

State Constitutions I

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First in A Series

Fifty laboratories experimenting in the science of government.

Collectively they comprise the United States of America.

Separately no two are exactly alike.

Their constitutions spell out the differences.

Each state has a constitution, a body of fundamental law established to provide a set of governmental machinery to protect citizens from unfair and improper use of governmental authority.

A written constitution is a sacred document. It represents the structure for a well-ordered society. It offers mankind an opportunity for both nobility of spirit and a chance to gain power.

Holders of public office--from lowly village constables to the "strongest" governors--take oaths to protect and defend the constitution of their state. However, state constitutions have been subjected to severe criticism and many unkind words have been written and spoken concerning them.

"Our constitution was written for a different era and a different civilization," is a typical comment.

"Constitutions of the states are their greatest shame," one writer has declared. "They bear no more resemblance to a constitution than a garbage dump does to a park."

"The kind of tooth powder the citizens" should use was said to be the only thing left out of one state constitution.

"What are the differences in the constitutions under which the people of the 50 states govern and are governed?

Every state has the right to make and unmake its own constitution at will, providing it does not run counter to any provisions in the Constitution of the United States. This means no state can coin money, establish a postal service, take private property for public use without just compensation, or maintain other than a government subject to popular control.

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About 1,139,000 words have been used in writing the 50 state constitutions now in force. If tied together, the documents would fill more than 2,000 large book-size pages. The volume would cover subjects ranging from A to Z--from Age to Zoning.

For constitutions in one state or another, to mention a few of the subjects, deal with age of consent, bigamy, lotteries, taxes, elections, methods of removal from public office, court procedures, methods of amending constitutions, veto powers of the governor, the rights of women and zoning regulations.

Louisiana isn't the largest or most populous state, but her constitution is the mostest by far. It contains 217,000 words. On the other hand, Vermont's constitution has only about 5,700 words, Connecticut's 6,197 and Rhode Island's, ~~6,650~~ 6,650. Washington's has 27,500.

South Carolina's is the only state constitution listing 14 as the age of consent for unmarried females. Only in California's do grape vines rate special mention. There grape vines under three years old are to be tax exempt.

Florida's provides that in case of invasion or violent epidemic, the legislature may adjourn from the capitol to another location. It specifies, however, that all other departments of state government must be removed to the same place.

Only in Mississippi's does a constitution provide that no person can bequeath more than one-third of an estate to charitable, religious, educational, or civic institutions if that person leaves a spouse or child or descendent of the child.

Under constitutions of Florida, New York and Wisconsin, a person making or interested in a bet or wager on the outcome of an election can lose the right to vote in that election. Fighting, challenging or aiding in a a duel, either in or out of the state, is cause for disfranchisement under constitutions of California, Texas, Mississippi, Nevada and Virginia.

Priests and ministers of the gospel are not eligible to sit as lawmakers under constitutions of Tennessee and Maryland. Certain types of lotteries are permitted under the New Jersey constitution. And under Louisiana's, Huey Long's birthday anniversary "shall be and forever remain a legal holiday."