

2026 | 15th Annual Solano County Constitution Essay Contest



2026 COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE LIST

Essay Topic: What is a Republic, and Why Did Our Founders Choose It?

1. Declaration of Independence

Key ideas: Natural rights, consent of the governed, right to change government.

- “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”
 - “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”
 - “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government...”
 - **Primary source link:** <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
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2. U.S. Constitution – Key Provisions

- **Preamble** “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” → Shows power comes from the people and the goal is to secure liberty.

- **Article I, Section 1** “All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.” → Creates representative (republican) lawmaking.
 - **Article IV, Section 4 (Guarantee Clause)** “The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government...” → The Constitution itself requires a republican form of government.
 - **Article I, Section 9 & Article II** (together with separation into three Articles) Establish distinct legislative, executive, and judicial branches — the structural foundation of checks and balances.
 - **Primary source link (full Constitution):** <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>
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3. Founding Father Quotes (with Sources)

- **James Madison – Federalist No. 39** “We may define a republic to be... a government which derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people, and is administered by persons holding their offices during pleasure, for a limited period, or during good behavior.” → Classic definition of a republic.
- **James Madison – Federalist No. 51** “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” → Explains why checks and balances are needed in a republic.
- **James Madison – Federalist No. 47** “The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands... may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.” → Why separation of powers is essential.
- **John Adams – Thoughts on Government (1776)** “There is no good government but what is Republican... the very definition of a Republic, is ‘an Empire of Laws, and not of Men.’” → A republic is a government of laws, not arbitrary rule.
- **Primary source:** <https://constitutioncenter.org/education/classroom-resource-library/classroom/6.5-primary-source-john-adams-thoughts-on-government-1776>
- **Thomas Jefferson – First Inaugural Address (1801)** “Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the forms of kings to govern him? Let history answer this question.” → Rejects monarchy and affirms republican self-government.
- **Primary source (Founders Online):** <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0116-0004>

Quick Way to Use These in Your Essay

- Use the **Preamble** and **Article IV, Section 4** to show the Constitution itself establishes a republic.
- Use the **Declaration** to explain *why* (to secure rights through consent).
- Use **Madison’s definitions and quotes** from *Federalist 39, 47, and 51* to explain what a republic is and why separation of powers and checks and balances were chosen.
- Add one short Adams or Jefferson quote for variety.

These examples give you strong, citable evidence directly from the Founders and the founding documents.

4. The Bill of Rights

- The Bill of Rights, comprising the first ten amendments in the American Constitution, ratified in 1791, primarily focuses on protecting individual liberties and limiting government power. Our Founders chose a republic to secure these liberties through representation, separation of powers, and clear limits on authority—exactly what these amendments help guarantee.
- Below, we identify and list the relevant amendments. We challenge you to do your own research and analysis on the details of each amendment listed below. Then think about how each amendment supports our form of government – a republic. Choose the amendments that best support your essay thesis.
- **Bill of Rights – Full Official Transcript (National Archives)** <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript> This is the authoritative transcription of the original 1789 joint resolution that became the Bill of Rights (ratified 1791).

Amendment Key Protection		How It Supports a Republic
1st	Freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and petition	Allows citizens to debate, criticize government, and hold representatives accountable—essential for self-government in a republic.
4th	Protection against unreasonable searches and seizures	Limits government intrusion into private life, reinforcing the idea that power must be restrained.
5th	Due process, grand jury, no double jeopardy, just compensation	Ensures government follows fair procedures and cannot arbitrarily take life, liberty, or property.
6th	Speedy public trial, impartial jury, right to counsel	Protects individuals from government abuse in criminal cases through jury trial (a classic republican safeguard).
8th	No cruel and unusual punishment or excessive bail/fines	Prevents government from using harsh punishments to oppress the people.
9th	Rights retained by the people	Confirms that people keep rights beyond those listed, supporting the Lockean idea of natural rights that government exists to protect.
10th	Powers reserved to the states or the people	Limits federal power and reinforces federalism and popular sovereignty—key features of the republican system.

Here is a clean list of **primary source links** (or the best free, reliable online versions of the original texts) for the sources used in your essay preparation.

1. Founding American Documents

- **Declaration of Independence** (full transcript) <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>
- **U.S. Constitution** (full transcript, including Preamble) <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript> (National Archives main founding documents page: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs>)
- **Bill of Rights** – Full Official Transcript (National Archives) <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript> This is the authoritative transcription of the original 1789 joint resolution that became the Bill of Rights (ratified 1791).
- **Articles of Confederation** <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/articles-of-confederation>

2. Federalist Papers (full collection + specific numbers)

- **Primary source for all Federalist Papers: Full text of all Federalist Papers** (Library of Congress / Congress.gov) <https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers>
- **Individual papers (same site or Avalon Project):**
- **Federalist No. 9, 10, 14, 18–20, 39, 41, 47, 48, 51, 63** are all available through the Congress.gov link above.
- **Avalon Project (Yale) example:** https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed15.asp (replace the number for others, e.g., fed10.asp, fed47.asp, fed51.asp).

