

## **Success of the Constitution**

*Digital History*

### **Why has the Constitution survived?**

At the end of the Constitutional Convention, George Washington said, "I do not expect the Constitution to last for more than 20 years." Today, the United States has the oldest written constitution in the world. Why has the Constitution survived?

The framers of the Constitution established the broad structure of government but also left the system flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions. A document of less than 6,000 words, the Constitution is not overly detailed. Over the years, Congresses, presidents, and the courts have reinterpreted the document to meet the needs of the moment.

### **How has the constitutional system changed?**

When the Constitution was ratified, the states were dominant. Since then, the national government has gradually become dominant. When George Washington became president, he had just five cabinet officers: Secretaries of state, war, and treasury, an attorney general, and a post-master general. Since then, the presidency has accumulated more and more authority. Today, there are 14 executive departments and 2.7 million civilian federal employees.

The framers of the Constitution expected Congress to be the dominant branch of government. In the early years of the republic, presidential candidates were usually nominated by a caucus system centered in the House of Representatives. Today, Congress is less inclined to initiate policy than to let the president set the legislative agenda. Today, Congress has about 290 committees and subcommittees. More than 10,000 people work for the 535 members of Congress.

Especially in the 20th century, the Supreme Court has become a powerful vehicle for making public policy as it interprets the law.

Political parties, which are not mentioned in the Constitution, would become an integral part of the American political system. They remain the means through which political officeholders are nominated and elected.