

OUR 1ST GOVERNMENT - THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION


Read/Watch – Why the Articles of Confederation Failed - <https://www.thoughtco.com/why-articles-of-confederation-failed-104674>

Independent Citizens Seek

Weak
Awesome Government

When the American colonists gained their independence from the British after the Revolutionary War, the Americans were faced with a problem: What kind of government should they have? They'd lived for years under British rule, and they had lots of complaints. Now they would create a government from scratch, and they had a few requirements.

Their experience under heavy-handed British rule left the newly independent Americans a little bit skittish. Basically, they wanted a government that couldn't do much. They started by drafting a document called the Articles of Confederation. It was the first written constitution of the United States after it was ratified (approved) in 1781. The Articles formed a war-time confederation of states with an extremely limited central government. A confederation is a group of individuals united together for a purpose – in this case, the 13 states that had been British colonies before the war – but retain considerable independence.

	<p>Definition: A confederate government has the power to handle only those matters that the member states have assigned to it.</p> <p>Example: The United States of America under the Articles of Confederation.</p>
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The Articles of Confederation explained how the 13 states would be governed as one nation. Here are the basics: each state was independent and had its own government; each state would send representatives to the "Congress of the Confederation," a lawmaking body; Congress was the only branch of government (no president or courts); in Congress, each state got one vote.

A Rocky Start

**PROS
(GOOD)**

On one hand, the Articles of Confederation had qualities that citizens appreciated. Because the Articles did not set up a very strong government, states got to keep their power and independence. There was no powerful government telling them what to do. Citizens also wanted protection, and the Articles gave Congress the power to create a military to protect all the states.

**CONS
(BAD)**

However, there were problems. For one thing, the Articles did not give Congress the power to enforce its laws. Congress also had no power to collect taxes to pay for things such as the military. The Articles of Confederation did not prevent states from printing their own money.

What else is missing? Did you read anything about a president or leader? This is called an executive. You are right, there was not one listed. Congress would be in charge. The colonists did not want one person to be too powerful, like King George III had been. What about courts? Courts were not a major part of the Articles of Confederation. The state would be in charge of most courts, and Congress would solve any problems that the states couldn't solve on their own. It seemed that Congress would be very busy! And in order to change the Articles, every single state had to agree to the changes. These and other problems meant that, in general, citizens felt like the relationship... er, the government, wasn't working.

Lots of Differences

With thirteen different states, there was no easy solution. Here's why:

- States had different needs. For example, some states depended on fishing, while others mostly grew crops.
- States had different sizes. Some states had many people; others had few.
- People had different opinions. Some people feared a central government, while others thought a central government was necessary.

Here is a list of the problems that occurred with the Articles of Confederation, and how these issues led to our current Constitution.

- 1. The states didn't act immediately.** It took until February 1779 for 12 states to approve the document. Maryland held out until March 1781, after it settled a land argument with Virginia.
- 2. The central government was designed to be very, very weak.** The Articles established "the United States of America" as a perpetual union formed to defend the states as a group, but it provided few central powers beyond that. But it didn't have an executive official or judicial branch.
- 3. The Articles Congress only had one chamber and each state had one vote.** This reinforced the power of the states to operate independently from the central government, even when that wasn't in the nation's best interests.
- 4. Congress needed 9 of 13 states to pass any laws.** Requiring this high supermajority made it very difficult to pass any legislation that would affect all 13 states.
- 5. The document was practically impossible to amend.** The Articles required unanimous consent to any amendment, so all 13 states would need to agree on a change. Given the rivalries between the states, that rule made the Articles impossible to adapt after the war ended with Britain in 1783.
- 6. The central government couldn't collect taxes to fund its operations.** The Confederation relied on the voluntary efforts of the states to send tax money to the central government. Lacking funds, the central government couldn't maintain an effective military or back its own paper currency.
- 7. States were able to conduct their own foreign policies.** Technically, that role fell to the central government, but the Confederation government didn't have the physical ability to enforce that power, since it lacked domestic and international powers and standing.
- 8. States had their own money systems.** There wasn't a common currency in the Confederation era. The central government and the states each had separate money, which made trade between the states, and other countries, extremely difficult.
- 9. The Confederation government couldn't help settle Revolutionary War-era debts.** The central government and the states owed huge debts to European countries and investors. Without the power to tax, and with no power to make trade between the states and other countries viable, the United States was in an economic mess by 1787.
- 10. Shays' Rebellion – the final straw.** A tax protest by western Massachusetts farmers in 1786 and 1787 showed the central government couldn't put down an internal rebellion. It had to rely on a state militia sponsored by private Boston business people. With no money, the central government couldn't act to protect the "perpetual union."

These events alarmed Founders like George Washington, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton to the point where delegates from five states met at Annapolis, Maryland in September 1786 to discuss changing the Articles of Confederation. The group included Madison and Hamilton, and it recommended that a meeting of all 13 states be held the following May in Philadelphia. The Confederation Congress agreed and the Constitutional Convention of 1787 effectively ended the era of the Articles of Confederation.

THE FLAWS OF THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

The weaknesses evident in the Articles of Confederation allowed the states to focus on their own powers. With no central government to control them, the states taxed each other, printed their own money, made treaties with foreign governments, and often refused to uphold the laws of the Confederation government. States quarreled over borders and tariffs, the country was badly in debt, and foreign countries saw the lack of a strong central government as weakness that could easily be exploited. Many leaders began to push for a government strong enough to settle disputes, to regulate commerce, and levy limited taxes. The central government didn't have the ability to collect taxes. The Confederation relied on the voluntary efforts of the states to send tax money to the central government. Lacking funds, the central government couldn't maintain an effective military or back its own paper currency. An important turning point was Shays' Rebellion. This occurred when farmers in western Massachusetts, in debt and unable to pay their taxes, rebelled against foreclosures, forcing judges out of court and freeing debtors from jails. The rebellion in 1786 and 1787 showed the central government couldn't put down an internal rebellion and had to rely on a state militia sponsored by private Boston business people. With no money, the central government couldn't act to protect the "perpetual union." Shays' Rebellion was eventually controlled, but it encouraged leaders to seek a stronger central government.

Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation	→	How the Constitution Remedied Weaknesses
Articles created a "league of friendship" between the states	→	Constitution created a federal system of government
Congress could not tax; Only request contributions	→	National government was given the power to tax
Congress could not regulate interstate trade/foreign commerce	→	Congress given power to regulate commerce and foreign trade
No separate executive to enforce the acts of Congress	→	Article II created a separate executive department whose job is to enforce the laws of Congress
No national judiciary to handle state disputes	→	Article III created a national judiciary with a Supreme Court and lower courts as established by Congress
States and national gov't had the authority to coin money	→	Only the national government has the authority to coin money
Each state had one vote, regardless of size or population	→	States are represented based on population in the House of Representatives and equally in the Senate
Nine of 13 states required to pass legislation	→	Bills need a simple majority in both houses of Congress
Unanimous consent required to amend the Articles of Confederation	→	Two-thirds of Congress and three-fourths of the states are necessary to amend the Constitution