

# The Articles of Confederation

## Standard 2.2: The Articles of Confederation

*Analyze the weaknesses of the national government under the Articles of Confederation; and describe crucial events (e.g., Shays' Rebellion) leading to the Constitutional Convention. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Science) [8.T2.2]*

**FOCUS QUESTION: How Did the Articles of Confederation Seek to Balance the Powers of Federal and State Government?**



[1977 13-cent U.S. Postage stamp commemorating the Articles of Confederation bicentennial: the draft was completed on November 15, 1777](#) | Public Domain

Initially proposed in 1777 but not finally ratified until 1781, the **The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union** were the nation's first constitution and established its first central government. [John Dickinson](#), Pennsylvania delegate to the Continental Congress, wrote the first draft, using the phrase "United States of America" possibly for the first time (Lepore, 2018, p. 97).

Prior to the Articles, each of the 13 colonies functioned as its own independent government. The colonies lacked a structure through which to work together toward common goals. The **Articles created a central government**—albeit a weak one—to oversee the conduct of the Revolutionary War and to conduct foreign diplomacy on behalf of the new nation. Historian Jill Lepore (2018) called the Articles "**more like a peace treaty**, establishing a defensive alliance among the sovereign states, than a constitution" (pp. 97-88). Here is the [text of the Articles](#).

The Articles of Confederation brought forth **contentious issues over the power of the federal government versus the autonomy and independence of the states**. "Efforts to revise the Articles proved fruitless," noted Jill Lepore (2018), "even though the Continental Congress had no standing to resolve disputes between the states nor any authority to set standards or regulate trade" (p. 114). Those tensions—coupled with Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts—proved too great for the confederation government and the **Articles ended** when the Constitutional Convention was convened in 1787.

How should the United States achieve a balance between federal versus state power? That question, raised by the Articles, was never fully addressed by the Constitution and it has remained ever-present throughout U.S. history, including the Civil War over slavery, Franklin Roosevelt's responses to Great Depression and the New Deal, and 20th century efforts by southern states to resist integration of African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic again pitted states against the federal government over the allocation of medical supplies, the implementation of testing and contact tracing, decisions about when to re-open businesses and schools, and the administration of financial relief legislation.

The modules for this topic explore the tensions between federal and state power in the 18th century with Shays' Rebellion and in the 21st century with the regulation of self-driving automobiles.

## Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Government Under the Articles of Confederation](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Shays' Rebellion and the Coming of the Constitution](#)
3. [ENGAGE: How Much Power Should the Federal Government Have in the 21st Century? The Case of Self-Driving Cars](#)

## 1.INVESTIGATE: Government Under the Articles of Confederation

[John Hanson](#), a merchant and public official from Maryland, was the first "President of the United States in Congress Assembled" under the Articles of Confederation. The position of President of Congress was largely ceremonial; there was no executive branch of government like there is today. Hanson served one year, issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation, was followed by seven other men, each serving one year terms. There is a statue of John Hanson in the U.S. Capitol Building (see the [Architect of the Capital website](#)).

Congress, under the Articles of Confederation, was **relatively powerless**. It could pass laws, but not enforce them. It could not raise troops for war. It did not have the power to tax, but it could raise money from the states ([Digital History, 2019](#)).

Members of Congress represented states, not people, and each state had one vote. Since any state could veto any proposed legislation, it was difficult to get anything done at a national level. The following wiki pages offer more information about the Articles and their failures as a framework for government:

- [Articles of Confederation](#)
- [Failure of the Articles of Confederation](#)

One major accomplishment of the national government under the Articles was the [Northwest Ordinance of 1787](#) that stated all new territory in the west would be admitted as equal states when they had an elected legislature and a constitution with a Bill of Rights. The Northwest Ordinance also outlawed slavery in new Northwest Territory and guaranteed tribal land rights to Indian people ([The Northwest Ordinance Guarantees Tribal Land Rights](#)).

