

Definition: **constitutional convention** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

**1.**

an assembly of representatives or delegates, formed either to formulate a new national constitution, as the conventions held prior to the federation of Australia, or to examine and reform an existing one.

Summary Article: **Constitutional Convention**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

in U.S. history, the 1787 meeting in which the Constitution of the United States was drawn up.

**The Road to the Convention**

The government adopted by the Thirteen Colonies in America (see Confederation, Articles of, and Continental Congress) soon showed serious faults. Congress, powerless to enforce its legislation, was unable to obtain adequate financial support. Although its achievements were not so inconsiderable as has been commonly thought, Congress was, on the whole, impotent, and federal authority was too weak to be of consequence. The central government also was unable to require fulfillment of any obligations it entered into with foreign nations.

Severe economic troubles produced radical economic and political movements, such as Shays's Rebellion. The monetary schemes of the states brought floods of paper money, which some of the states, notably Rhode Island, attempted to force creditors to accept. The threat to economic stability alarmed the wealthy conservative class; the merchants, who found the state tariffs not to their liking, were also harassed by the impossibility of making stable agreements with the English merchants. They were anxious to have a stronger federal government to guarantee order and property rights. The men who had money invested in Western territories also favored a stronger federal government controlling the territories. Therefore, agitation for the adoption of a stronger union grew steadily in force.

Its advocates were zealous. James Madison and George Washington in Virginia, Alexander Hamilton in New York, and James Wilson (1742–98) and Benjamin Franklin in Pennsylvania all favored some new scheme. The pamphlet of Pelatiah Webster was important, although it has been, perhaps, overemphasized by enthusiasts; feeling for union was general.

It was chiefly through the efforts of Madison that Virginia and Maryland agreed to a conference concerning navigation on the Potomac. The conference met in 1785 at Alexandria and at Mt. Vernon, but it was discovered that no agreements could be reached without the concurrence of Pennsylvania and Delaware. The upshot was the calling of a general convention of the states to discuss commercial problems.

This met at Annapolis in Sept., 1786, but delegates from only five states—Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Delaware—arrived. The delegates therefore announced the calling of a general convention to revise the Articles of Confederation, to meet at Philadelphia in May, 1787. Notice was sent to Congress, but the new convention was launched as an extralegal body; cautious Congressional endorsement came only after five states had already selected their delegates.

## The Constitution Emerges

The convention at Philadelphia drew up one of the most influential documents of Western world history, the Constitution of the United States. All the states except Rhode Island sent representatives. The delegates mainly came from the wealthier and more conservative ranks of society and included, besides Washington and the other proponents already mentioned, such leaders as Edmund Randolph, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, William Paterson, Charles Pinckney, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Abraham Baldwin, Luther Martin, and Roger Sherman.

Washington was elected to preside, and the convention immediately set about drawing up a new scheme of government. However, it found itself faced with a rift: the smaller states wanted to retain their power, and the larger states wanted to have power determined by population. It was agreed that the new Congress should be made an effective body, but as to its composition there was great difference of opinion.

The fundamental question was the apportionment of power in the new government. Edmund Randolph offered a plan known variously as the Randolph, the Virginia, or the Large-State Plan; it provided for a bicameral legislature, with the lower house elected according to population and the upper house elected by the lower. William Paterson offered the New Jersey, or the Small-State, Plan; it provided for equal representation of states in Congress. Neither the large states nor the small states would yield, and for a time it seemed that the convention would founder. Oliver Ellsworth and Roger Sherman put forward a compromise measure that gradually won approval; this provided for a lower house to be elected according to population (the House of Representatives) and an upper house to be chosen by the states (the Senate). This initial compromise defused the threat of a walkout by the small states, and the convention settled down to complete its task.

It was agreed that Congress should have the power to levy direct but not indirect taxes. The matter of counting slaves in the population for figuring representation was settled by a compromise agreement that established that three fifths of the slaves should be counted in apportioning representation; slaves were to be treated as property in assessing taxes. Controversy over abolishing the importation of slaves ended with agreement that the importation should not be forbidden before 1808. There were, naturally, many other points of argument, and some of the delegates were so disgusted that they went home and later led the fight in their states against the ratification of the Constitution.

James Madison was responsible for much of the substance of the Constitution, but the style was the work of Gouverneur Morris. The convention was in session until Sept. 17, 1787, and the document was then sent to the states for ratification. Delaware ratified it first, on Dec. 7 of that year. There were serious struggles in most of the states (see *Federalist*, The; Federalist party), especially since the convention had obviously gone beyond its mandate merely to amend the Articles of Confederation.

North Carolina and Rhode Island rejected the Constitution, but the majority clause brought the Constitution into force without them by the end of June, 1788, and they were later forced to accept it. The thesis, associated with the name of Charles Austin Beard, that the Constitution was framed solely to further the economic interest of special groups, notably creditors, land speculators, and holders of public securities, has not been generally accepted by historians.

## Bibliography

See Beard, C. A. , *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913, repr. 1960);.

Farrand, M. , The Framing of the Constitution (1913, repr. 1962) and.

Fathers of the Constitution (1921);

Van Doren, C. , The Great Rehearsal (1948);

Jensen, M. , The New Nation (1950, repr. 1962);

McDonald, F. , We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution (1958, repr. 1962) and.  
The Formation of the American Republic (1967);

Ellis, J. J. , The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789 (2015);

Klarman, M. J. , The Framers' Coup (2016).

### **APA**



Chicago

Harvard

MLA

---

Constitutional convention. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional\\_convention](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional_convention)

---



*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, © Columbia University Press 2018



*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, © Columbia University Press 2018

## APA

Constitutional convention. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional\\_convention](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional_convention)

## Chicago

"Constitutional Convention." In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University. 8th ed. Columbia University Press, 2018.

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional\\_convention](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional_convention)

## Harvard

Constitutional convention. (2018). In P. Lagasse & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia*. (8th ed.). [Online]. New York: Columbia University Press. Available from:

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional\\_convention](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional_convention) [Accessed 19 October 2019].

## MLA

"Constitutional Convention." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 8th edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*,

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional\\_convention](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/constitutional_convention). Accessed 19 Oct. 2019.