

# On Constitution Day, honor our chief governing document as one of history's highest political achievements

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We recognize Constitution Day — September 17 — to celebrate more than just words on parchment. The Constitution represents a turn in human history away from authoritarianism and toward individual rights and duties enshrined in legal systems that govern all citizens equally, from the highborn or the elite to the poor or the ordinary.

No person is above the law. All are bound by it, and transgressions against it are transgressions against family, friends, neighbors, and society writ large.

The Constitution, if it is a symbol, stands for the proposition that every human being within its jurisdiction enjoys rights that the government exists to defend, and against which the government may not transgress. This is a beautiful, powerful concept, one that has the power to unite disparate peoples in pursuit of better lives for themselves and their posterity.

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Justice Antonin Scalia pointed out that dictators and banana republics operate under constitutions too. He claimed that the Soviet Union's bill of rights was "wonderful" and, in its wording, "better than ours." Yet those constitutions failed or are failing. Why? What has made citizens of the United States the freest people historically to have lived under a constitution? Why has our Constitution endured while other constitutions haven't?



Late Justice Antonin Scalia noted that dictators and banana republics operate under constitutions, but those nations fail. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast, File)

It's because of deep-seated culture and hard-earned values, because of reverence for the law and legal tradition; a constitution is only as good as the people it governs.

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Our Constitution, in theory, represents a social contract: a pact between citizens and its rulers that restrains government, divides power, and sets competing interests against one another with offsetting effect.

The social contract for a mature, successful society involves a collection of individuals wise enough to appreciate the reciprocal advantage of mutual submission and similar enough in ethics and morals to prescribe the proper scope, limits, and structure of the approved ruling authority.

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On this Constitution Day, we should not only honor our chief governing document and the leaders who made its provisions and ratification possible, but also strive to be better, more knowledgeable citizens, to appreciate the long chain of human accomplishment that made possible our cherished freedoms under the law.

The Constitution sets forth the legal and governing architecture for our country and represents one of the highest political achievements in the history of the world. It deserves respect and sustained study. Why not take the time to read it today?

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