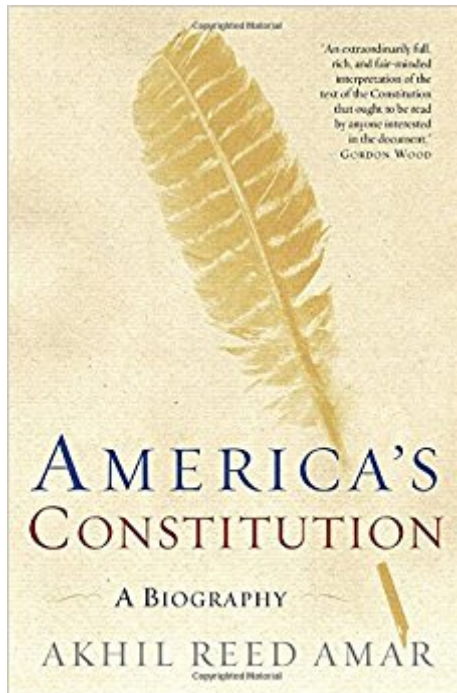


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America's Constitution: A Biography



Synopsis

In *America's Constitution*, one of this era's most accomplished constitutional law scholars, Akhil Reed Amar, gives the first comprehensive account of one of the world's great political texts. Incisive, entertaining, and occasionally controversial, this "biography" of America's framing document explains not only what the Constitution says but also why the Constitution says it. We all know this much: the Constitution is neither immutable nor perfect. Amar shows us how the story of this one relatively compact document reflects the story of America more generally. (For example, much of the Constitution, including the glorious-sounding "We the People," was lifted from existing American legal texts, including early state constitutions.) In short, the Constitution was as much a product of its environment as it was a product of its individual creators' inspired genius. Despite the Constitution's flaws, its role in guiding our republic has been nothing short of amazing. Skillfully placing the document in the context of late-eighteenth-century American politics, *America's Constitution* explains, for instance, whether there is anything in the Constitution that is unamendable; the reason America adopted an electoral college; why a president must be at least thirty-five years old; and why—for now, at least—only those citizens who were born under the American flag can become president. From his unique perspective, Amar also gives us unconventional wisdom about the Constitution and its significance throughout the nation's history. For one thing, we see that the Constitution has been far more democratic than is conventionally understood. Even though the document was drafted by white landholders, a remarkably large number of citizens (by the standards of 1787) were allowed to vote up or down on it, and the document's later amendments eventually extended the vote to virtually all Americans. We also learn that the Founders' Constitution was far more slavocratic than many would acknowledge: the "three fifths" clause gave the South extra political clout for every slave it owned or acquired. As a result, slaveholding Virginians held the presidency all but four of the Republic's first thirty-six years, and proslavery forces eventually came to dominate much of the federal government prior to Lincoln's election. Ambitious, even-handed, eminently accessible, and often surprising, *America's Constitution* is an indispensable work, bound to become a standard reference for any student of history and all citizens of the United States. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. You can read the U.S. Constitution, including its 27 amendments, in about a half-hour, but it takes decades of study to understand how this blueprint for our nation's government came into existence. Amar, a 20-year veteran of the Yale Law School faculty, has that understanding, steeped in the political history of the 1780s, when dissatisfaction with the Articles of Confederation led to a constitutional convention in Philadelphia, which produced a document of wonderful compression and balance creating an indissoluble union. Amar examines in turn each article of the Constitution, explaining how the framers drew on English models, existing state constitutions and other sources in structuring the three branches of the federal government and defining the relationship of the that government to the states. Amar takes on each of the amendments, from the original Bill of Rights to changes in the rules for presidential succession. The book squarely confronts America's involvement with slavery, which the original Constitution facilitated in ways the author carefully explains. Scholarly, reflective and brimming with ideas, this book is miles removed from an arid, academic exercise in textual analysis. Amar evokes the passions and tumult that marked the Constitution's birth and its subsequent revisions. Only rarely do you find a book that embodies scholarship at its most solid and invigorating; this is such a book. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Amar, a Yale Law School professor, approaches the Constitution with a perspective that is both

accessible and unconventional. He gets into the formative process of our most revered doctrine of governance by placing it in the context of law, history, and political science. Yet he broadens his focus beyond the Philadelphia constitutional convention to include popular conversation and competing values. Amar views America's foundation as a corporate merger, reflecting 13 colonies with different legal charters and interests. He raises central questions: Was the constitutional process democratic? Was it pro-slavery? He explores the context of the subsequent amendments, initially the Bill of Rights, then those associated with the Reconstruction era through the civil rights era. Amar dares to incorporate contemporary concerns around the amendments that have often prodded us toward achieving our otherwise unrealized ideals. There is a fluidity to Amar's analysis that contrasts with those strict constructionists and those with vested interests in the original intent of our Constitution, as if such ground were sacred. Vernon Ford

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As a non-lawyer I found this book fascinating and thought provoking. It provided me with an entirely new basis for thinking about our current legal environment and the issues of civil and political rights that are being threatened today.

The first of two brilliant profiles that illuminate the document that shocked the old world order and provided the road to freedom and fairness for all who live within its boundaries.

This is a very good introduction to the complex ideas underlying this short but so very significant document. I'm a political junky, so for those of you are not this book may be a solution for insomnia. If you care about the country and want to understand it's governing document, then this is a great start.

The author's scholarship and knowledge is very impressive. Takes an effort to make it through but a great book for a lay person like me to learn about constitutional history.

The state of our republic prompted me to repeat civics from grade school - they should never have eliminated civics - no wonder we are in such trauma now

Fascinating journey through the history of the US constitution. I am a lay reader with only general knowledge of the period and US constitutional history and found this book illuminating. The review

article by article and amendment by amendment might have been heavy, but the author manages to really bring the meaning and scope of the various articles to life and gives them their true historical significance and revolutionary nature. His detailed analysis of the impact that the compromises made to accomodate slavery had on the institutions and on the course of US history is truly revealing. Excellent!

For those of us who start out believing that our "forefathers" had a clear-eyed vision of the form and function of the US Government that would/should succeed the Articles of Confederation, this text is a cure!

Excellent clarity, fairly easy reading and a marvelous history lesson to boot. I purchased this book for an on-line course taught by the author. Read it carefully, cover to cover, along with the companion book "American's Unwritten Constitution". The author does an excellent job of taking you through how the document came to be in it's current form. The history of how the content came to be decided upon is something which should absolutely be taught in all of our schools. For all the folks who love to talk about their Constitutional rights and what their family members fought and died for, I would highly recommend a reading of this book so they have some clue as to what they're talking about.

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