3. Anti-Federalist Papers

- Collections of Anti-Federalist writings (Brutus, Federal Farmer, Centinel, etc.) are available in various public-domain compilations. One accessible full-text PDF collection is commonly used in education: search “Anti-Federalist Papers complete” on reliable educational sites, or use Teaching American History / Online Library of Liberty editions for individual essays such as Brutus I.

4. Constitutional Convention

- **Madison’s Notes and related Convention documents:** Library of Congress / Founders Online and Senate historical resources provide access to Madison’s notes. Teaching American History also hosts day-by-day materials: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/collections/madisons-notes-on-the-constitutional-convention/>

5. John Locke

- **Second Treatise of Government** (Project Gutenberg – free full text) <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7370>

- **Online Library of Liberty edition** (Hollis 1764, widely read in the colonies): Search “Locke Two Treatises Hollis Online Library of Liberty”

6. Montesquieu

- **The Spirit of the Laws** (public-domain English translation) Wikisource: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Spirit_of_Laws_\(1758\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Spirit_of_Laws_(1758)) Online Library of Liberty: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/montesquieu-complete-works-vol-1-the-spirit-of-laws>

7. Magna Carta & English Law Tradition

- **Magna Carta 1215** (English translation) British Library / National Archives resources: <https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta> National Archives (UK) education page with text: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/magna-carta/>
- **William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England** Internet Archive has full volumes (public domain): search “Blackstone Commentaries on the Laws of England” on archive.org
- **Sir Edward Coke** – His *Institutes* (especially the Second Institute on Magna Carta) are available in older public-domain editions via Internet Archive or specialized legal history sites.

8. Classical / Antiquity Sources

- **Polybius, Histories, Book 6** (mixed constitution discussion) Perseus Digital Library: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0234> (navigate to Book 6)
- **Aristotle, Politics** Internet Classics Archive: <https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html> Perseus also has editions.
- **Cicero, On the Republic (De Re Publica)** Wikisource and Loeb Classical Library public-domain translations are available; search “Cicero On the Republic” on Wikisource or Internet Archive.

9. Applications in Landmark Supreme Court Cases / Reinforced the Founders’ choice of a republic

- **Luther v. Borden (1849)** and **Pacific States Telephone & Telegraph Co. v. Oregon (1912)** recognized the Constitution’s Guarantee Clause, which requires every state to have a republican form of government. Full opinion (Luther): <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/48/1/> Full opinion (Pacific States): <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/223/118/>
- **Marbury v. Madison (1803)** established judicial review, giving courts the power to strike down unconstitutional laws and creating a key check that protects limited government and individual rights. Full opinion: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/5/137/> (Also available on Wikisource: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Marbury_v._Madison)
- **United States v. Nixon (1974)** and **Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer (1952)** confirmed that no branch—not even the President—holds unlimited power, putting the Founders’ system of checks and balances into practice. Full opinion (Nixon): <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/418/683/> Full opinion (Youngstown): <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/343/579/>

- **INS v. Chadha (1983)** enforced the Constitution’s carefully designed lawmaking process, protecting separation of powers. Full opinion: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/462/919/>

Simple sentence you can adapt: “The Supreme Court has reinforced the Founders’ choice of a republic in cases such as *Marbury v. Madison*, which established judicial review as a check on the other branches, and *Luther v. Borden*, which recognized the Constitution’s guarantee of a republican form of government.”

These cases show that the republican structure—representation, separation of powers, checks and balances, and limited government—was not just a theory in 1787. It has remained a living part of American constitutional law.

10. Extra Helpful Research Pages for Students

- National Archives – America’s Founding Documents: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs>
- Library of Congress Federalist Papers research guide: <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers>
- Avalon Project (Yale Law School) – 18th-century documents: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/>
- Founders Online (National Archives): <https://founders.archives.gov/> (letters and papers of Washington, Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, etc.)

Tip for students: Start with the National Archives transcripts of the Declaration and Constitution, then read Federalist Nos. 10, 47, 51, and review several of the Supreme Court landmark decisions. Use the other sources for deeper evidence on why the Founders preferred a republic with separation of powers, checks and balances, and protection of rights. Always cite the specific paper or document in your essay.