

More than just waging a war of independence, American revolutionaries took a great leap of faith and established a new government based on the sovereignty of the people. It was truly a radical idea that entrusted the power of the nation not in a monarchy, but in its citizens. Each generation since continues to question how to form “a more perfect union” around this radical idea.

### Section 1: The Great Leap

“The Great Leap” introduces visitors to the context and main controversies behind America’s democratic system. It poses central questions such as: What were the principles and events that inspired the writers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? Just how revolutionary was our new democracy led by the people? And who would be included as “the people?” How would they make their voices heard?

- **The World They Inherited:** Before revolution, Britons on both sides of the Atlantic believed that governing power resided with elites. It was a world of strict social hierarchy where aristocrats and wealthy gentlemen were above ‘common people.’ In this world, only men who owned enough property could vote on representatives. Common people had very limited ways in which they could participate in government, such as petitioning and demonstrations.
- **Grievances:** When Parliament enacted laws that were unpopular with colonists and sent troops to keep them under control, Americans began to stand up and voiced their belief that government was only legitimate when it represented the people.
- **Revolution:** By 1776, many Americans were no longer loyal to King George III or identified solely as Britons. They decided to make a great leap to a new idea: they could do without monarchy and aristocracy. Through boycotts, declaring independence, debates, critical essays, and armed resistance, the people made their voices heard.
- **Creating the Constitution:** After the challenges of war, came the challenge of establishing a new government. While delegates to the Constitutional Convention agreed to have a central government with federal government officials to be elected to represent the people. But questions remained if they could pull the growing nation together. Who would have the right to vote? Would the states ratify, reject, or amend the document that would become our U.S. Constitution? What place did African Americans, women, and Native Americans have in this new nation? Play the interactive game “Join the Debate,” to learn how the founders disagreed about who would participate in our democracy.

### Section 2: A Vote, A Voice

We have a diverse body of voters today, but not every American has had the right to vote. When America was founded, voters made up a small fraction of the population. The founders only saw a world where propertied men voted on behalf of everyone else. Over the years, those who were shut out of the polls showed their desire to be heard. The fight for fair representation and a voice at the polls brought struggle and changes to our country since our founding.

- **Gaining the Vote:** Voting rights have changed dramatically over our history as we confronted issues of race, class, wealth, and politics. With each new group who could

vote, there came new ideas about what it meant to have a government 'by the people.' While some saw expanding the vote as a way to strengthen America, others saw this as a threat to their control.

- **Sometimes It Takes an Amendment:** Constitutional amendments were passed to protect voting rights and reject discrimination based on race or gender and to expand the voting age.
- **Demanding the Vote:** By the late 1800s and into the 1900s, more Americans who were not male, white, or at least 21 years old began to demand the ballot. African Americans faced racial prejudice, poll taxes, and violent intimidation. They marched and demonstrated, showing that voting rights are civil rights. Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans also organized to fight for their rights at the polls.
- **Keeping the Vote:** As more Americans won the right to vote, efforts had to be made to keep that right accessible. Some officials worked to make voting easier for Americans such as physical access for the disabled and establishing a Voter Bills of Rights. Officials, politicians, and concerned citizens alike called for people to register and get out the vote. Listen to the reasons others choose to get out and vote through a video created in partnership with the History Channel. Why do you vote? Participate in an interactive by dropping a coin in the answer that best fits why you vote. See what other visitors have to say!
- **The Push and Pull of Voting Regulations:** Accessibility to voting continues to expand and contract. While some states work to make registration easier and extend voting times, others have adopted stricter ID laws, literacy tests, and reduced early voting opportunities.

### **Section 3: The Machinery of Democracy**

We participate in the political system through state and national parties, nomination conventions, and stumping for our candidate of choice. These informal institutions and activities that are not specified in the Constitution are nevertheless all a part of the machinery that keeps democracy running. It all comes down to getting people to go out and vote.

