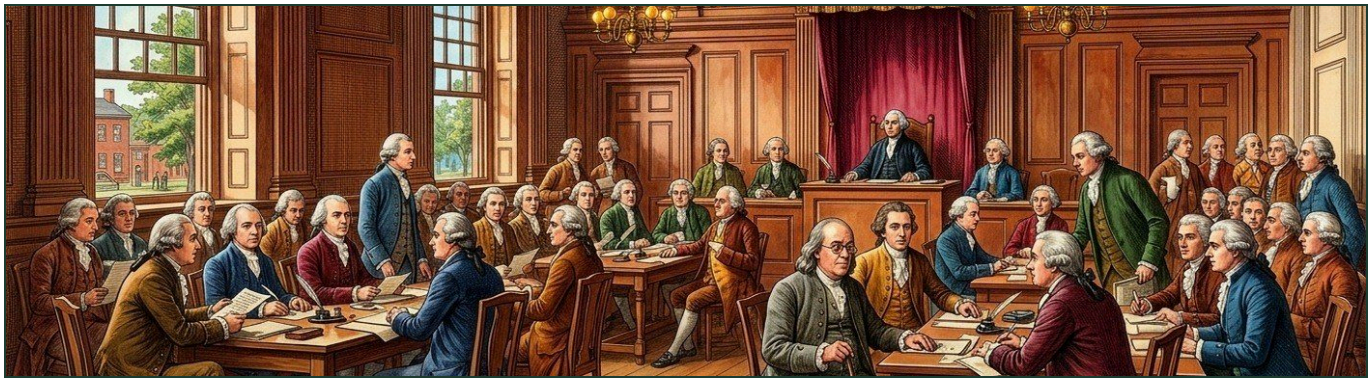


1776 – 1791

Constitutional Convention Timeline

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 produced the United States Constitution — the world's oldest written national constitution still in use — after the nation's first attempt at self-government had nearly collapsed.

1776 — Declaration of Independence

The Continental Congress declares independence from Britain on July 4, 1776, announcing that the thirteen colonies are now the United States — but leaving the question of how to actually govern the new nation entirely unresolved.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Declaration created a nation out of revolution, but revolution is easier than governing — the founders still had to answer the hardest question: what kind of government would replace the king they had just rejected?*

1781 — Articles of Confederation Ratified

The thirteen states ratify the Articles of Confederation — their first constitution — creating a Congress but giving it almost no real power: it cannot levy taxes or regulate trade, important laws need the votes of 9 of the 13 states, and changing the Articles needs all 13.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Articles reflected the founders' deep fear of strong central government after their experience with Britain — but the result was a government so weak it struggled to pay its debts, fund its army, or prevent states from treating each other like foreign nations.*

Constitutional Convention Timeline *continued*

1786–87

Shays' Rebellion

Armed farmers in Massachusetts, crushed by debt and taxes after the Revolutionary War, rebel against the state government; the national government under the Articles can ask the states for soldiers but has no money to pay them, and Massachusetts ends the uprising with militia paid for by Boston merchants, exposing the complete helplessness of the existing system.

> **Why it mattered:** *Shays' Rebellion terrified the founders — if a state government could be threatened by its own citizens and the national government could do nothing, the entire American experiment was at risk; it provided the final push to call the Constitutional Convention.*

May 1787

Constitutional Convention Opens

Fifty-five delegates from twelve states (Rhode Island boycotts) gather at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, officially to revise the Articles — but within days they agree in secret to scrap the Articles entirely and write a new constitution.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Convention's decision to start fresh rather than patch the Articles was one of the boldest political acts in American history — the delegates exceeded their mandate and took on the task of inventing a new form of government from the ground up.*

July 1787

The Great Compromise

The Convention deadlocks between large states (wanting representation based on population) and small states (wanting equal votes); Roger Sherman's Connecticut Compromise breaks the impasse by creating a two-chamber Congress — proportional House, equal Senate.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Great Compromise saved the Convention from collapse — without it, the small states would have walked out; the two-chamber solution it produced remains the structure of Congress today and gives every state equal power in the Senate regardless of population.*

1787

The Three-Fifths Compromise

Northern and Southern delegates clash over whether enslaved people count for representation; they agree to count three of every five enslaved people when dividing House seats and direct taxes among the states.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Three-Fifths Compromise embedded slavery into the nation's founding document, gave Southern slaveholders disproportionate political power in Congress, and planted a contradiction between liberty and bondage that would not be resolved until the Civil War.*

Constitutional Convention Timeline *continued*

September 1787

Constitution Signed and Sent to States

The Convention produces a finished Constitution on September 17, 1787; thirty-nine of the fifty-five delegates sign it; it is sent to the states, where nine of thirteen must ratify it to take effect.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Constitution that emerged was a document of compromises — none of the delegates got everything they wanted, but most believed it was far better than the Articles; the question now was whether the American people would accept it.*

1787–88

Ratification Debate and The Federalist Papers

A fierce public debate erupts over ratification; Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay write 85 essays (The Federalist Papers) defending the Constitution; by June 1788, nine states have ratified, but Virginia and New York ratify only after recommending amendments, and Federalists pledge to add a bill of rights.

> **Why it mattered:** *The ratification debate produced America's most important work of political philosophy — The Federalist Papers — and the promise of a Bill of Rights secured support from skeptics who feared the new government would repeat Britain's abuses of individual liberty.*

1789

First Government Begins

George Washington is inaugurated as the first President on April 30, 1789; the first Congress meets; the new government begins to function under the Constitution for the first time.

> **Why it mattered:** *Choosing a head of state by election under a written constitution was rare in the world of 1789 — most nations changed leaders through inheritance or violence; the American model of constitutional government would inspire revolutions and constitutions around the globe.*

1791

Bill of Rights Ratified

The first ten amendments to the Constitution — the Bill of Rights — are ratified on December 15, 1791, guaranteeing freedom of speech, religion, and the press; the right to a fair trial; and protections against government overreach.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Bill of Rights answered the founders' critics who feared the new government would become tyrannical — by explicitly listing what the government could not do to its citizens, it created the legal foundation for individual liberties that Americans still invoke in courts today.*