

# National government in america 1775 to 1789

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Americans developed many types of "national" governments between 1775 to 1789. Each of these variations in centralized governments served different purposes through out this time period. They also represented the ideologies and fears of the people in how they were regarded, empowered, and organized.

One of the first unified fronts that the colonial states presented in a form of centralized governments was the formation of the Second Congress. The Second Congress met on May 10, 1775 in Philadelphia. It had many of the same restrictions that the First Congress had when it met in September 1774. Their purpose was to perform in two contradictory ways. First they had to raisemoneyfor an army. All the while negotiating a reconciliation with England.

Some of the delegates included, John Hancock, John and Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison. Although these delegates were, for the most part, of the same mind in 1775, times would later change them: influencing all of them in different political directions.

This Congress had virtually no power. They did not have any authority to write or change laws. But they could raise an army, financethe war, gathering a pro-independencerecoalition, and they could explore diplomatic alliances with foreign countries.

So little power was given to Congress, by the states, because of a deeply embedded fear of a powerful centralized government. Unwilling to repeat the mistake made in Britain, placing so much power in such a small governing

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body, was something that the states strived to not repeat. And they kept that in mind when they elected to draft the Articles of Confederation.

The Articles of Confederation, drafted by John Dickinson in May 1775, allowed Congress to issue bills, borrow money, to settle all disputes between states, and to administer unsettled western lands. However, many state governments did not like the last two provisions (settle disputes between states and control all western lands). Those issues would cause Congress to debate the Articles for years.

To amend the Articles, all states had to unanimously agree to the changes. Again the second class powers given to the national government was due to the states fear of an all-powerful central government. For it could potentially jeopardize the freedoms of the people it governed. Just like it had when the king of England and Parliament passed various revenue generating taxes on the colonies without representation.

By 1781 economic turmoil began to weaken the newly formed confederation of the states. The cost of the war had plunged the colonies into economic hardship. From 1781 to 1788 is known as the "critical period." After the revolution the first priority was to pay for the war itself.

Congress had given land certificates to soldiers that fought in the war against the British, as payment for their service. They had also printed money to pay for the military supplies and pay soldiers, but the money was never backed by "hard money." Hard money is gold or silver. In 1775 this printed money had some value, but it was virtually worthless by 1781. Many states had also

printed paper money in excess, as well. Further confusing and disrupting the economy and plunging the country into deeper economic debt.

Even though Congress was granted the right to print money, it did not have the right to tax. Without the ability to tax, Congress had no means of collecting revenue to pay for the war. A weakness that was discovered when Robert Morris served as Superintendent of Finance for the Confederation from 1781 to 1784.

Morris originally proposed a five-percent impost tax on all imported goods into the country. But most coastal states already had impost taxes, which they used to pay for their portions of the war debt. Also Congress did not have the authority to impose such taxes on the states populations according to the Articles of Confederation. Nor did they have any means of enforcing compliance of such tax laws. This proposal was soon dropped.

A second plan by Morris called for a nationally supported bank that would hold Congress' s hard money along with other investors and private citizens. In return the bank would give the government short-term loans. This plan also allowed the bank to print " banknotes." Banknotes were paper money that was backed by hard money in the bank vaults: therefore they would not depreciate in value. The theory behind this was that with paper money backed by hard money it would provide the nation with some economic stability.

Morris' national bank worked with limited success. The bank was relatively small; it printed little money (even though it actually printed more paper

money than what it could back in hard money) for circulation. Therefore, it had limited impact on the economy: providing little stability.

In the fall of 1786 the economic troubles of the Confederation reached a peak. Armed men threatened the courts in Massachusetts over the newly imposed taxes passed by the state. Not only were additional taxes passed, but also the state insisted that they be paid in hard money. Most citizens at the time had little hard money on hand.

This caused many to arm themselves again, in protest against the hardships that the government was imposing on them. Daniel Shays was the leader, who was a farmer, and also had served as a captain in the Continental army during the revolution. Shays, with 2, 500 other, marched on the courts of Massachusetts. James Bowdoin, governor of Massachusetts at the time, quickly put the rebellion down. Later this uprising would be called Shays Rebellion.

The significance of Shays Rebellion was that it demonstrated that the nation was still in unrest. Originators of the revolution found themselves on the other side of the table. In their efforts to repay the war debt and maintain a standard of living and success of their businesses, they had placed economic hardships on the people in the form of excessive taxes. Although Congress and the state governments had few options (one being to print money in excess or to heavily tax the people), some thought that there was a better way.