## **Suggested Learning Activities**

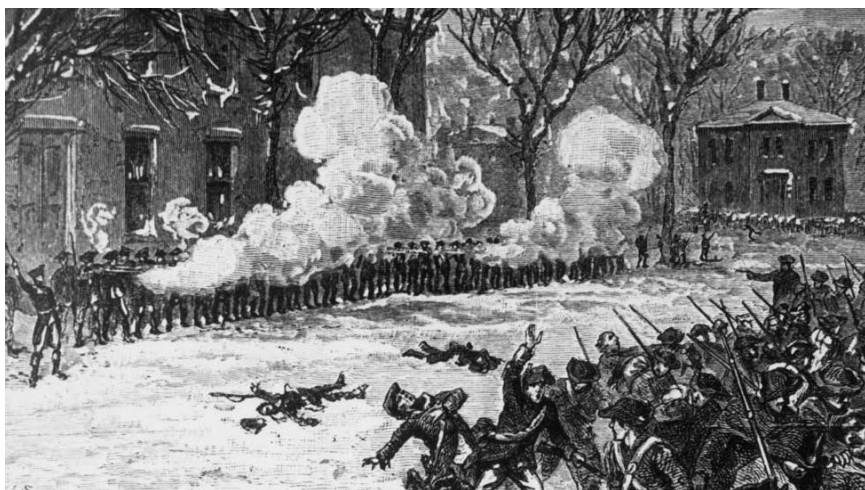
- **Explain Your View**
  - Using historical evidence, explain the major reasons why the Articles failed to create an effective national government.

## **Online Resources for the Articles of Confederation**

- [Articles of Confederation, 1777-1781](#) from the Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State provides an overview of the creation of the Articles of Confederation.
- [Timeline](#) of events preceding the Articles and leading up to the Constitutional Convention.
- New Hampshire adopted the [nation's first constitution](#) in 1776.
- [The Northwest Ordinance](#)

## **2.UNCOVER: Shays’ Rebellion and the Coming of the Constitution**

[Shays’ Rebellion](#) was an armed uprising against the government of Massachusetts by farmers in the western part of the state. It lasted from August 1786 to June 1787.



Shays' Protestors are Repulsed from the Armory at Springfield, Massachusetts  
"[Shay's Rebellion](#)" by Shockabrah is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary War veteran, was the leader of the rebellion. Shays and his followers, facing heavy debt and high taxes, decided to protest the state government and local courts that were auctioning off their homes and land for nonpayment of taxes.

In January 1787, Shays led a group into a confrontation with the state militia at the Springfield, Massachusetts Armory. Shots were fired, four protestors were killed and the rebellion was effectively ended. Listen to a [Podcast](#) on Shays' Rebellion from "Ben Franklin's World: A Podcast About Early American History."

The impact of Shays' Rebellion was profound, illustrating to many that the national government under the Articles of Confederation could not manage finances or effectively enforce laws.

Political leaders worried that more instability and uprisings would follow. Future president George Washington wrote a letter warning of "anarchy and confusion" unless governments can enforce their laws.

Historians agree that the alarm over Shays' Rebellion led to the convening of the Constitutional Convention and the writing of the Constitution.

## Suggested Learning Activities

- **Analyze Primary Sources**
  - [Abigail Adams letter on Shays' Rebellion](#)
  - [Shays' Rebellion: A Massachusetts Farmer's Account](#) from the Constitutional Rights Foundation
- **Create a Graphic of Shays' Rebellion**
  - Use [Shays' Rebellion and the Making of a Nation](#), a website from Springfield Technical Community College as a source of information for your graphic presentation

## Online Resources for Shays' Rebellion

- [Shays' Rebellion](#), U.S. History.org
- [How Did the Leaders of the American Revolution View Shays' Rebellion](#), Learning Plan, University of Maryland, Baltimore County
- [After Shays' Rebellion](#), Learning Plan from America in Class, National Humanities Center

## 3. ENGAGE: How Much Power Should the Federal Government Have in the 21st Century? The Case of Self-Driving Cars

The Articles of Confederation's debates over the powers of state and federal government remain with us today in the 21st century. One example is the case of self-driving cars: **Should the federal or state government have the power to regulate the testing and use of**

these vehicles on streets, roads, and highways?



