

# To Preserve And Protect...

*By Sandra Day O'Connor*

SOME PEOPLE QUESTION WHETHER THE U.S. CONSTITUTION lives up to the needs of modern citizens. I think a fairer question is whether modern citizens—We, the People—are living up to the needs of our Constitution. Our government relies on good citizens. To be a good citizen, you need to know how our government works. And to do that, you need to know the Constitution.

We, the People, have room to improve. One poll from a few years ago tells us that less than half of Americans can name the three branches of government—yet three-quarters can name each of the Three Stooges. These days not many Americans are even inspired to take a closer look. In another poll 57% of Americans admit to having little to no confidence in Congress.

Even as trust in government and other institutions plummets, the good news is that many Americans continue to look to the Constitution (not Moe, Larry, and Curly) for answers. Doing so brings us back to our roots, to the enduring principles and ideals that animated our nation's founding. Now, as we celebrate the 225th anniversary of the Constitution, it is time to rediscover and deepen our understanding of those principles.

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As we reflect on the triumph of the Constitutional Convention, we recognize that today—much like in the summer of 1787—reasonable minds can disagree on some major principles. Indeed, sometimes it seems that the Constitution is wielded more often as a sword than as a solution in increasingly partisan debates over issues. But it is a testament to the enduring nature of our founding document that it inspires the passion of people in the Tea Party as well as in Occupy Wall Street. As we strive to sustain our tradition of freedom and confront the challenges of our day, all of us should recommit ourselves to the Constitution and to the active citizenship that makes our Constitution and government work.

What makes the Constitution worthy of our commitment? First and foremost, the answer is our freedom. It is, quite simply, the most powerful vision of human freedom ever expressed. It's also the world's shortest and oldest national constitution, neither so rigid as to be stifling, nor so malleable as to be devoid of meaning.

Our Constitution has been an inspiration that changed the trajectory of world history for the perpetual benefit of mankind. In 1787, no country in the world had ever allowed its citizens to select their own form of government, much less to select a democratic government. What was revolutionary when it was written, and what continues to inspire the world today, is that the Constitution put governance in the hands of the people. Today, 225 years later, more than half the nations on earth are democratic.

Visit the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia—just steps away from Independence Hall, where the Constitution was drafted—and watch the reactions of visitors, especially children, to the stirring

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images of immigrants becoming American citizens in naturalization ceremonies. It could hardly be more clear how much our newest citizens value that which many Americans now take for granted: our freedom, our American ideals, our Constitution.

It is exactly our tendency to take our freedoms and our Constitution for granted that spurs the greatest challenge facing our democracy to-

day: a near-failure of civic education. Virtually all the Founding Fathers recognized that democracy depends on a well-informed public. James Madison, one of the principal architects of the Constitution, put it this way: "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. ...A people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

Today, 40 state constitutions tout the importance of civic knowledge, and 13—some predating our national constitution—cite civic education as the primary purpose of schools. It is hard to disagree that we are failing in this civic mission of schools when more than two-thirds of American students perform below proficiency in the U.S. Department of Education's national civics assessment, and less than 20% of twelfth graders can explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

We should be particularly concerned that the decline in civic education is undermining Americans' understanding of and faith in our courts and the judicial process. In a 2006 survey commissioned by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, four in ten Americans believe that the president may constitutionally ignore a Supreme Court ruling. We are increasingly seeing citizens attacking judges for their rulings. We hear calls for an elected judiciary and for the impeachment or removal of judges. But when American citizens perceive judges as politicians in robes, rather than unbiased arbiters of the law, we risk losing the independence of our judiciary, which is a cornerstone of our Constitution and of our freedom.

Nevertheless, there are seeds of solutions. Even as the civics and social studies classes that many readers of this book remember have become anachronisms along with chalkboards and instructional filmstrips, new media solutions for informing and engaging students are emerging. In 2009 I founded iCivics ([www.icivics.org](http://www.icivics.org)), a free, online civics curriculum for middle school and high school students that uses online role-playing games, videos, social networking, and other activities to engage students on a pathway to lifelong civic participation. And for those of you who are my age and shuddering at the idea of teaching constitutional principles

on Facebook, remember that the principle "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," was one of the practical rules of compromise used in crafting and ratifying the Constitution itself.

There is a direct correlation between civic knowledge and what the political philosopher William A. Galston has called "political participation, expression of democratic values including toleration, stable political attitudes, and adoption of enlightened self-interest." Teachers and parents—who are the first and best civics teachers, because they teach by example—should make it clear to children: Civics isn't just important, it is empowering. Beyond the classroom, each of us has the opportunity to engage in the American experiment of democracy. We can start with ourselves and our families. We can vote, we can write to our representatives, we can volunteer in our community. We can push for stronger civic education in our schools. We can read books—like this one—to develop and deepen our own understanding of the Constitution. When the president takes the oath of office, he swears to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

We, the People, can and must do the same.