Constitutional Timeline

1775: American Revolutionary War Begins
January 10, 1776: Thomas Paine publishes Common Sense
July 2, 1776: Delegates to second Continental Congress vote for independence
July 4, 1776: Congress issues Declaration of Independence
November 15, 1777: Congress proposes Articles of Confederation
March 1, 1780: Pennsylvania adopts gradual emancipation law
March 2, 1780: each state begins to write its own constitution
March 1, 1781: Articles of Confederation Ratified
October 19, 1781: British surrender @ Yorktown
July 8, 1783: Massachusetts Supreme Court declares slavery unconstitutional in Commonwealth v. Jennison
September 3, 1783: Treaty of Paris officially ends Revolutionary War
January 8, 1784: Connecticut legislature approves gradual emancipation plan.
February 23, 1784: Rhode Island passes gradual emancipation law.
January 16, 1786: Freedom of Religion becomes law in Virginia
August 29, 1786: Shay’s Rebellion breaks out in Massachusetts
September 14, 1786: delegates in Annapolis say the Articles need to be fixed
February 21, 1787: Congress endorses the call for a Philadelphia convention to fix the Articles of Confederation
May 29, 1787: Edmund Randolph proposes Virginia plan
June 15, 1787: William Peterson proposes New Jersey plan
June 19, 1787: Roger Sherman’s Great Compromise creates dispute between large and small states on the issue of representation in Congress
July 13, 1787: Northwest Ordinance allows settlement in the western territory beyond the 13 original colonies
July 16, 1787: Dispute over representation between large and small states settled
August 24, 1787: The nation starts to address the dilemma of slavery
September 12, 1787: Delegates debate inclusion of Bill of Rights
September 17, 1787: Delegates sign final draft of Constitution
November 20, 1787: Federalist Papers promote ratification of the Constitution and are published in New York papers
December 7, 1787: Delaware becomes the first state to ratify the Constitution.
December 12, 1787: Pennsylvania ratifies the Constitution
June 21, 1788: Constitution takes effect when New Hampshire is the 9th state to ratify.
February 4, 1789: Meeting in New York City, electoral college unanimously elects George Washington president
September 24, 1789: Judiciary Act organizes federal court system
September 25, 1789: Bill of Rights added to the Constitution
February 2, 1790: Supreme Court holds first session
July 10, 1790: Congressional act locates future seat of government in District of Columbia
March 3, 1791: Congress begins to put Constitution’s principles into practice
December 12, 1791: Congress charters first bank of the U.S.
December 15, 1791: states ratify the first ten constitutional amendments, known as the Bill of Rights
February 17, 1795: 11th Amendment, limiting federal power of the courts, ratified
March 4, 1797: John Adams inaugurated as president
July 6, 1798: Congress passes Alien Act, allowing dangerous aliens expelled by president’s discretion
July 14, 1798: Congress passes Sedition Act, limiting freedom of press and speech
February 17, 1801: Thomas Jefferson becomes president
February 24, 1803: Marbury v. Madison confirms Supreme Court’s power
May 2, 1803: Louisiana Purchase made for $15 million
June 15, 1804: 12th Amendment ratified, requiring separate election of the president and vice president
January 1, 1808: Congress abolishes African slave trade.
March 4, 1809: James Madison inaugurated as president
June 18, 1812: U.S. declares war on Britain
August 24, 1814: British capture Washington, D.C. setting fire to White House, Capitol, and most Department buildings.
March 4, 1815: Treaty of Ghent formally ends the War of 1812
April 10, 1816: Congress charters 2nd Bank of the U.S.
March 2, 1819: Congress passes first immigration law in U.S. history
March 3, 1820: Missouri Compromise, declares 12 slaves states and the other 12 free
December 2, 1823: Monroe Doctrine warns European nations not to interfere in American continents
February 12, 1825: Creek Indians sign treaty with U.S., agreeing to turn over land and move west.
May 28, 1830: Congress passes Indian Removal Act, setting aside land in Oklahoma for eastern tribes.
December 21, 1830: Georgia extends into lands secured to Cherokee by federal treaty
November 24, 1832: South Carolina nullifies Tariff Acts of 1828 and 1832
January 16, 1833: Congress passes Force Act of 1833, enforcing federal laws against nullification
May 13, 1846: U.S. declares war with Mexico
August 8, 1846: Huge Congressional debate whether acquired land from Mexican war has slavery or not
July 20, 1848: Seneca Falls Convention calls for equal civil and political rights for women.
September 20, 1850: Compromise of 1850 temporarily settles issue of slavery in territories
May 30, 1854: Kansas-Nebraska Act applies popular sovereignty in Louisiana Purchase Territory north of the Missouri Compromise line.
May 21, 1856: Bleeding Kansas---dispute over slavery in new territories leave issues for Congress to resolve.
March 6, 1857: Dred Scott decision states that now Black American man, slave or free, was a U.S. citizen, and cannot sue the courts, or have any constitutional right.
December 20, 1860: South Carolina is the first state to leave the Union.
April 12, 1861: Attack on Fort Sumter starts the Civil War
April 22, 1862: President Lincoln suspends writ of habeas corpus along Washington and Philadelphia route—followed by other limitations of the Constitution. Lincoln first acts and later asks approval from Congress
January 1, 1863: Lincoln delivers Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the Southern states
November 19, 1863: Lincoln delivers Gettysburg Address, stating we are a unified nation, even before the Constitution, and not just a collection of states
April 9, 1865: The Civil War ends and the South surrenders
December 6, 1865: The states ratify the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery in the U.S.
December 24, 1865: Ku Klux Klan formed in Pulaski, Tennessee by Confederate veterans.
April 9, 1866: Congress passes Civil Rights Act of 1866,
June 13, 1866: States ratify 14th Amendment, granting former slaves citizenship and promising “equal protection of the laws”
December 10, 1869: Wyoming Territory extends voting rights to women.
February 3, 1870: 15th Amendment ratified, guarantees the right to vote regardless of race.
March 3, 1871: Indian Appropriation Act declares all Native American treaties void and makes all Indians wards of the federal government
April 20, 1871: Congress passes Ku Klux Klan Act, allowing the president to impose martial law when southern governments violate civil rights
November 18, 1872: Susan B. Anthony arrested in NY, for attempting to vote in the presidential election
April 14, 1873: In the Slaughterhouse Cases, Supreme Court rejects the view that 14th Amendment applies to the Bill of Rights of the states.
February 23, 1875: Jim Crow laws start in Tennessee
January 22, 1882: John D. Rockefeller establishes Standard Oil
May 6, 1882: Congress passes Chinese Exclusion Act, banning Chinese immigration for 10 years.
January 16, 1883: Congress passes Pendleton Reform Act, establishing permanent Civil Service Commission
May 10, 1885: Supreme Court in Yick Wo v. Hopkins, rules that aliens are protected under the 14th Amendment
May 10, 1886: Supreme Court rules in decision that a corporation is considered a person under the 14th Amendment
July 2, 1890: the National American Women’s Suffrage Association forms to promote the right of women to vote
February 23, 1903: Congress upholds congressional power to bar lottery tickets from interstate commerce in Champion v. Ames
June 29, 1906: Hepburn Act extends powers of Interstate Commerce Commission
June 30, 1906: Congress passes the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act
February 12, 1909: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded
February 24, 1909: Muller v. Oregon allows states to limit women’s working hours to protect women’s health and physical structure. This hinders the women’s rights movement since a similar law for limiting men’s hours was overturned because it violated the right to work

