

## The Great Debate: Ratifying the Constitution of 1787

Eleven days after the Philadelphia convention ended, Congress recommended that the final draft of the Constitution be submitted to the thirteen states. Although the convention delegates had gone well beyond the scope of their instructions, Congress raised no objections to their proposal.

Congress also approved the controversial procedure suggested by the convention for ratifying the Constitution. According to the Articles of Confederation, the individual state legislatures should have voted on the Constitution. The convention delegates, however, called on each state legislature to assemble a state convention for the purpose of voting on the Constitution. The method for selecting the delegates was to be decided by the states.

Several states reacted quickly, organizing state conventions and approving the draft Constitution with little debate. The Delaware convention unanimously accepted the Constitution on December 6, 1787. A few days later, supporters of the Constitution in Pennsylvania rushed the document through the ratification process before their opponents could present their case. Within a month, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut also approved the Constitution.

### ***What were the issues in the ratification debate?***

By early 1788, fierce debates on ratification were already underway in the states of New York, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Four central issues stood out.

- Were the security and prosperity of the United States threatened by the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation?
- Were the delegates to the Philadelphia convention justified in drafting a new Constitution, rather than following their instructions to revise the Articles of Confederation?
- Did the powers granted to the national government under the proposed Constitution

pose a threat to individual liberty and the rights of the states?

- Should amendments guaranteeing individual rights be added to the Constitution to prevent the abuse of power by the national government?

In theory, the Constitution could have taken effect with the approval of nine of the thirteen states. In fact, rejection of the document by a major state would have forced a new round of negotiations and might very well have sunk attempts to form a stronger national government.

The Philadelphia convention had conducted its deliberations in secret. Nonetheless, the public quickly entered the ratification debate. Many expressed their opinions with conviction, but at the same time, only the voices of elite men were valued by those in power.

Supporters of the Constitution viewed the document as a means for rescuing the country from the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation. They expected that the Constitution would win the backing of the United States' most prominent citizens. Opponents found much to criticize. They saw in the Constitution a threat to their liberties and an attempt to create a dominant aristocracy in U.S. society.

***“These lawyers, and men of learning, and moneyed men, that talk so finely, and gloss over matters so smoothly, to make us poor illiterate people swallow down the pill, expect to get into Congress themselves; they expect to be the managers of the Constitution, and get all the power and all the money into their own hands, and then they will swallow up all of us little folks, like the great Leviathan....”***

—Amos Singletary’s remarks as recorded by Jonathan Elliot, Convention of Massachusetts, January 25, 1788

The ratification debate hardened the political divisions in U.S. society. The Federalists, who had been behind the drive to draft a new Constitution, now faced a well-defined opposition, the Anti-Federalists.

The Anti-Federalists were in fact supporters of confederation, or even a loose form of federalism. The Federalists were best described as “nationalists,” because they favored a strong national government.

The Federalists and Anti-Federalists engaged in a war of words in U.S. newspapers. Not since the months just before the outbreak of the War of Independence had U.S. politics

become so heated. As the ratification battle raged in early 1788, three distinct positions emerged.

In the coming days, you will have an opportunity to recreate the debate of 1788. Pay special attention to the primary source documents included. Although the English language of past centuries poses a challenge, do your best to extract meaning from the documents. Your efforts will pay off and give you a clearer understanding of the emotions and reasoning expressed during the first years of the United States.