The Constitution: The Foundation of a Nation

Level 3

Before there was a United States, colonists from other countries lived in America but were still ruled by their home countries. After a while, the people of the colonies of England felt the king was treating them badly, so they declared their independence and stopped following the English government. They had to fight a war to win the right to create their own government, but when they did, they knew they needed some foundation for the new government so that it never ended up just as bad as the one they were used to.

They wrote a set of laws that created the United States government and limited its power in order to protect the rights of the people. We call this the Constitution and we call the men who created it the Framers.

### Creating the Government.

These Framers wanted to make sure that the new government would make the best decisions for the people and not take advantage of the power to make laws. So, they created a three-branch government. Each branch has its own powers. This creates what we call checks and balances, which are supposed to keep any one branch of government from becoming too powerful. Let’s look at the three parts of government and the checks and balances as they relate to making laws.

The Legislative Branch is Congress, which is split into two parts: The House of Representatives and the Senate. Congress is where laws begin. The members of Congress write what they want to become laws, which are called bills, and then vote on them.

The Executive Branch includes the president and vice president. Once Congress passes a bill, the president must sign it before it becomes law.

The Judiciary Branch is the courts, including the Supreme Court. When someone thinks a law goes against the Constitution, the judges and justices of this branch study the law and the situation that lead to the case and decide if the law is good or bad for the rights of the people.

The Vice President is the president of the Senate and votes whenever there is a tie. The president can veto – or reject – any bill coming out of Congress, but if Congress holds another vote and passes it by a two-thirds majority, the bill becomes law anyway. The Justices of the Supreme Court and the judges of the lower federal courts are appointed by the president and confirmed by a vote in the Senate.

### The Rights of the People

The colonists who fought to be free from the king’s control believed that each person had certain rights, and that no government or other person should be able to interfere with those rights – at least not without a very good reason.

They were so worried that the government might find a way to get around the Constitution that some of them wanted more rights specifically protected. The Constitution can be changed, but it isn’t easy. The first ten amendments, which we call the Bill of Rights, added a list of people’s rights and limits on the power of the government to get involved in people’s lives. Most of the amendments to the Constitution are meant to expand freedom and protect rights – and that’s what the Framers hoped for all those years ago.