

Name _____ Date _____

WHAT IS A CONSTITUTION?

<https://nnigovernance.arizona.edu/tribal-constitutions>



Written or unwritten, a **constitution** is the basic principles and laws of a nation, state, or social group that determine the powers and duties of the government and guarantee certain rights to the people in it. Most constitutions address such topics as: Who are we as a people? Where are we from? What do we value? How do we make decisions? Who has authority over what? What kinds of relationships do we expect to have with each other, with outsiders, and with the world around us? How do we choose our leaders? How do we deal with disagreements or disputes among us? How do we organize to get things done?

Constitutions matter because they tell citizens of the nation how things should be done. They matter because they are a tool for governance, a window on the nation's beliefs, a way to inform citizens of their own responsibilities, and a way to tell them what to expect of their leaders. Without a constitution, a set of

shared rules, community action becomes chaotic. No one is certain who has the authority to make decisions or how the community should begin those decisions. Disagreements don't get resolved because the rules for resolving them aren't clear. Those who interact with the nation don't know what to expect. But just like in your classroom, if the rules are clear, then everyone knows how the system works. They know what to expect. They know what the nation values and how it is likely to act.

Some have argued that constitutions can be found even in the non-human world. According to Ngarrindjeri elder, "Wolves have a constitution. The wolf pack has rules. Each wolf knows its role and respects the rules. That makes the pack effective. When they follow the rules, the system works." Does that make sense to you?



The governments of Native nations, like those of other nations, take many forms. Across the United States and in some other parts of the world, growing numbers of Native nations are moving to declare their sovereignty (self-governing power). They are reclaiming the right to make decisions for themselves on their lands. This often involves improving existing constitutions or creating new constitutions.

Check for Understanding

1. According to the text, a constitution is the basic recommendations of a _____, _____, or _____ group that determine the powers and duties of the government and guarantee certain rights to the people in it.

2-1. What topics do most constitutions address?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) _____
- e) _____
- f) _____
- g) _____
- h) _____
- i) _____

11. Why do constitutions matter?

- a) They tell the government how things should be done.
- b) They tell citizens of the nation how things should be done.
- c) They tell citizens how much taxes they will pay.
- d) They tell the government how much taxes they will receive.

12. What rules would you put in a constitution? Why?
