

**From VOA Learning English,  
welcome to THE MAKING  
OF A NATION – American  
history in Special English.  
I’m Steve Ember.**



Today, we continue our story of the United States Constitution. In recent weeks, we told the story of how the Constitution was written. In the summer of 1787, a group of delegates gathered for a convention in Philadelphia. Their plan was to rewrite the Articles of Confederation. Those articles created a weak union of the 13 states.

Instead of rewriting the articles, however, they spent that summer writing a completely new plan of government. On September 17th, after four months of often bitter debate, the delegates finally agreed to the new plan. Now, they had to get at least nine of the 13 states to approve it.

Delegates to the Philadelphia convention had met in secret. They wanted to be able to debate proposals, and change their minds, without worrying about public reaction. Now, they were free to speak openly. Each had a copy of the new Constitution.

Newspapers also had copies. They published every word. Public reaction was great indeed. Arguments 'for' and 'against' were the same as those voiced by delegates to the convention: The Constitution would save the United States! The Constitution would create a dictator!

Yale Law School professor Akhil Reed Amar says the public debate

about the Constitution was one of its first successes as a democratic document. He notes that even democracies of long ago, like those in Greece or Italy, did not let citizens vote on their constitutions.

“People could be for the Constitution, or against it, no one was shut down, no one was put in prison if they liked George Washington or they didn’t like

George Washington. Just this proliferation, robust, wide-open, uninhibited discourse, up and down the continent!”

Supporters of the new Constitution understood that to win ratification, they must speak out. So, a few weeks after the document was signed, they began writing statements in support of the proposed Constitution.

Their statements appeared first in newspapers in New York. They were called the Federalist Papers. They were published under the name of “Publius.” But they were really written by three men: Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay.

Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas says he deeply respects the men who wrote the Federalist Papers.

“These are people who were engaged, who knew the Constitution. I also want you to know, these were not scholars. These were farmers. These were businesspeople. Some of whom who had formal education. Some who did not. But they cared about this country.”



Years later, historians said the Federalist Papers were the greatest explanation of the Constitution ever written. But in 1787, they had little effect on public opinion.

The debate over the Constitution divided Americans into two groups. Those who supported it were known as Federalists. Those who opposed it were known as anti-Federalists.

The anti-Federalists were not anti-American. They were governors, heroes of the Revolutionary War, and even a future president. Yet they distrusted the idea of a strong central government.



Give too much power to the president, Congress and the courts, they said, and citizens would no longer be free. They would lose the liberties gained in the war for independence from Britain.

Law professor Akhil Reed Amar says the anti-Federalists were an important part of the debate — and of history.

“The people who opposed the Constitution, who think it could be better still, they’re not cast out. They become presidents of the United States, vice presidents of the United States, justices on the Supreme Court. It’s extraordinary how they’re kept in the process.”

There were both Federalists and anti-Federalists in the Continental Congress. The Congress had few powers. But it was the only central government the 13 states had at that time. It met in New York City.

The convention in Philadelphia had sent the Continental Congress a copy of the new Constitution. Within eight days, the Congress agreed that each state should organize a convention to discuss ratification. One by one, the states held those meetings.

Delaware was the first state to ratify, early in December, 1787. All the delegates voted to approve it. Pennsylvania was the next to ratify, also in December. New Jersey ratified the Constitution in December, followed by Georgia and Connecticut in January. That made five states. The Federalists needed just four more to win ratification.

Massachusetts voted in early February. Delegates to the state convention wanted the Constitution amended to include guarantees to protect citizens' rights. They agreed to ratify if these guarantees were added later.

Maryland ratified the Constitution at the end of April. There, a number of delegates included a letter of protest with their vote. They said if the plan of government were not amended, the liberty and happiness of the people would be threatened.

At the end of May, South Carolina became the eighth state to ratify. Just one more state and the new Constitution would become the law of the land. All eyes turned to Virginia.

Virginia was the biggest of the 13 states. One-fifth of all the people in America lived in Virginia. The men who attended the ratifying convention were among the most famous names in the nation: James Madison, Patrick Henry, George Mason, James Monroe, Edmund Randolph and John Marshall.

The most famous Virginian, George Washington, stayed at his home, Mount Vernon. All during the month of June, however, riders brought him messages from the convention and carried messages back.

Thomas Jefferson was still in Paris, serving as America's representative to France. But others kept him informed of everything that happened at home. Jefferson wrote back that he liked most of the Constitution. But, he said, I do not like the fact that it does not contain a declaration of the rights of citizens.

For three weeks, the Virginia delegates argued about the Constitution. By the end of June, they were ready to vote. Patrick Henry, the outspoken anti-Federalist, asked to make a final statement.

"If this convention approves the Constitution," Henry said, "I will feel that I fought for good reasons...and lost the fight. If this happens, I will wait and hope. I will hope that the spirit of the American Revolution is not lost. I will hope that this new plan of government is changed to protect the safety, the liberty, and the happiness of the American people."

Then the convention voted. Virginia approved the Constitution. However, like Massachusetts, it added that the document must include a declaration of rights for the nation's people.

Federalists in Virginia thought their state was the ninth to ratify, the one that made the Constitution the law of the land. But they soon learned that New Hampshire had ratified a few days earlier. Virginia was number 10. That left three states: North Carolina, Rhode Island, and New York.

In a way, New York was the most important of all. If New York refused to join the union under the Constitution, it would be almost impossible for a central government to rule the nation. The 12 other states would be divided in two, geographically separated by New York state.

Alexander Hamilton was a leader of the Federalists. They used their right to filibuster -- to make many long speeches -- to delay the vote. They wanted to wait to hear what Virginia would do. Early in July, they got the news. But New York's anti-Federalists kept up the fight for three more weeks.

It was not until the end of July that New York finally ratified the Constitution. The vote was extremely close: 30 to 27. Like Massachusetts and Virginia, New York demanded a declaration of rights.

The long struggle to give the United States a strong central government was over. It took four months to write a new Constitution. It took 10 months to ratify it.

Yale Law School professor Akhil Reed Amar says adopting the constitution was, in his words, "the most democratic deed in history."

"For the first time ever in the history of the planet, an entire continent got to vote on how they and their posterity would be governed. And there were lots of exclusions from our perspective, but we wouldn't exist as a democratic country, as a democratic world, but for that." The Continental Congress declared that the Constitution would become effective the first Wednesday in March, 1789. The last two states -- North Carolina and Rhode Island -- did not approve it until many months after that date.

Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania, who had signed the Declaration of Independence, wrote down eight words when he heard that the Constitution had been ratified. "It is done," he said. "We have become a nation."

But before that, the nation's founders had one more question to answer. How would the Constitution guarantee citizens' rights? Delegates at the convention had raised the point many times. And several states made protecting citizens' rights a condition for approving the document. The Bill of Rights will be our story next week.



I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week here at VOA Learning English for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.