Changing the Constitution

Trace how federal and state decisions make amendment possible

USG.C.3.2 "Examine how the Constitution may be considered a "living document" due to its clearly defined and intentionally rigorous amendment process, which requires both state and federal participation."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline federal actions in the amendment process, circle state actions, and number the approval thresholds. Use your marks to trace why changing the Constitution requires broad agreement.

A Change That Took Two Levels of Government

1 In 1919, Congress proposed a change to the Constitution that would protect women's right to vote. Supporters had won a major step, but the proposal was not yet part of the Constitution. States still had to decide whether to ratify it. When Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to approve in 1920, the proposal reached the required three-fourths of the forty-eight states. It became the Nineteenth Amendment. The long campaign shows why some people call the Constitution a living document: its rules can change as the nation confronts questions that earlier generations did not settle fairly.

2 Article V sets a demanding path for such changes. Congress can propose an amendment only if two-thirds of each house agrees. Alternatively, two-thirds of state legislatures can request a convention to propose amendments, a route that has never been used. A proposal then goes to the states. Congress chooses whether states vote through their legislatures or through special ratifying conventions. In either case, three-fourths of the states must approve before the proposal becomes an amendment. The president does not sign or veto constitutional amendments. Federal and state participation means neither Congress alone nor a few states alone can rewrite the nation's highest law.

3 The Nineteenth Amendment followed the congressional proposal route, then won approval from state legislatures. That sequence matters: a national proposal did not erase the need for broad agreement across states. Imagine instead that Congress passed an ordinary law about voting. A later Congress could change that law through the regular legislative process; amending the Constitution requires the much higher Article V thresholds. Those hurdles protect stability, but they do not freeze the document in the past. An amendment can make a lasting national rule when people build enough support in both the federal government and the states.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did Congress's 1919 proposal not immediately change the Constitution? What later event completed the change?

2. Suppose an amendment proposal wins a simple majority in each house of Congress, but no more. Why can it not proceed by that route, and what other proposal route does Article V provide?

3. If Congress chooses state ratifying conventions instead of state legislatures, what approval threshold stays the same? What does that show about the states' role?

4. How does the Nineteenth Amendment show that the Constitution can change without changing as easily as an ordinary law?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Propose a constitutional amendment on a topic other than voting rights. In one paragraph of 4 to 5 sentences, explain what it would do, how it could be proposed and ratified, and why this process makes the Constitution both adaptable and difficult to change.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.3.2

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline federal actions in the amendment process, circle state actions, and number the approval thresholds. Use your marks to trace why changing the Constitution requires broad agreement. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did Congress's 1919 proposal not immediately change the Constitution? What later event completed the change?	**State ratification was still required. Tennessee's approval in 1920 brought the total to thirty-six of forty-eight states, meeting the three-fourths threshold.**
2	Suppose an amendment proposal wins a simple majority in each house of Congress, but no more. Why can it not proceed by that route, and what other proposal route does Article V provide?	**The congressional route requires two-thirds of each house. Alternatively, two-thirds of state legislatures can request a convention to propose amendments.**
3	If Congress chooses state ratifying conventions instead of state legislatures, what approval threshold stays the same? What does that show about the states' role?	**Three-fourths of the states must still approve. Broad state agreement is required regardless of which ratification method Congress chooses.**
4	How does the Nineteenth Amendment show that the Constitution can change without changing as easily as an ordinary law?	**It added a lasting protection through a congressional proposal and approval by three-fourths of the states. An ordinary law can be changed through the regular legislative process.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would propose an amendment protecting access to clean drinking water. Congress could propose it if two-thirds of each house agreed, and Congress could choose ratification by state legislatures. It would become part of the Constitution only if three-fourths of the states approved it. This path would let the country add a national protection as its needs change, while the high thresholds would prevent one Congress or a small group of states from making the change alone.

Accept either Article V proposal route and either state ratification method when students apply the process accurately. Part 3 should connect the high federal and state thresholds to both the possibility of change and the difficulty of achieving it.