The United States is a nation of diverse peoples bound together through an allegiance to the constitution. The Introduction looks at where the people of the United States have come from and how they have come together, whether through conquest, colonialism, the slave trade, the acquisition of territories, or voluntary migration. The United States did not become a nation by accident, but by choice. Since its founding in 1789, the United States has experienced almost constant immigration. There have been three notable waves: in the 1840s and 1850s, from the 1890s to World War I, and after 1965. There are many issues that Americans have to confront that relate to immigration.

The U.S. Constitution: A Very Short Introduction
David J. Bodenhamer

The U.S. Constitution: A Very Short Introduction explores the major themes of American constitutional history—federalism, the balance of powers, property, representation, equality, rights, and security. Informed by the latest scholarship, each theme illustrates how the Constitution has served as a dynamic framework for legitimating power and advancing liberty. Today, we face serious challenges to the nation’s constitutional legacy. Endless wars, a sharply divided electorate and deadlocked government, economic inequality, immigration, cybersecurity and privacy, and foreign interference in the nation’s democratic processes have placed demands on government and on society that test our constitutional values. Understanding how the Constitution has evolved will help us adapt its principles to the challenges of our age.

5. The nation in history
Steven Grosby
‘The nation in history’ investigates historical notions of nationhood. Nations are generally thought of as being relatively recent inventions, as it is believed that earlier societies did not have the necessary cultural cohesion due to the lack of technology and education. However, this view underestimates ancient and pre-modern societies, who coalesced around legal, religious, military, and linguistic constructions. The main difference between pre-modern and modern societies was the level of participation. A major formative factor in nationhood is the exploitation of myth to infuse a unique nationalistic vision in citizens. These are not easily verifiable, and even change when the situation merits it.

1. What constitution?

Martin Loughlin

What constitution?’ asks why Britain never adopted a ‘modern’ constitution. The traditional view of constitution saw it as an inheritance, developed over time from the national spirit. The modern constitution was created at the time of the American Revolution. This was a rationalist exercise, where people agreed on the terms of government. It required a single document, antecedent to government that provided a comprehensive fundamental law. This modern type still needed to be embraced by the people. A lack of revolutionary crisis since 1688 has meant that Britain has not needed to reconstitute itself politically. Furthermore, like the common law system, British politics pragmatically favours precedent over abstract principle.

EpilogueThe founding fathers, history, and us

R. B. Bernstein

The “Epilogue” concludes that Americans’ contentious relationship with the founding fathers has unfolded within and been shaped by two linked questions: how much do the founding fathers resemble us and how much do they differ from us? To what extent must we keep faith with them, and to what extent must we challenge them or set them aside in the face of changing conditions and problems? The Preamble’s statement that the Constitution’s primary purpose is “to form a more perfect Union” offers a way to answer these questions. The idea of perfecting the Union has been a vital feature of American constitutional culture and, in particular, a key theme of African American constitutional thought.
8. Discursive realities and surrealities
Michael Freeden

Ideological fragmentation and malleability has led to new developments in the theory of ideology. ‘Discursive realities and surrealities’ examines the differing responses to these developments. Some scholars have concentrated on the fragments and this branch of study of the micro-ideologies is discourse analysis. This has drawn on studies in hermeneutics, semantics, and postmodern studies. Others have reactivated the old Marxist scepticism about what lies behind the continual ideological permutations. Post-Marxists and poststructuralists have given new impetus to the study of ideology. They have refused to take any fact, any opinion, any framework, for granted.

3. Independence
Robert J. Allison

By spring 1776 British authority had collapsed in the colonies. Congress appointed John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston to draft a declaration of independence. ‘Independence’ describes this declaration and reveals how complex declaring independence would be. Americans were redefining their relationship with the British Empire, but also the basis of government and the nature of their society. The declaration was adopted by Congress on July 4, 1776, but fighting continued. Richard Howe and Henry Clinton had been sent to achieve a political end—reconciliation—through military means, but George Washington was securing a military end—victory—through the political means of cultivating support from the people the army protected.

Introduction: a new kind of liberal
Harvey C. Mansfield

What sort of man was Alexis de Tocqueville? A writer, certainly, and with great style, but a writer of nonfiction conveying fact and truth in compelling terms with brilliant formulations. A social scientist, but without the cumbersome methodology, the hands-off neutrality, the pretended objectivity of today’s version. Tocqueville was a defender and reformer of politics, scientific in some ways but never permitting science to obstruct those goals. A historian? Yes, because he wrote of democracy in America, then and now its principal abode, and of the old regime in France, where according to him democracy
—surprisingly, in the form of rational administration by a monarchy—began. He did not write like a theorist, as if he were abstracted from time and place. Yet he was a seeker of causes, not a plain narrator, and he chose to write about the most important events, the “first causes,” he went so far as to say. A philosopher? A difficult question, to which many who identify philosophy with system say no. I say yes, more of a philosopher than he appears to be. We can settle on “thinker,” a less ambitious word for a man who had his doubts about philosophy....

2. What is a nation?

Steven Grosby

What is a nation?’ attempts to define the term of nation. Nations are comprised of social (i.e. norms, customs, or language) and territorial relations, which give rise to a collective self-consciousness over time. Humans have always formed families or kinships to aid the inheritance of genes, but these also enable cultural inheritance. Nations are comprised of a community of kinship, where individuals recognize themselves to be continuously related to others. Patriotism occurs when individuals transcend their own self-interest for the good of the nation. Unlike nationalism, patriotism can involve compromise. Nations are formed as a medium between city-states and empires, and often assume statehood in order to protect themselves.