["Picturization of self driving car from drivers perspective, active breaking and obstacle reconnaissance"](#)  
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**Self-driving cars** (also known as "driverless cars" or "autonomous vehicles") are automobiles where human drivers do not have to operate the vehicle. In design, self-driving cars use laser beams, radar, high-powered cameras and sonar to map their surroundings and then make predictive calculations to perform the necessary driving maneuvers - accelerate, slow down, brake, stop and so on - all without human intervention or control ([Self-Driving Cars Explained](#)). According to [BusinessWire](#), 20.8 million autonomous vehicles will be in operation in the United States by 2030.

Vehicles with different amounts of autonomy are currently being tested and sold - automatic acceleration and speed controls, braking, steering, lane switch prevention - the technology exists for cars to function in most driving situations with humans on alert to take over when prompted to do so. In this fast-developing field, **what level of**



**government has the authority and responsibility to regulate self-driving vehicles?** At the moment, declared *Wired* Magazine, no one is regulating self-driving cars.

The question of regulation took on renewed importance in 2018 when a self-driving Uber test vehicle struck and killed a woman pedestrian in Arizona. While the National Transportation Safety Board is the federal agency overseeing motor vehicle safety, the testing of self-driving cars is seen as a responsibility of state governments. Arizona is leading the way in promoting the development of autonomous vehicles.

There are many competing interests in the development of self-driving cars. Auto manufacturers want less government regulation in order to compete against Chinese companies in a global market for autonomous vehicles. Safety advocates want more government oversight so unproven technology does not result in accidents and deaths. Some states want to pass their own laws while others would prefer the federal government set a standard that everyone must follow. One trucking company actually urged the Trump Administration to build federal highways just for driverless trucks ([We Still Can't Agree How to Regulate Self-Driving Cars](#)).

## Suggested Learning Activities

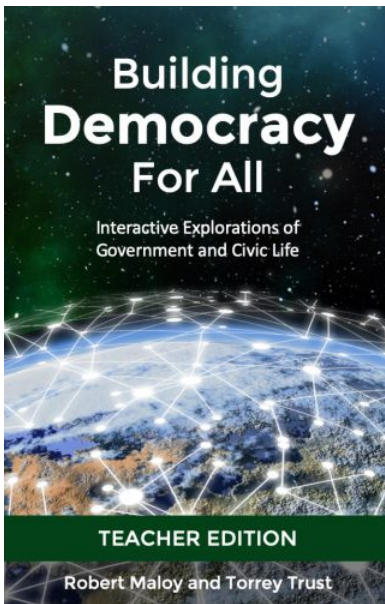
- **Analyze a Video**
  - [Safety Assurance for Self-Driving Vehicles](#) from University of Toronto
  - What can self-driving vehicles do, and not do, safely on roads and highways?
- **Record a Public Policy Statement or Video About Self-Driving Vehicles**
  - What rules should federal and state governments adopt to regulate the development and use of self-driving cars?
- **Express Your View:** How are the debates over the Articles of Confederation continuing to affect your life and the lives of people in your community today?

## Online Resources for Self-Driving Cars

- [Autonomous Vehicles State Bill Tracking Database](#), National Conference of State Legislatures
- [Science of Innovation: Self-Driving Cars](#), NBC NewsLearn

## Standard 2.2 Conclusion

The Articles of Confederation were the nation's first central government. **INVESTIGATE** examined how the government functioned under the Articles, including the continuing issues of state versus federal power and authority. **UNCOVER** explored the role of Shays' Rebellion in the writing of the new Constitution. **ENGAGE** used the example of modern-day self-driving cars to explore the power of the federal government in the 21st century.



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>



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