

Chapter Summary

Creating a Constitution, 1781–1789

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What gives a government authority?

This chapter examines the reasons that the United States decided to replace the Articles of Confederation with a stronger Constitution and how the Constitution was written and enacted.

The Confederation

- Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, providing a basis for governing.
- Congress promoted trade with Europe and the Caribbean.
- Congress had no power to regulate commerce, enforce treaties, tax, or print money.
- States imposed trade restrictions and tariffs on each other's goods.
- States restricted Britain's ability to collect debts; Congress could not reach a financial settlement with Britain.
- States issued money, but inflation devalued the currency; debt problems led to rebellion and riots in New England.
- Spain restricted American use of the Mississippi River; Congress had no leverage against Spain.
- Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786 raised fears that the republic was at risk.

A New Constitution

- The New Jersey Plan to amend the Articles of Confederation was rejected.
- The Virginia Plan to create a federal Constitution passed.
- The Connecticut Compromise (Great Compromise) led both small and large states to support the Constitution: Congress has a House of Representatives with proportional representation and a Senate where each state has equal representation.

- The Three-Fifths Compromise led Southern and Northern states to support the Constitution: an enslaved person counted as three-fifths of a free person for the purposes of representation and taxation.
- The federal government has three branches: executive (headed by the president), legislative (Congress), and judicial (the courts).
- The system of checks and balances keeps any branch from having too much power.
- The delegates created a clear system for making amendments to the Constitution.

Ratifying the Constitution

- Federalists, who supported ratification of the Constitution, wanted a strong central government to regulate trade and secure property rights.
- Anti-Federalists, who opposed ratification, thought the Constitution endangered the freedoms of the states.
- The arguments for ratification were summarized in *The Federalist*, an influential collection of essays by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay.
- To get the Constitution ratified, supporters also promised to add a bill of rights (Amendments 1–10) to further limit federal power.