

Bill of Rights

1789 The First U.S. Congress proposes the Bill of Rights, a set of amendments to the constitution guaranteeing essential liberties, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to peaceful assembly

Historical Context

The Bill of Rights is the term used for the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States. The debate over ratifying and drafting the Constitution was bitter and many Americans had actually opposed the new form of government, particularly after a pamphlet written by [George Mason](#) was circulated. Mason, an Anti-Federalist, believed any constitution should have a bill of rights; others, like [James Madison](#), disagreed, saying it was unnecessary as the government only had powers as specified by the Constitution.

After the ratification of the state of Massachusetts was put in doubt over the objections of the Anti-Federalists, the Federalists agreed to consider amendments related to a bill of rights. Though James Madison was originally a staunch opponent of the bill, in order to secure the Constitution's ratification and realising the importance that citizens put on the bill, he put an amendment through Congress. The Senate changed the bill to include 12 amendments rather than 17, and later 10 were passed and ratified: the Bill of Rights.

Famous amendments include the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances", often invoked in debates about free speech, and the Second Amendment: "A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed", always invoked in arguments about gun control.

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