

# OUR 1<sup>ST</sup> 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*  
~~Awsome~~ 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. 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.



**Definition:** A confederate government has the power to handle only those matters that the member states have assigned to it.

**Example:** The United States of America under the Articles of Confederation.

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.

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.

#### CONS (BAD)

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.

That last one was especially troublesome. Many people feared they would lose their freedom if a central government had too much power. Others were tired of the weak government created under the Articles of Confederation and felt like nothing would ever get done if nobody was in charge. In 1787, representatives from every state except Rhode Island met in Philadelphia to fix the Articles. The Constitutional Convention effectively closed the history of government under the Articles of Confederation.

The left side lists the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, and the right side lists some possible consequences of those weaknesses. Identify each weakness from the left to match it to its likely effect on the right.

#### WEAKNESSES OF THE ARTICLES

- Congress had no executive power to enforce laws.
- Congress had no sole power to coin money.
- Congress had no power to levy taxes.
- Congress had no power to regulate commerce (trade).
- Congress had no power to amend the Articles w/out a unanimous vote.

#### EFFECTS OF THE WEAKNESSES

- \_\_\_\_\_ *NO NEW CHANGES* - New attempt at revising the Articles fails to garner enough votes for approval
- \_\_\_\_\_ *YOUR MONEY IS WORTHLESS* - Connecticut says it will no longer accept Rhode Island's "worthless currency"
- \_\_\_\_\_ *NOT FOR SALE HERE* - Virginia bans all goods from Maryland and North Carolina
- \_\_\_\_\_ *STATES CHALLENGE NATIONAL LAWS* - A Georgia citizen disobeys a congressional resolution, but the Georgia legislature says, "O.K."
- \_\_\_\_\_ *DEBT ON THE RISE* - France sends collection notices for war debts; Congress petitions Virginia for a loan