

176 Amendments and Counting

Lesson from the Courts in the Community curriculum

Find out more about [this program](#) and discover [additional lesson plans about how state courts operate](#).

Objective: Students will be able to describe why Colorado’s practice of amending its constitution is unique and the benefits and pitfalls of having a constitution that is easy to amend.

Inquiry Questions:

- How do the structures of Colorado’s governments impact democratic decision making?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of people in the United States?
- How do the 176 amendments to Colorado’s Constitution impact how the state government functions?
- How does the ability to easily amend the constitution serve the people of Colorado?

Colorado Academic Standards

- **SS.HS.4.2.EOc.** Analyze the processes for amending the Constitutions of Colorado and the United States and the significant changes that have occurred to those documents including both the Colorado and the United States’ Bills of Rights.
- **SS.HS.4.2.EOe.** Describe the role and development of the founding documents of Colorado and the United States from their inception to modern day. Including but not limited to: the Great Law of Peace, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitutions of the United States and Colorado, the Federalist Papers, and the Bill of Rights.
- **SS.HS.4.2.EOf.** Evaluate the role of the judicial system in protecting life, liberty, and property for all persons in the United States

Activities: Video, discussion, homework assignment

Grade Level: High School

Anticipated classroom time: 45 to 60 minutes

Teacher background information

This lesson focuses on the history of Colorado’s Constitution, which has been amended more than 176 times since it was passed in 1876. This fact has established the “People’s Constitution” as one of the most easily amended state constitutions in the country. From its early days as a tri-lingual document written in English, Spanish and German, to the controversial Tax Payer’s Bill of Rights (TABOR), there have been complex and unintended consequences to the state’s constitution.

There are three ways to amend the Colorado state constitution. First, an initiative may be proposed directly by the people of Colorado, receive a required number of signatures on a petition, and then be voted on in a state-wide referendum, which must receive a 55% majority in order to be adopted. Second, the state assembly may draft an amendment, approve it by a two-thirds majority vote in each house, and then send it to the voters, who must again approve it with a 55% majority in a state-wide referendum. In either of these methods, if the amendment is limited only to repealing a part of the constitution, it only needs a simple majority approval in state-wide referendum. Third, the state assembly may call a constitutional convention by a two-thirds majority vote in each house and simple majority approval of voters in a state-wide referendum, with members then determined by state-wide election using state senate districts, who would submit alterations to the voters to approve as a slate via simple majority. Despite these relatively high bars to passing any given amendment, at least 176 amendments to the constitution have been passed since its initial adoption in 1876.



Class Activity

Note: It would be useful to teach the U.S. and Colorado Constitution lesson before teaching this lesson.

1. Ask students what they know about the Colorado Constitution (or what they learned from the U.S. and Colorado Constitution lesson).
2. Review questions on the viewing sheet and encourage students to answer the questions as they are viewing the video.
3. Watch [PBS' Colorado Experience: The Colorado Constitution](#). *Note that this video was made in 2013, when the constitution had been amended 152 times. In the past 10 years it has been amended 24 more times.*
4. Review the questions from the viewing sheet, asking for students to quickly share their responses.
5. Spend time discussing the last question on the sheet.

Homework assignment

1. Have students write a short response to these prompts: "Why do you think the Colorado Constitution is often called the People's Constitution? Do you think the ease with which the constitution can be amended enhances or detracts from our democracy?"
2. Evaluate using your classroom rubric.



Colorado Constitution video questions

(from the Colorado Department of Education [Colorado government lessons](#))

1. How many times has the state constitution been amended since 1876? _____
2. When was the Colorado Constitution finally completed? _____
3. Why did early Coloradans find it necessary to create their own government?
4. What major event was occurring when Colorado became a territory? _____
5. Why did Colorado need to become a state? Provide at least 3 reasons:
6. In what year was the Colorado Constitutional Convention? _____
7. Why is the Colorado Constitution written in 3 languages?
8. Why are water rights an important part of the constitution?
9. What was the controversy over water rights in Northern Colorado?
10. When did Colorado grant women the right to vote? _____ Why is this significant?
11. What is a ballot initiative?
12. How can Colorado citizens change or add to the Colorado Constitution?
13. What major event was voted down by Colorado voters in 1976?
14. Explain Amendment 2 and its significance.
15. What is TABOR? What are its limitations?
16. List 5 interesting facts about the Colorado Constitution that you learned from this video.

