Rules That Last

The origins, structure, and future of Alabama's constitution

SS24.AS.18 "Summarize the creation and composition of the Alabama Constitution of 1901 and formulate an argument for constitutional reform in Alabama."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline why the 1901 constitution was created, circle the kinds of rules it contains, and number two details that could support an argument for reform.

A Constitution Built to Last

1 In 1901, delegates gathered in Montgomery to replace Alabama's 1875 constitution. They were chosen at a time when white leaders openly sought to reduce Black political power. The convention's president, John B. Knox, declared that establishing white supremacy was its purpose. Delegates drafted a new constitution, and Alabama voters approved it in November. The voting rules they wrote included poll taxes and literacy tests, which kept many Black citizens and poor white citizens from the polls. Those rules helped one group hold power, even though the constitution presented itself as a plan for governing the whole state.

2 The 1901 constitution contains a declaration of rights and articles that organize the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Other provisions address elections, taxes, education, and local government. Alongside these broad topics, delegates placed many specific policy decisions in the constitution instead of leaving them to ordinary laws. Alabama's counties and cities received limited power to make decisions on their own. As a result, some local matters have required a statewide constitutional amendment, rather than a local vote or a regular law. Over time, amendments made the document unusually long.

3 Later federal constitutional amendments and voting rights laws made the original poll taxes and discriminatory voting tests unenforceable. Yet Alabama still governs under its 1901 constitution, repeatedly amended and reorganized. Some reformers propose replacing detailed local rules with broader constitutional guidelines and giving counties more authority over routine decisions. They argue that local officials could respond faster; opponents worry that services and protections might differ from county to county. Others want any rewritten constitution to state strong protections for voting access. They point to 1901 as evidence that election rules can be designed to shut people out, even when those rules appear neutral.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Summarize why the 1901 convention met and how its proposed constitution took effect.

2. Summarize the constitution's composition. How does it go beyond setting up the branches of government?

3. Explain how the constitution's detailed rules and limits on local power have affected its length.

4. What argument from the passage supports adding strong voting-access protections to a rewritten constitution?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Propose a constitutional change that would let Alabama counties decide one local issue not named in the passage, and explain why you support it. In one paragraph, use two distinct facts from the passage and address one reasonable concern about your proposal.

ANSWER KEY

Rules That Last

HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.AS.18

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline why the 1901 constitution was created, circle the kinds of rules it contains, and number two details that could support an argument for reform. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Summarize why the 1901 convention met and how its proposed constitution took effect.	**Delegates met to replace the 1875 constitution, while white leaders sought to reduce Black political power. The delegates drafted a constitution that Alabama voters approved in November 1901.**
2	Summarize the constitution's composition. How does it go beyond setting up the branches of government?	**It includes a declaration of rights and articles organizing three branches, as well as rules about elections, taxes, education, and local government. It also contains specific policy decisions.**
3	Explain how the constitution's detailed rules and limits on local power have affected its length.	**Some local matters have required constitutional amendments instead of local decisions or ordinary laws. Amendments have made the document unusually long.**
4	What argument from the passage supports adding strong voting-access protections to a rewritten constitution?	**The 1901 voting rules excluded many Black citizens and poor white citizens. That history supports stating protections clearly so election rules cannot be used to shut people out.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would add a rule confirming that counties may set public library hours. The 1901 constitution placed many specific policy decisions in the constitution, and its limits on local power have made some local matters require amendments. Library schedules should respond to residents' needs without a statewide constitutional change. Counties might offer unequal hours, so the state could require a minimum level of library access while letting counties add hours when they can.

Accept proposals about other local issues not named in the passage if they use two accurate, distinct passage facts and address a relevant concern. Do not require students to claim that their chosen issue currently needs a constitutional amendment.