

Monk, Linda R. *Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*

From “*The Preamble: We the People*”

The first three words of the Constitution are the most important. They clearly state that the people—not the king, not the legislature, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government. This principle is known as popular sovereignty.

But who are “We the People”? This question troubled the nation for centuries. As Lucy Stone, one of America’s first advocates for women’s rights, asked in 1853, “‘We the People’? Which ‘We the People’? The women were not included.” Neither were white males who did not own property, American Indians, or African Americans—slave or free. Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American on the Supreme Court, described the limitation:

for a sense of the evolving nature of the constitution, we need look no further than the first three words of the document’s preamble: ‘we the people.’ when the founding fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America’s citizens . . . the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not... have imagined, nor would they have accepted, that the document they were drafting would one day be construed by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed a woman and the descendant of an African slave.

Through the Amendment process, more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution’s definition of “We the People.” After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment gave African Americans citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide, and in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment extended suffrage to eighteen-year-olds.

elected body that creates laws

interpreted

formal change to a legal contract

membership in a state or nation with rights, privileges, and duties

<p align="center">Central Concern #1</p>	<p align="center">Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students</p>	
<p>Why does Monk focus on the first three words of the Constitution?</p> <p>The passage from Monk's text is a close examination of the way in which those three words have been interpreted over time.</p>	<p>Text Under Discussion</p> <p>The first three words of the Constitution are the most important. They clearly state that the people—not the king, not the legislature, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government. This principle is known as popular sovereignty.</p>	<p>(Q1) What is (and isn't) the meaning of "popular sovereignty"? Why does Monk claim that this is the form of government in America?</p>
<p>But who are "We the People"? This question troubled the nation for centuries. As Lucy Stone, one of America's first advocates for women's rights, asked in 1853, "We the People? Which 'We the People'? The women were not included." Neither were white males who did not own property, American Indians, or African Americans—slave or free.</p>	<p><i>Elected body that creates laws</i></p>	<p>(Q2) Is Lucy Stone confused when she asks "Which 'We the People'?" Why does Monk say this question has "troubled the nation"?</p>

Central Concern #2	Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions for Students
<p>What insights does Justice Marshall bring to the issue of interpreting "We the People"?</p> <p>As the first African American on the Supreme Court, Marshall's appointment exemplifies the changing nature of the constitutional conception of who is included in the phrase "We the People."</p>	<p>(Q3) What does the phrase "founding fathers" mean? Why does Marshall think the founding fathers could not have imagined a female or black Supreme Court Justice?</p>
<p>Text Under Discussion</p> <p>Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American on the Supreme Court, described the limitation:</p> <p>for a sense of the evolving nature of the constitution, we need look no further than the first three words of the document's preamble: 'we the people.' when the founding fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America's citizens . . . the men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could not... have imagined, nor would they have accepted, that the document they were drafting would one day be <u>constituted</u> by a Supreme Court to which had been appointed a woman and the descendant of an African slave.</p>	<p>Having discussed the meaning of Marshall's quote, ask students to put his ideas into their own words in a brief two to three sentence paraphrase.</p>
	<p><i>interpreted</i></p>

Central Concern #3

How has the Amendment process altered the character of the Constitution?

Monk demonstrates that there have been several changes to the Constitution that have altered the understanding of who is included in the phrase "We the People"

Text Under Discussion

Through the Amendment process, more and more Americans were eventually included in the Constitution's definition of "We the People." After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment gave African Americans citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment gave black men the vote. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote nationwide, and in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment extended suffrage to eighteen-year-olds.

Directions for Teachers/Guiding Questions For Students

(Q4) What evidence is there in the final paragraph regarding Marshall's claim about the "evolving nature of the Constitution"?

4. For homework students write a paragraph length explanation that answers one of the following prompts. Provide evidence from the text in your response to justify your analysis:

- Based on Monk's writings, explain how the notion of who the "people" are—as defined by the Constitution—has changed over time in America.
- Based on Monk's writing, how does Thurgood Marshall's presence on the Supreme Court illustrate the evolution of the constitution?
- Analyze Monk's explanation of what has led to the modifications that have been made to the Constitution.

*** Write or type your paragraph on a separate sheet of paper.*