

## Why The Preamble Poll and National Political Confidence Index

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What, *another* indicator?

Well, yes. But this one has its origins in the Constitution --specifically, the Preamble:

**We the People** of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Although it lacks legal force, the Preamble serves as the mission statement of the Constitution. Its six internal phrases denote the purposes the new government is supposed to fulfill. The bracketing phrases establish the people of the United States as sovereigns of the constituted nation. The people are to use the criteria of the purpose-phrases to judge their government's performance, and ultimately, if they deem it necessary, to decide whether the government should continue as constituted.

**We the people:** The proclamation of popular sovereignty at the outset marks one of the revolutionary features of the document. The new government is founded not by officials of the current government, nor by an outside group or imposing force, not even by a majority of eligible voters, but by the people as a whole. Indeed, during the ratification process several states set aside voting eligibility requirements so that additional Americans could participate in the special conventions.

The purpose-phrases have a sonorous vagueness to them, affording room for interpretation. But they do have historical meanings.

At the time of ratification, **a more perfect union** meant "better than the arrangement under the Articles of Confederation." Three score and fourteen years later, Abraham Lincoln invoked the phrase in his First Inaugural Address, arguing that the Constitution precluded unilateral secession by any state. The phrase served as the title of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign speech about race relations, prompted by the controversy over remarks by his former pastor. More generally, "a more perfect union" evokes a sense of national community that is simultaneously progressive in its semantics --we the people should strive to improve governance-- and conservative in its heritage --as we have striven throughout most of our national history.

The next five purpose-phrases refer to basic social concerns: **justice, domestic tranquility, defence** (sic for the English spelling), **general welfare, and liberty**. The authors of *The Federalist Papers* used these to encourage readers to imagine a better life under the new political system. "Publius" contended repeatedly that under the Constitution the federal

government's actions in these areas would reinforce each other. A unified ("common") military would provide Americans with a stronger and more economical defense. Union would create a free-trade zone among the states, spurring prosperity, eliminating the need for each state to defend territory and property against the others, and more effectively deterring and if necessary repelling foreign invasion.<sup>1</sup>

Today, learning how people rate the government's work in different areas of responsibility gives us diagnostic insights into what they see as the contemporary strengths and weaknesses of the system. We use the responses to two questions pegged to the purpose-phrases of the Preamble as the basis for a National Political Confidence Index (NCPI).

For more than thirty years, the Gallup Organization has polled Americans annually about their [confidence in a variety of institutions](#), including the three branches of government. Many political pollsters regularly ask respondents whether the United States is headed in the "[right direction](#)" or on the "[wrong track](#);" the formulation endures despite being a [mixed metaphor](#) because it provides trend data.

Our Preamble Poll and NCPI burrow beneath those regularly surveyed qualities in order to gauge the people's sense that, no matter how well the current leadership is performing, no matter how well government institutions are functioning, they believe the Constitutional system still retains their confidence. Question one solicits a straight-forward series of ratings on a 0 to 100 scale of how the government is doing on each of the middle six purpose-phrases. Question two asks for a statement of preferences at redistributing government power among the constituted parts: the three branches of the federal government, the states, and the people.

It seems to us a worthy commemoration of Constitution Day (September 17, the date of the document's signing in 1787) to take stock of national confidence in the structure of government according to the criteria it specifies. Drops in confidence will warrant greater public consideration of structural remedies (amendments and other reforms). A sustained period of low index numbers might warrant efforts to reprise the historic course of events that brought us the Constitution in the first place, perhaps through Article V's provision for another convention. The standing process for structural changes in government could also be overridden, as it was in the 1780s via Article VII.

Since our results provide only the first data point of the NPCI, we cannot provide evidence of either a drop in confidence or a chronic period of low confidence. But constitution-level concerns are being voiced in America today.

The loudest voice comes from the ideological right. The name, slogan, and icon of the Tea Party bid Americans to look back not just to the Constitution but also to the Declaration of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Federalist 2, 4, 13, 14, 41, 85. Also see Akhil Reed Amar, *America's Constitution: A Biography* (New York: Random House 2005), p. 47: "The flip side of a common front against Europe would be increased intercourse between Americans themselves in a demilitarized interstate free-trade zone."

Independence and the rebellious spirit of the Revolutionary Era, particularly on the issue of taxation and government spending. Some Tea Party adherents have launched a campaign to [leverage Article Five](#) into a constitutional convention of the states. Meanwhile, on the left, concerns about [money as a corrupting force in American politics](#) have battered in the wake of *Citizens United* and related Court decisions. They worry about the semi-hidden sights of greater spending by fewer people, and greater amounts of candidate and elected official time being devoted to fundraising. Finally, growing numbers of Americans in the middle class (albeit not necessarily in the middle of an ideological spectrum) feel their nation is no longer special, that the [American Dream](#) of a better life for one's children has been staggered if not ended altogether.

In coming years, as the index point becomes a trend line and the accompanying data enables more fine-grained distinction-making, the Preamble Poll and the National Political Confidence Index will be a rich resource for those seeking to assay Americans' fundamental levels of content and discontent with their politics. Several scholars at the GSPM have taken the existing data and made a start at identifying the sources and touchstones.

Thanks for reading. We'll see you again next Constitution Day.