which said all government power came from the people—became a model for many other states. Virginia's bill of rights also said that people were not to be taxed without their consent. In other words, no taxation without representation. Taxation without representation was one of the reasons why the colonists began to think about becoming independent from Great Britain.

What was done in state constitutions that hadn't been done before?

No nation had ever created a government that tried to guarantee freedom and equal opportunity for everyone in its written documents. There was no model. This was the beginning of America's experiment in government.

Did state constitutions serve as models for the United States Constitution?

Yes. The Continental Congress had established the Articles of Confederation, but everyone agreed it was too weak. Under the Articles of Confederation, there was one legislative body, and each state had one vote. However, the new government did not have a leader. The new government could not raise taxes. There was no court system and no way to enforce the laws. For these reasons, delegates from the states came together to write what is now the United States Constitution. Their experience writing and working with their state constitutions helped prepare the delegates to write the constitution for their new national government. ❖

YOUR TURN!

1. In what ways did state constitutions reflect the ideas of the colonists who were fighting for independence from Great Britain?

2. Research a state constitution written after 1776. Compare it to the U.S. Constitution on pages 416-423 of the historical anthology. List the similarities and differences between the state constitution you researched and the U.S. Constitution.

Similarities	Differences