February 3, 1913: States ratify the 16th Amendment, allowing for a federal income tax

April 8, 1913: States ratify the 17th Amendment, allowing for the direct election of senators

December 23, 1913: Congress creates Federal Reserve Board to regulate banking

1914: Margaret Sanger indicted for advertising birth-control information and devices

November 9, 1916: Jeannette Rankin becomes the first woman elected to Congress

April 6, 1917: U.S. enters World War I

June 15, 1918: Congress passes Espionage Act

October 1, 1917: Roger Baldwin founds the National Civil Liberties Bureau, precursor to American Civil Liberties Union

May 16, 1918: Congress passes Sedition Act to suppress wartime dissent

June 3, 1918: Supreme Court in Hammer v. Dagenhart, declares federal Child Labor Act unconstitutional invasion of states’ rights

January 16, 1919: States ratify the 18th Amendment, prohibiting the sale, manufacture, and transportation of liquor.

March 3, 1919: Supreme Court in Schenck v. U.S. sustains convictions of war protesters adopting “clear and present danger” test

August 18, 1920: States ratify 19th Amendment, granting women suffrage throughout America

April 9, 1923: Supreme Court rules minimum wage laws for women unconstitutional in Adkins v. Children’s Hospital.

December 10, 1923: The Equal Rights Amendment, written by Alice Paul, is introduced to Congress

June 8, 1925: Supreme Court applies First Amendment to states in Gillow v. New York

March 4, 1931: Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated as president

January 23, 1933: Ratification of the 20th Amendment changes inauguration date of presidents form March to January

May 17, 1933: Congres passes National Industrial Recovery Act, creating the National Recovery Administration (NRA)

June 16, 1933: Hundred Days Congress passes its last New Deal measure

December 5, 1933: States ratify 21st Amendment, repealing the 18th Amendment, ends prohibition

June 6, 1934: Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) created

July 5, 1935: National Labor Relations Act is enacted, protecting workers rights to organize unions and bargain collectively

August 14, 1935: Congress passes Social Security Act, establishing pensions for persons aged 65 and older

January 6, 1936: Supreme Court in U.S. v. Butler, rules the Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional

March 29, 1937: Supreme Court sustains constitutionality of minimum wage legislation in West Coast Hotel v. Parrish
April 12, 1937: Supreme Court in NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Co., upholds constitutionality of National Labor Relations Act

June 25, 1938: Fair Labor Standards Act establishes minimum wage and forty-hour workweek for many workers

