

The Connecticut Constitution of 1965

Historical Background

This context may be helpful as you introduce students to the lesson.

Prior to 1965, Connecticut was governed under three key documents: the colonial-era Fundamental Orders, the 1662 Royal Charter, and the 1818 Constitution. The Fundamental Orders established a system in which each town had equal representation in the legislature, prioritizing political equality for towns rather than individuals. This system of town-based representation persisted through 1965, even as population shifts created significant disparities in political power.

While the issue of equal representation was debated during Connecticut's 1818 Constitutional Convention, no major changes were made to the system. Newly incorporated towns continued to receive the same legislative representation as established towns, despite the growing populations of urban areas. In the 1960s, a series of landmark U.S. Supreme Court rulings, including *Baker v. Carr* (1962), *Gray v. Sanders* (1963), *Wesberry v. Sanders* (1964), and *Reynolds v. Sims* (1964), reinforced the principle of "one person, one vote," first established by the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, requiring legislative districts to be based on population.

These rulings set the stage for reform in Connecticut. Political activists Miriam "Mims" and Oliver Butterworth of West Hartford and the League of Women Voters filed a lawsuit against the state in 1964, arguing that the state's representation system violated the U.S. Constitution. The court ruled in their favor, leading to a mandate for a constitutional convention to be held in 1965 to redraw Connecticut's legislative districts. Eighty-four delegates, split evenly between Democrats and Republicans, convened from July through October 1965 to draft a new constitution, which was approved by voters in a statewide referendum. The new constitution greatly increased representation for cities like Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford, whose delegations expanded from two to ten members each. In the very first election under the new system, six African Americans were elected to the House, and Boce W. Barlow, Jr. became the state's first Black senator.

While the shift to population-based representation was one of the most significant changes in the 1965 Connecticut Constitution, it was not the only reform enacted. The new constitution also expanded religious freedom for non-Christians, established a right to free public education, and provided mechanisms for future amendments and constitutional conventions. However, the overhaul of legislative representation was among the most impactful, as it directly addressed longstanding inequalities and brought Connecticut in line with the "one person, one vote" principle upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. The new constitution played a crucial role in fostering greater political inclusion and ensuring a legislative body that more accurately reflected the state's population.