



Forging Civic Strength through the Lens of History

Key Documents

Students must know these for the AP U.S. History exam (2025–2026 format), along with why they matter and how they are typically tested.

The College Board does not publish an official short list of “required documents” like AP Government does, but certain documents appear repeatedly on the exam — in DBQs, LEQs, SAQs, and multiple-choice questions — because they are central to understanding major historical developments, causation, continuity/change, and comparison.

Must-Know Primary Source Documents for APUSH

1. Declaration of Independence (1776)

- **Key ideas:** Natural rights, social contract, consent of the governed, right to revolution, equality (“all men are created equal”)
- **Why it’s essential:** Foundational statement of American political philosophy; sets up debates about liberty, equality, and government purpose that run through the entire course.
- **Common exam uses:**
 - DBQ/LEQ on causes of Revolution or development of democracy
 - Comparison with later equality movements (abolition, women’s rights, civil rights)
 - SAQ on Enlightenment influence

2. Articles of Confederation (1777–1781)

- **Key features:** Weak central government, state sovereignty, no power to tax, no executive, no national court, unicameral Congress
- **Why it’s essential:** Demonstrates the first attempt at national government and its failures → direct cause of the Constitutional Convention
- **Common exam uses:**
 - Causation LEQs (weaknesses → Constitution)
 - Comparison with Constitution
 - DBQ evidence on early republic challenges



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3. U.S. Constitution (1787) + Major Compromises

- **Key elements students must know:**
 - Great Compromise (bicameral legislature)
 - Three-Fifths Compromise
 - Commerce Compromise
 - Electoral College
 - Necessary and Proper Clause
 - Supremacy Clause
 - Separation of powers / checks and balances
- **Why it's essential:** The framework of American government; every period after 1787 connects back to it.
- **Common exam uses:** Almost every year in DBQs or LEQs on federalism, power distribution, or change over time.

4. Bill of Rights (1791) – First 10 Amendments

- **Especially important:** 1st (speech, religion, press, assembly, petition), 4th (search & seizure), 5th (due process, self-incrimination), 6th (criminal trial rights), 10th (reserved powers)
- **Why it's essential:** Addresses Anti-Federalist concerns; foundation of civil liberties cases and debates.
- **Common exam uses:** Civil liberties development, federalism questions, comparison with later amendments.

5. Federalist Papers (especially Nos. 10, 51, 70, 78)

- **Federalist No. 10** (Madison): Large republic controls factions
- **Federalist No. 51** (Madison): Checks & balances, “ambition must be made to counteract ambition”
- **Federalist No. 70** (Hamilton): Strong unitary executive
- **Federalist No. 78** (Hamilton): Judicial review, judiciary as “least dangerous” branch
- **Why they're essential:** Most important contemporary defense of the Constitution; reveal framers' intentions.
- **Common exam uses:** SAQs, LEQs on ratification debate, judicial power, federalism.

6. Northwest Ordinance (1787)



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- **Key provisions:** Process for creating new states, banned slavery in Northwest Territory, encouraged public education
- **Why it's essential:** One of the few major successes of the Articles period; it set precedent for territorial expansion and gradual abolition in the North.
- **Common exam uses:** Westward expansion, sectionalism, slavery debates.

7. Missouri Compromise (1820)

- **Key terms:** 36°30' line, Maine free, Missouri slave, balance of 12–12 states
- **Why it's essential:** First major sectional crisis after 1787; temporary solution that delayed (but did not prevent) civil war.
- **Common exam uses:** Sectionalism, slavery expansion, causation of Civil War.

8. Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

- **Key idea:** Adapted Declaration of Independence language to demand women's rights ("all men **and** women are created equal")
- **Why it's essential:** Launch of organized women's rights movement in U.S.
- **Common exam uses:** Continuity/change in reform movements, women's rights, comparison with Declaration.

9. Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

- **Key points:** Freed slaves in Confederate-controlled areas only, did not apply to border states or Union-controlled areas
- **Why it's essential:** Changed the war into a fight for freedom; practical and symbolic turning point.
- **Common exam uses:** Causation of Union victory, shift in war aims, African American role in Civil War.

10. 13th, 14th, 15th Amendments (1865–1870) – Reconstruction Amendments

- **13th:** Abolishes slavery
- **14th:** Citizenship, due process, equal protection
- **15th:** Voting rights (race, color, previous servitude)
- **Why they're essential:** Redefined citizenship and rights after the Civil War; basis for civil rights cases for next 100+ years.
- **Common exam uses:** Change over time in civil rights, failure of Reconstruction, comparison with later movements.



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11. Dawes Act (1887)

- **Key idea:** Broke up tribal lands into individual allotments → massive land loss for Native Americans
- **Why it's essential:** Major assimilation policy; part of broader 19th-century Indian policy shift.
- **Common exam uses:** Westward expansion, Native American history, government policy toward minorities.

12. Social Security Act (1935)

- **Key idea:** Created old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children
- **Why it's essential:** Cornerstone of the New Deal welfare state; marked permanent expansion of federal role in economy and social welfare.
- **Common exam uses:** Role of government, Great Depression/New Deal DBQs, continuity/change in liberalism.

13. Civil Rights Act of 1964 & Voting Rights Act of 1965

- **Key provisions:**
 - 1964: Banned discrimination in employment, public accommodations
 - 1965: Eliminated literacy tests, federal oversight of elections
- **Why they're essential:** Peak of Second Reconstruction; finally enforced 14th and 15th Amendments.
- **Common exam uses:** Civil rights movement, federalism, government enforcement of rights.

Quick Prioritization for Students

Absolute highest priority (appear almost every year):

1. Declaration of Independence
2. Constitution + Bill of Rights
3. Federalist 10, 51, 78
4. Reconstruction Amendments (14th especially)

Very high frequency:

- Articles of Confederation

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- Northwest Ordinance
- Missouri Compromise
- Emancipation Proclamation
- Civil Rights/Voting Rights Acts

Still very important:

- Seneca Falls Declaration
- Dawes Act
- Social Security Act

Big Point

Memorizing key excerpts (especially from the Declaration, Federalist Papers, and amendments) and understanding how to use them as evidence in causation, comparison, and continuity/change arguments is one of the most effective ways to raise your DBQ and LEQ scores.