



What Does the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution Mean?

Background

The Preamble was created at the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787 and was intended to introduce the Constitution and explain its purpose. However, the United States has changed dramatically since 1787. Women, free blacks, or men without property were not permitted to serve as delegates at the Convention. The founder's society was small and basically agrarian. Today, our country extends across the continent; we are no longer a nation of farmers; and our population is close to 300 million. Furthermore, all citizens regardless of sex, race, or class are constitutionally guaranteed the exercise of their citizenship rights. As our country has changed, our interpretation of phrases contained in the Preamble has also changed, necessitating a reevaluation of the values it expresses.

Objectives

Students will:

- Compare and contrast the language in preambles to two state constitutions
- Analyze the preambles in order to identify common themes and differences
- Identify underlying values in the preambles of state constitutions
- Compare state preambles with the preamble of the U.S. Constitution
- Draft a new preamble for the U.S. Constitution, and provide rationales for the ideas, rights, and values it espouses
- Discuss the process of amending the U.S. Constitution

Target Group: Secondary

Time Needed: 2-4 class periods

Materials: Handout 1, State Constitution Preambles; and Handout 2, U.S. Constitution Preamble.

Procedures

Part One: Analyzing State Constitutions

Break students into small groups. Assign each group the task of comparing and analyzing the preambles of two or three state constitutions.

Ask students create a chart outlining/noting which preambles

- Refer to liberties or rights. What are those liberties or rights?
- Set out the goals of the state's Constitution. What are the goals? (For example, a goal outlined in the Hawaii Preamble is to preserve quality of life.)
- Mention God or a divine creator. What words are used to describe the divinity figure?



- Describe beliefs. What are those beliefs? (For example, the Hawaii Preamble refers to a belief in government of the people, and the Illinois Constitution is based on the supposition that government should eliminate poverty and inequality.)

Please note, that there may be some overlap. For example, students may decide that the state's goal is to provide for the health of its citizens and that its belief system includes the idea that government should provide for the health and welfare of all citizens.

Reconvene the class. Go around to each group in turn and ask them to share findings on commonalities, differences in concepts and principles, and rights for each state Preamble until answers have been exhausted. Point out differences that may have been missed. Capture responses on the board.

Ask students to identify the underlying values expressed in these state constitution preambles. (A value is a belief, principal, philosophy, or ideal—such as ending poverty--that person holds in high regard. There are different types of values: personal, cultural, work-related, social, organizational, religious, and constitutional.)

Part Two: Comparison with the U.S. Constitution

Next, ask student to read the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution. Brainstorm omissions from the federal Constitution Preamble as compared to those of the states. Capture those responses in a separate area on the board. What similarities exist between the state preambles and the federal preamble? Is anything markedly absent from the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution? (For example, the federal preamble does not mention equality.)

Part Three: Writing a new preamble for the U.S. Constitution

Ask students to return to their small groups. Ask each group to rewrite the federal Preamble, choosing principles, ideas, rights, and concepts to highlight in their new Constitution. Students should identify rationales for the principles, ideas, rights, and concepts included in their preambles, and keep track of them on a separate sheet of paper. After they write their preambles, ask them to return to their rationales. Ask them to identify the value underlying their rationales.

Bring the class back together to read their preambles aloud and deliver reports about their rationales and the underlying values.

After each preamble is read, ask for a show of hands rating it on a basis of 1-3 (1= adequate, 2= good, 3= superior). Note responses. Which preambles were ranked higher than others, and why?



Part Four: The Amendment Process

Conclude by asking students to consider the endurance and continuing relevance of the U.S. Constitution today and, in particular, the amendment process, which allows for the expansion of rights. Ask the students, given that the amendment process allows for expansion of rights and the incorporation of contemporary constitutional values, do you think it's necessary to revise the federal Preamble? Why?

This lesson was developed by Hilary Glazer and Michelle Parrini.



Handout 1

STATE CONSTITUTIONS PREAMBLES

West Virginia Constitution Preamble

"Since through Divine Providence we enjoy the blessings of civil, political and religious liberty, we, the people of West Virginia, in and through the provisions of this Constitution, reaffirm our faith in and constant reliance upon God and seek diligently to promote, preserve and perpetuate good government in the state of West Virginia for the common welfare, freedom and security of ourselves and our posterity."

West Virginia adopted its First Constitution in 1863, when it became the 35th state in the Union. The state is now governed by its Second Constitution (1872).

Hawaii Constitution Preamble

We, the people of Hawaii, grateful for Divine Guidance, and mindful of our Hawaiian heritage and uniqueness as an island State, dedicate our efforts to fulfill the philosophy decreed by the Hawaii State motto, "Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono." ["The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness."]

We reserve the right to control our destiny, to nurture the integrity of our people and culture, and to preserve the quality of life that we desire.

We reaffirm our belief in a government of the people, by the people and for the people, and with an understanding and compassionate heart toward all the peoples of the earth, do hereby ordain and establish this constitution for the State of Hawaii.

The Hawaii Constitution was adopted at the election held on November 7, 1950, and was amended at the election held on June 27, 1959. As so amended, it was accepted, ratified, and confirmed by Congress by the Act of March 18, 1959. It went into effect on August 21, 1959, upon the issuance of a presidential proclamation admitting the state of Hawaii into the Union.

The Constitution has since been amended a number of times in accordance with proposals adopted by the legislature or by constitutional convention and ratified by the people.



Handout 1, page 2

STATE CONSTITUTIONS PREAMBLES

Illinois Constitution Preamble

We, the People of the State of Illinois - grateful to Almighty God for the civil, political and religious liberty which He has permitted us to enjoy and seeking His blessing upon our endeavors - in order to provide for the health, safety and welfare of the people; maintain a representative and orderly government; eliminate poverty and inequality; assure legal, social and economic justice; provide opportunity for the fullest development of the individual; insure domestic tranquility; provide for the common defense; and secure the blessings of freedom and liberty to ourselves and our posterity - do ordain and establish this Constitution for the State of Illinois.

Illinois had adopted four constitutions. The first Constitution was adopted in 1818. The second, third, and fourth were adopted in 1848, 1870, and 1970.

Delaware Constitution Preamble

Through Divine goodness, all people have by nature the rights of worshiping and serving their Creator according to the dictates of their consciences, of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring and protecting reputation and property, and in general of obtaining objects suitable to their condition, without injury by one to another; and as these rights are essential to their welfare, for due exercise thereof, power is inherent in them; and therefore all just authority in the institutions of political society is derived from the people, and established with their consent, to advance their happiness; and they may for this end, as circumstances require, from time to time, alter their Constitution of government.

Delaware has adopted four constitutions; in 1776, 1792, 1831, and 1887.



Handout 2

U.S. CONSTITUTION PREAMBLE

U.S. Constitution Preamble

We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

*Adopted by the Constitutional Convention, September 17, 1787
Ratified June 21, 1788*