



The Constitution Was Built on Human Weakness, Not Idealism

By Ella Johnson

HISTORY

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What sustains the Constitution? Founders distrusted power, built checks on ambition, and trusted agency as divine.



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In a Latter-day Saint meeting I attended last year on September 17, we sang patriotic hymns and marked Constitution Day. To my surprise, many young single adults didn't realize the significance of the date.

In comparison to Independence Day, Constitution Day isn't celebrated at all. Especially for Latter-day Saints, this is unfortunate. Many doctrines from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are directly connected to the Constitution. President Dallin

H. Oaks has [taught](#), “The United States Constitution is unique because God revealed that He ‘established’ it ‘for the rights and protection of all flesh’ ([Doctrine and Covenants 101:77](#); see also [verse 80](#)).” Why is the Constitution so important?

First, God declares in the Doctrine and Covenants that *He* established the constitution of the land, “by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose” (D&C 101:80). The Book of Mormon often refers to America as the land of promise, with prophecies of people being wrought upon by the spirit of God to come to this land (1 Nephi 13-14). The religious freedom created by the Constitution allowed for the restoration of the gospel in a way that would not be possible elsewhere.

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Second, the constitution presupposes a clear-eyed view of human nature, one we find illustrated and explained in scripture. The Old Testament is replete with examples of peoples, kings, and nations repeatedly falling into sin and pride. In the Doctrine and Covenants, we read: “We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion” (D&C 121:39).

Because humans are fallen and have a tendency to misuse power, government should be structured so that bad actors have a hard time oppressing others. The checks-and-balances system among the three branches of government outlined in the Constitution allows human nature to be used against itself. Instead of relying on the goodwill of leaders, the three-branch government relies on the fact that each branch of government will become jealous of the other’s power, and “check” the other. In a way, the problem becomes the solution.

“Ambition is one of the more ungovernable passions of the human heart,” John Adams wrote. “The love of power is insatiable and uncontrollable. There is danger from all men. The only maxim of the free government ought to be to trust no man living with power to endanger the public liberty.”

When humans ignore or deny this tendency, tyrants have an opening. Many revolutions result in another tyrant. The perpetrators of the French Revolution were upset by the

aristocracy's abuse of power, but they themselves became abusers of power.

Because of fallen human nature, it's remarkable that our system of government has lasted as long as it has. Our ingenious system has stayed in operation **longer** than any other government in the world with a written charter. This is because the Constitution relies on the realities of human nature demonstrated through scripture and historical reflection.

Third, the constitution thwarts Satan's plan to destroy the principle of agency. President Oaks has **taught**: "God has given His children moral agency—the power to decide and to act. The most desirable condition for the exercise of that agency is maximum freedom for men and women to act according to their individual choices. Then, the revelation explains, 'every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment' (**Doctrine and Covenants 101:78**)."

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Latter-day Saints believe in a war in heaven, where Satan rebelled because he wanted to destroy the agency of man (**Moses 4:3**). "The warfare is continued in mortality in the conflict between right and wrong," the Bible Dictionary entry under **War in Heaven** reads, "between the gospel and false principles, etc. The same contestants and the same issues are doing battle, and the same salvation is at stake."

We came to earth under God's plan of agency, where Jesus Christ's atonement enables us to make choices for ourselves, instead of being forced or excused by the lack of law or consequence. "Choosing" to follow God wouldn't matter much if we were forced to do it by Satan or an earthly tyrant. As Princeton's Robert P. George **argues**, authentic religious belief "cannot, by its very nature, be established by coercion."

God cares about government and how we are governed. He cares about whether government leaders or voters desire to seek to exercise unrighteous dominion over others, even under the guise of noble political pursuits. The Book of Mormon teaches, "Because all men are not just, it is not expedient that ye should have a king or kings to

rule over you” (Mosiah 29:16). The Book of Mormon also outlines the tendencies governments have toward collapsing because of corruption.

For people of faith, politics isn’t just a hobby—it’s connected to the ongoing battle between good and evil. Each voter can be diligent in ensuring no leader abuses their power, and we can constantly check that same tendency in ourselves when it comes to relationships at work, school, and in the home.

The signing of the Constitution was a great victory for moral agency. God established the constitution so that no man “should be in bondage one to another” (D&C 101:79). Under its principles, no one political leader can gain control of a whole nation. While there have been varieties of corruption from the founding of the nation to today, our system still operates with those same three branches of government.

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If you have the capacity to eat a cookie on National Cookie Day, you likely have the capacity to pick up a pocket constitution this September 17 and give it a read. It’s striking to see how the checks and balances were designed to work, and how carefully the founders limited federal power. At the very least, say a prayer to God thanking Him for the wise men He raised up and continues to raise up. The Constitution remains one of the great blessings of our time.

About the author

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Ella currently works for the National Journalism Center in Virginia after graduating with a B.A. from Mount Liberty College in Murray (now Provo), Utah. She spends her time recruiting people to NJC’s internship program, conducting investigative research, practicing pull-ups, and writing freelance on the side.