1. Words, images, meanings

R. B. Bernstein

The phrase “founding fathers” is central to how Americans talk about politics, and “Words, images, meanings” describes when the phrase was first coined, what it really means, and how artists have depicted the “founding fathers”—those who helped to found the United States as a nation and a political experiment. This group has two subsets. First are the Signers, delegates to the Second Continental Congress, who in July 1776 declared American independence and signed the Declaration of Independence. Second are the Framers, the delegates to the Federal Convention who in 1787 framed the United States Constitution. They include Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton.

1. First principles

Andrew Preston
The United States began its existence as an act of foreign policy. It is no exaggeration to say that the nation owes its very existence to the successful pursuit of war and diplomacy. ‘First principles’ explains that over a period of forty years, from the outbreak of revolution in 1775 to the end of war with Britain in 1815, the founding generation established and consolidated a new nation by responding to a series of international challenges. Along the way, they established a set of first principles of foreign relations: namely, unilateralism, exceptionalism, and expansionism. These would shape Americans’ engagement with the wider world for centuries to come.

2. Expansionism

Andrew Preston

Over the course of nearly three hundred years, the people who inhabited what came to be called the United States enlarged their territorial holdings. As they did so, their belief that expansion wasn’t just inevitable but righteous took hold: progress was good, the United States represented progress, and so many started believing that the best thing for all concerned was to stretch US borders as far as possible. ‘Expansionism’ explains how the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War unleashed these restless impulses and their violent effects across a continent, and set the ideological template for even greater expansions to follow.

The American Revolution: A Very Short Introduction

Robert J. Allison

Between 1760 and 1800, the American people cast off British rule to create a new nation and a radically new form of government based on the idea that people have the right to govern themselves. The American Revolution: A Very Short Introduction provides a cohesive synthesis of the military, diplomatic, political, social, and intellectual aspects of the American Revolution, paying special attention to the Revolution's causes and consequences. It recreates the tumultuous events that led to revolution, such as the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party, and highlights the major battles and commanders on both sides before exploring the aftermath of the Revolution and how the new republic developed.
American attitudes towards foreign law was initially ambivalent. The same can be said about foreign opinions towards American law. ‘The Court and the world’ looks at the extent the American experience with the operation of the Supreme Court has influenced other countries’ and supranational developing political and legal structures and vice versa. No other country has chosen to bestow life tenure on its judges. Another difference is that European courts, for example, tend to observe a norm of unanimity. What is clear, however, is that even though most people know little about the Supreme Court, it occupies a place in the public imagination.

The Founding Fathers: A Very Short Introduction
R. B. Bernstein

The Founding Fathers: A Very Short Introduction provides an overview of the brilliant, flawed, and quarrelsome group of lawyers, politicians, merchants, military men, and clergy known as “the Founding Fathers,” what they did, and what history has made of them. It traces the dynamic forces that molded Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and their contemporaries as British colonists in North America and as intellectual citizens of the Atlantic civilization’s Age of Enlightenment. It analyzes the American Revolution, the framing and adoption of state and federal constitutions, and the key concepts and problems that both shaped and circumscribed the founders’ achievements as the United States sought its place in the world.

2. Tocqueville’s praise of democracy
Harvey C. Mansfield

‘Tocqueville's praise of democracy’ explores Tocqueville's understanding of democracy and the development of this understanding in the course of his reading and experience, particularly in America. For Tocqueville democracy is primarily a way of life, and only secondarily is it a form of government. What strengthens individuals is association and what this might look like and the role of the New England township is a pivotal idea in Tocqueville's thinking. Political and civil associations are an important theme in his writings as is the idea of self-interest and its influence on democracy.
Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction
Harvey Mansfield

Item type: book

Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction uncovers the man behind the landmark Democracy in America, a book still considered one of the best sources for anyone trying to understand American democracy. Tocqueville was a liberal and a thinker whose life's experiences — his aristocratic ancestry, his ventures in politics, and his voyages abroad — shaped his writings. His work expressed his passion for political liberty and insistence on human greatness. He opposed abstraction and theory, and his emphasis on the practice of self-government in America was a reflection of his hopes and fears for America, and his disappointment with his native France.

3. Informal democracy
Harvey C. Mansfield

Item type: chapter

Whilst Tocqueville sees much to admire in the formal democracy of America: the constitution and the structures devised by the Founders, ‘Informal democracy’ explores his admiration for the informal democracy that he observes and believes makes it possible for people to work together. He examines the twin benefits and dangers of majority power and majority tyranny. The roles of political parties, a free press, political associations, as well as the roles of public opinion and material well-being are all included in his analysis of the informal elements in democracy in America.

Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction
Steven Grosby

Item type: book

Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction examines the political and moral challenges that face the vast majority of human beings who consider themselves to be members of various nations. It explores nationality through the difficulties and conflicts that have arisen throughout history, from ancient civilizations to the present day, and discusses nations and nationalism from social, philosophical, and anthropological perspectives. This VSI looks at the nation in history, the territorial element in nationality, and the complex ways nationality has co-existed with religion, and shows how closely linked the concept of nationalism is with being human.
2. Freedom’s ferment, 1750–1848

Susan Ware

‘Freedom's ferment, 1750–1848’ asks what slavery meant for women, white and black. What would it take to win the freedom of both slaves and women, and who would plead their cause? It describes the story of Sally Hemings, a slave in the household of Thomas Jefferson who went on to bear his children. The American Revolution did not radically reshape women's lives, especially when it came to political rights and legal status, but it did provide openings, especially for elite white women, to play larger roles in the new democracy. Women increased participation in religious benevolence, antislavery activism, and women's rights. It also saw the resumption of an expansive westward movement of peoples.