

e-Edition Plus

A current events feature for teaching with electronic editions.

By Emilia Pastina

U.S. Senate elections spark debate on the U.S. Constitution

For nearly 100 years, U.S. senators have been directly elected by voters in each of the nation's states.

But now people unhappy with the national government would like to change that by amending the U.S. Constitution.

Since 1913, the Constitution's 17th Amendment has allowed citizens in each state to vote directly for their state's two members in the 100-member U.S. Senate.

Now some members of the Tea Party political movement, conservative leaders and others would like to go back to the way it was at the birth of the nation, when state legislatures chose who filled Senate seats instead of individual voters.

One of the main arguments for changing the Constitution with a new amendment for Senate elections is that switching authority back to state legislatures would give states more power to protect state interests in Washington. Another argument is that this would reduce the chance voters would be overly influenced by TV ads.

"Direct democracy is the worst form of government possible, because it relies on 60-second sound bites and the ability of the ad firm that can best make an impression on the voters," said Howard Stephenson, a Republican state senator from Utah who wants the 17th Amendment repealed, in a New York Times interview.

But the question for lawmakers and citizens is whether repealing the 17th Amendment would give states more power, or increase the chance that politics would become more corrupt through the influence of big business and other groups working through legislatures.

Behind the law

For more than 100 years after the U.S. was founded, senators were appointed by state legislatures. At the same time, members of the U.S. House of Representatives were voted for directly by citizens.

Then, in 1906, a series of magazine articles called "Treason of the Senate" and written by David Graham Phillips exposed senators who bought their seats from legislators. The articles claimed that large corporations and corrupt state legislators had too much power in choosing senators.

The public was angry when they learned about the bribery and fraud, which led to Progressive Era reformers proposing the removal of legislators' authority to appoint senators.

In 1913, the 17th Amendment was ratified and citizens began choosing U.S. senators in direct popular elections.

Changing the Constitution

Changing, or "amending," the U.S. Constitution is not a simple process.

Adding a new amendment, or repealing an old one, must be approved by three-fourths of the states in the nation.

It is a process that can take months, and sometimes years. There have been just 27 amendments to the Constitution since it took effect 221 years ago in 1789.

The First Amendment, which took effect in 1791, guarantees the "five freedoms" of speech, religion, the press, assembly and the right to petition the government to make changes.

The 27th amendment, which took effect in 1992, prohibited members of the U.S. House and Senate from raising their own pay while in office.

UPI Photo



U.S. Senators like Harry Reid (left), Judd Gregg (center) and Mitch McConnell are elected directly by voters in their states. Some would change that.

Talk About the News

- The 17th Amendment has been getting a lot of attention. Some people want to change it to allow state legislatures to pick U.S. senators. Others want to leave it alone and allow voters to choose senators to avoid corruption by state legislators. As a class, talk about the pros and cons. Discuss reasons why states would want or need more power in national government. Talk about the risks of state legislators picking U.S. senators.

Learning Standard: Engaging peers in constructive conversation about matters of public concern by clarifying issues, considering opposing views, applying democratic values, anticipating consequences and working toward making decisions.

Explore Your e-Edition

- Often, changes to laws or even the U.S. Constitution begin when citizens are concerned or angry about an issue. Read today's editorials and letters to the editor in the e-Edition to learn about various opinions on local, state or national issues. Choose one point of view that you agree or disagree with. Write a letter to the editor about this issue to express your opinions.

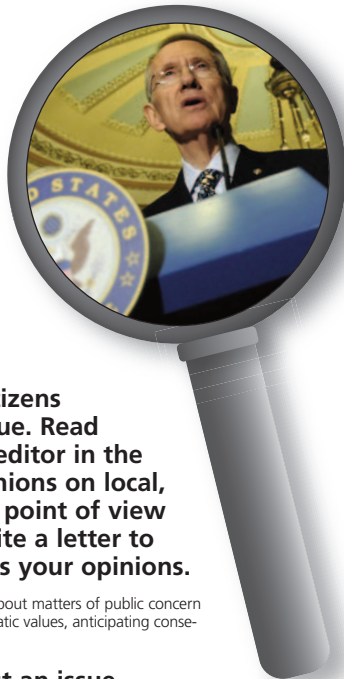
Learning Standard: Engaging peers in constructive conversation about matters of public concern by clarifying issues, considering opposing views, applying democratic values, anticipating consequences and working toward making decisions.

- Read today's e-Edition to learn about an issue important to your state or another state. Then think about what kind of person would be best equipped to deal with the issue as a U.S. senator. Based on the article, write an employment ad for the position of U.S. senator. Use information in the article to come up with a job description, experience needed and characteristics this person should have.

Learning Standard: Composing coherent written essays that express a position on a public issue and justifying the position with reasoned arguments.

- Many people who vote get information about candidates from newspaper or TV ads. Look through the display ads of the e-Edition to find an ad that honestly, fairly and accurately tells about the benefits of a product. Then list at least five characteristics a political ad should have to be reliable.

Learning Standard: Employing multiple strategies to construct meaning, such as generating questions, studying vocabulary, analyzing mood and tone, recognizing how authors use information, generalizing ideas, matching form to content and developing reference skills.



How Well Did You Read?

Understanding what you read is a skill that will help you all through life. Review the story about the 17th Amendment by answering the questions below.

1. According to the story, the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has to do with:

- A. Freedom of speech
- B. The right to bear arms
- C. Filling of Senate seats
- D. Birthright citizenship

2. In Paragraph 7 of the story, the word "repealing" means to:

- A. Accept
- B. Dislike
- C. Overturn
- D. Vote upon

3. According to the story, those in favor of repealing the 17th Amendment want to:

- A. Give power to the people
- B. Give power to the states
- C. Give power to the President
- D. Give power to senators

4. According to the story, at the birth of the United States, U.S. senators were:

- A. Appointed by state legislatures
- B. Voted by the people
- C. Appointed by the President
- D. Didn't exist

5. According to the story, changing the U.S. Constitution requires the approval of how many states in the nation?

- A. One-fourth
- B. One-half
- C. Two-thirds
- D. Three-fourths