- **Popular Images and Party Symbols:** American political parties began to form in the 1780s and have been with us ever since. Visual icons become symbols for expressing points of view and identifying political parties. The most famous of these symbols are the donkey and elephant. However, symbols and political imagery can also be used to mask complex policy positions.
- **Campaigning:** Political campaigns of the 1800s were often spectacles meant to drum up support and show partisan strength. Torchlight parades with fireworks and colorful catalogs filled with pin-back buttons, clothes, and lanterns for sale could help mobilize voters. Today, candidates turn to radio jingles, television spots, and internet advertisements to get their message out in front and in your home.
- **Voting, 1789 to Present:** States employ different methods of collecting and counting votes. America is a patchwork of manual, mechanical, and electronic balloting. When it comes to electing our president, Article II of the Constitution established the Electoral College, with each state having a number of electors equal to its number of senators and representatives. In most states, the candidate who gets the most popular votes wins the Electoral College votes although this hasn't always been the case.

## Section 4: Beyond the Ballot

Americans of every ethnicity, class, and state share the revolutionary spirit of rising up and speaking out. The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees this right to peaceably assemble and petition the government.

- **Petitioning:** Whether on traditional paper forms or electronic mailings, adding your name to a petition is an effective way to shape political discourse and to let your representatives hear from you. In the early days of the Republic, mass petitioning gave the disenfranchised a means to voice grievances and have an active role in the direction of their country.
- **Petitioning with Your Feet:** Carrying signs, singing songs, or shouting from a podium – all of these demonstrations allow Americans to take part in the democratic process. People have the right to peaceably assemble before the government and demand to be heard. Explore some historic protests through the “Petitioning with Your Feet” poster interactive.
- **Lobbying:** Lobbying often has negative connotations, but there was positive as well as negative forms of lobbying. Just like petitioning, lobbying is a direct action meant to influence our representatives. Trinkets, knick-knacks, and literature from individuals and powerful corporations often abound in the offices of representatives. Meeting face-to-face with government officials can lead to positive changes.
- **Deceit and Corruption:** There is always the possibility that not everyone is listened equally in this democracy. Money, scandal, and power can combine to turn lobbying into negative and unfair influence for powerful individuals and corporations willing to practice fraud and dishonesty. Take a listen to an audio box of news clips of infamous lobbyists.

## Section 5: Creating Citizens

What does it mean to be a citizen? What are the rights and responsibilities of American citizens? These are basic questions that our founders left unanswered. Future generations have been facing these questions ever since. What does being a citizen mean to you?

- **Defining Citizenship:** Who can be called an “American?” There has long been a tension between those who welcome immigrants to America and those who worry immigrants change the “character” of the nation. Laws have either affirmed the ideals of “E pluribus unum (Out of many, one)” or have directly contradicted them and sought to restrict certain groups of people from entering America.
- **Do We Need a Shared National Identity?:** Holidays, national heroes, and popular imagery like Uncle Sam helped to forge an American identity after independence. Whether part truth or myth, these stories created a shared ideal of citizenship. But which beliefs and values would be represented? Whose stories and voices would be told to future generations in our schools?
- **How Diverse Should the Citizenry Be?:** How will this diverse nation form a character? Three distinct views take a stand on this issue: 1) Multiculturalism, 2) a melting pot of assimilation, 3) or outright discrimination and exclusivity.
- **The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens:** With citizenship comes responsibility – the need for citizens to step up and fulfill some basic roles within society for the betterment of all. Some responsibilities include: taking the census, young men registering for Selective Service, paying taxes, and participating on a jury if called. In addition to these responsibilities, citizens claim certain rights, including: right to bear arms, right to an education, right to a job, a right to health care, and equal protection for all under the law. Of course, these rights and responsibilities have not been without controversy.

**Interactive Story Kiosk:**

A touchscreen computer will feature video, audio, and photographic resources gathered through MoMS' Stories from Main Street programs. Selected stories will highlight rural Americans' reflections upon their engagement in their communities and the democratic process.

**American Experiments Traveling Trunk**

Go beyond the exhibition with the "American Experiments" traveling trunk, a collection of activities

designed to engage visitors inside the museum as well as students in the classroom. Thought-provoking and fun, "American Experiments" includes activities that will tie in themes from the exhibition. A "Head-to-Head" challenge asks visitors to select their choice for the American who changed the nation the most or the most "American" food. Leave your opinion of "I believe good citizens should..." with a "My Fellow Citizens" photo opportunity. Finally, see where you stand in comparison to others in a voting game posing such questions as "Should it be mandatory to vote?" and would you "join a protest even if most people I know disagreed with my viewpoint." "American Experiments" is just one example of the many rich programming opportunities *Voices and Votes* opens up for communities.