Economic problems come from the simple fact that all thirteen states printed their own money. Some states (with strong economies: Virginia and New  
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York) relied on taxes solely to repay their portions of the war debt quickly. While other states that had poor economies simply printed more money to compensate for monetary fluctuations. One theory was that if a unified economy could be established it would help ease the situation and growing tensions. But to have that you would need a unified national government, one with more powers than the present Congress had to manage it.

At the prompting of James Madison, the Virginia legislature called a meeting of the states. The way this meeting was called bypassed the confederation Congress. The purpose of this meeting was to try and modify the Articles of Confederation, to give Congress power to regulate trade in hopes to improve the economic problems. But only five of the nine states, which agreed to participate, attended. Out of those who did attend, all had the same impression of a pending national crisis. So the meeting was rescheduled for Philadelphia in May 1787 in order to try and get more participants to attend.

During the time it took for a quorum to gather, Madison and the Virginian delegates drafted a fifteen-point plan, which totally restructured the confederation. Once the seriousness was revealed of what was really under discussion, it was unanimously decided to keep all of the proceedings completely confidential. To help keep order, George Washington was elected to preside over the convention.

Virginia was the first to propose vast changes in the federal government. Their plan, presented by Edmund Randolph, called for a three-branch government. With a two chamber legislature, a powerful executive, and judiciary branch. This government operated directly on the people. Congress

had the right to veto state legislation, coerce states militarily to obey national laws, and to legislate in areas where states are incompetent. The executive and judiciary branch could veto jointly any legislation presented by Congress. To say the least this plan was heavily debated. But it did not meet any outright opposition.

William Paterson, who was from New Jersey, presented an alternative plan in mid June. This plan became known as the New Jersey Plan and resembled some of the Articles of Confederation. It had a single house Congress in which the states would have one vote. But it would have a shared three-man presidency, of whom were elected by Congress. This three-man group took the place of the executive and judiciary branches. This plan gave vast powers to Congress: it was allowed to regulate trade, and to use force on unruly states. However, the plan still rested on the confederation principle of the national government that was to be an assembly of states and not of the people.

A compromise later broke the heavy debates over the two plans. By mid July it was agreed that the new form of government should be a three-branch government with supreme power over the states and bicameral legislature (with a Lower House of Representatives appointed by population and the Senate who represented each state). In the Senate the two senators could vote independently of each other. This was the first emergence of the present day federal government; a government based on the representation of the people.

The next hurdle was to define who the people were. In southern states they had large majorities of people who could not vote, but would give power to

them through the new form of Congress. But these people were slaves: the debate was, are they citizens or are they property. To the southern states they were citizens, with the idea that they would allow more power for them in the Congress. However, smaller northern states with little or no slaves viewed them as property. Who had no right to representation in Congress. This debate created what is known as the " three-fifths clause." Which stated that only three-fifths of the non-voting population could be counted when deciding the number of representatives in Congress.

With most of the problems out of the way, the next step was to have the thirteen states ratify the new form of government. Only nine states needed to ratify, and pass, the proposal in order to make it law, however, it was going to be an up hill battle. For the states would not give up their powers so easily.

The proponents of the new government called themselves Federalist; opponents to the new government took the name of Anti-Federalist. By May 1788, eight of the states ratified the proposal. To help gain more support, the federalists James Madison and John Jay wrote a series of essays called " The Federalists Papers." The essays started in October 1787, and totaled eighty-five altogether. They were published in New York newspapers in hopes to win the states vote for the new government. New York was critical to the success of the proposal, after Virginia, New York was the next most influential state. If New York could be persuaded to pass the new form of government it would assure solidity and legitimacy to the new government.



Even though Virginia and New York's ratification was not necessary to the passing of the new government, the federalists wanted to have a unanimous vote. Having these two states would help in pulling the remaining two states in (North Carolina and Rhode Island) into a unanimous agreement among the thirteen states. These two states did finally ratify the new government, but not until May of 1790, and at that, they barely ratified the new government by only a two-vote margin.

Prior to the revolution the ideology that prevailed was that government should be local, and directly represent the people. If a government was to be too large and too far from the people it served, it had the potential to become a dictatorship in its management of country affairs. But because of the economic strain of the war, the thirteen different economies and monetary systems were not adequate. Nor could they stabilize the economics of the confederacy.

A few politicians of the time (like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton) had a vision of a more powerful centralized government that would be able to bring the states in line with national policy and help to stabilize the local economies. While showing the world a unified front among the states.

Several debates would develop over the idea of a more powerful government over such things as the definition of representation by population, the western territories, and the power of the states vs. the power of the federal government and Congress.

Compromises, persuasive arguments, and essays would have to be made by everyone. But finally, in May of 1790, the thirteen states would agree on a

larger, more powerful federal government. Which had authority over the states in matters of taxation, trade, and fundamental laws that transverse state lines.