April 25, 1940: Supreme Court, in the first flag-salute case, upholds constitutionality of mandatory flag salutes in public schools

July 15, 1940: FDR seeks an unprecedented third presidential term

December 8, 1940: Following attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. enters World War II

June 22, 1944: Congress passes G.I. Bill, establishing programs to secure housing and education for veterans

August 14, 1945: World War II ends

October 18, 1945: Nuremberg War Crime Trials begin; military and political leaders of Nazi Germany prosecuted for crimes against humanity

July 25, 1947: Congress passes National Security Act

May 3, 1948: Supreme Court in Shelley v. Kraemer, rules unenforceable restrictive covenants denying blacks access to housing in white neighborhoods

July 26, 1948: Truman ends segregation in the military

April 4, 1949: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) founded

February 9, 1950: Investigations are made of Communists and Communist sympathizers in the government

June 27, 1950: Without securing formal congressional approval, President Truman sends U.S. troops to Korea as part of United Nations police action

February 27, 1951: Ratification of the 22nd Amendment limits presidents to two terms.

June 4, 1951: Supreme Court, in Dennis v. U.S., sustains leading communists’ convictions under Smith Act of 1940

April 8, 1952: President Truman seizes control of steel industry to avert strike during Korean War

February 27, 1953: Korean War ends

December 5, 1955: Rosa Parks spurred Civil Rights movement by refusing to give up her seat to a white bus rider

September 24: 1957: President Eisenhower enforces federal-court desegregation order, sending federal troops to Little Rock, AR, to escort 9 black children to school

March 29, 1961: Ratification of 23rd Amendment extends voting rights in presidential elections to District of Columbia residents

March 26, 1962: Supreme Court rules that federal courts can decide reapportionment cases in Baker v. Carr

June 26, 1962: The Supreme Court bans New York State school prayer in violation of First Amendment

March 18, 1963: Supreme Court rules persons accused of felonies must be provided lawyers in Gideon v. Wainwright

August 28, 1963: demonstration in Washington, D.C., where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers “I have a Dream” speech.

January 23, 1964: States ratify 24th Amendment, prohibiting poll taxes in federal elections

August 7, 1964: Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, allowing the President to take all necessary steps to protect U.S. forces in Southeast Asia.
December 14, 1964: Supreme Court sustains constitutionality of 1964 Civil Rights Act in Heart of Atlanta Motel v. U.S.
March 7, 1965: Selma-Montgomery March increases pressure for national legislation to secure voting rights
June 7, 1965: Supreme Court declares for first time a constitutional right to marital privacy in Griswold v. Connecticut
August 9, 1965: Congress passes Voting Rights Act
March 24, 1966: In Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections, the Supreme Court stopped states and local districts from imposing a poll tax on any election
February 10, 1967: States ratify 25th Amendment, modifying presidential succession
June 12, 1967: Supreme Court in Loving v. Virginia, strikes down prohibitions against interracial marriage as a 14th Amendment violation
April 20, 1971: Supreme Court in Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education upholds use of busing to end state-imposed school segregation
July 1, 1971: The 26th Amendment is ratified, standardizing the voting age to 18.
November 22, 1971: Supreme Court rules in Reed v. Reed, for the first time that laws discriminating against women violate 14th Amendment
March 22, 1972: Congress sends Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) barring discrimination based on sex to states for ratification
January 22, 1973: The Supreme Court overturns state prohibition of abortions in Roe v. Wade
March 29, 1973: U.S. withdraws combat troops from Vietnam
November 7, 1973: Congress reasserts its role with the War Powers Act
June 30, 1982: Equal Rights Amendment fails, having fallen three states short of 38 needed for ratification
June 30, 1986: Supreme Court rules that laws criminalizing homosexual conduct are constitutional in Bowers v. Hardwick.
November 13, 1987: Iran-Contra affair tests the system of checks and balances
May 7, 1992: States ratify 27th Amendment, limiting congressional pay raises
June 29, 1992: Supreme Court refuses to overrule its controversial Roe v. Wade abortion decision in Planned Parenthood v. Casey
May 22, 1995: Supreme Court strikes down state laws limiting congressional terms
February 12, 1997: Proposed constitutional amendment to limit congressional terms fails in House of Representatives
March 4, 1997: Proposed constitutional amendment requiring balanced budget fails in Senate
June 20, 2002: Supreme Court in Atkins v. Virginia, rules unconstitutional executions of mentally retarded criminals
June 23, 2003: Supreme Court upholds affirmative action in college admission
June 26, 2003: Supreme Court strikes down Texas law criminalizing homosexual conduct
June 27, 2006: United States Senate votes down by one vote a flag desecration amendment
July 18, 2006: U.S. House of Representatives votes down the Federal Marriage Amendment that would limit marriage in the U.S. to unions of one man and one woman

October 1, 2008: The U.S. Senate passed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, also known as a bailout of the U.S. financial system, creating a $700 billion Troubled Assets Relief Program to purchase failing bank assets.


November 2008: Voters in California pass Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage in the state through an amendment to the state constitution