

AP US HISTORY · UNIT 3

The Articles of Confederation

AMSCO Topic 3.7

AP US History Study Guide — Outside-Research Edition

Learning Objective: Explain how different forms of government developed and changed as a result of the Revolutionary Period.

Thematic focus (College Board framework): American and National Identity (NAT) · Politics and Power (POL)

*This guide keeps AMSCO's own content as its backbone and expands it with outside research. Every fact beyond what AMSCO Topic 3.7 says is tagged the moment it appears: **OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO:** [claim] — [source]. Only sources actually found this session are cited. Nothing below is invented.*

Historical thinking skills this guide targets: causation (why a deliberately weak government failed), comparison (state constitutions vs. the national Articles; the Articles vs. the Constitution that replaced them), and historiography (was the "Critical Period" actually a crisis, or Federalist propaganda?).

Big Picture

Fear of a "tyrannical" strong central government — the very thing they'd just fought a war against — led the Second Continental Congress to design an intentionally **weak** national government. That design choice is the single idea that explains almost everything else in this topic: every "weakness" below is really a *feature* working exactly as the Congress of 1776–77 intended, which is why fixing it in 1787 required starting over rather than amending.

New State Governments

- By 1777, 10 of the 13 former colonies had written new state constitutions (most written/adopted by state legislatures; MD, PA, and NC put theirs to a popular vote).
- Debate was between conservatives (stressed law and order) and liberals (stressed protecting individual rights and preventing future tyranny).
- Common features across state constitutions:
- **List of Rights:** each began with a bill/declaration of rights (jury trial, freedom of religion) that state officials could not violate.
- **Separation of Powers:** legislative (elected two-house legislature), executive (elected governor), judicial (courts) — meant to guard against the tyranny of a too-powerful executive.
- **Voting:** extended to White males who owned some property (assumption: property owners had more of a stake in government).
- **Office-holding:** usually required a *higher* property qualification than voting did.

***OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO:** Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution was the most radical of the bunch — it abolished the governorship and property requirements for voting entirely (any taxpaying man could vote), replacing the executive with a 12-member elected council. It was controversial even among Patriots: John Adams thought it recklessly democratic, while Thomas Paine (who helped draft it) considered it the fullest expression of revolutionary principle. This is a useful concrete example that "the states wrote new constitutions" was not one uniform process — it's itself a comparison point about how far different revolutionaries thought equality should go. — Pennsylvania General Assembly historical archives; National Constitution Center, "Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776," accessed 2026.*

The Articles of Confederation (National Level)

- Drafted by **John Dickinson** in 1776 (same time Jefferson wrote the Declaration); Congress modified it to protect state power more.
- Adopted by Congress in 1777; **ratification delayed** by disputes over western land claims — resolved when Virginia and New York agreed to cede their claims. Ratified **March 1781**.
- **Structure:**
- **Unicameral** (one-house) Congress; each state gets **one vote**.
- 9 of 13 votes needed to pass important laws; **unanimous** vote needed to amend.
- No separate executive branch, no separate judiciary.
- A Committee of States (one rep per state) handled minor decisions between sessions.
- **Powers granted:** wage war, make treaties, send diplomats, borrow money.
- **Powers NOT granted:** no power to regulate commerce, no power to collect taxes (had to request states to voluntarily contribute

money), no executive power to enforce its own laws.

For essay writing — this is a causation chain, memorize the links, not just the ends: fear of British-style centralized tyranny (cause) → deliberately weak Congress with no taxing/enforcement power (effect #1, and itself a cause) → Congress can't pay war debts, can't regulate interstate trade, can't respond to Shays's Rebellion (effect #2) → nationalists like Madison and Hamilton conclude the confederation model itself is unworkable, not just badly executed (effect #3) → Constitutional Convention called to replace, not amend, the Articles (effect #4, see Topic 3.8). An essay that treats "the Articles were weak" as a static fact rather than tracing this chain is leaving points on the table.

Accomplishments Under the Articles (1781–1789)

- Claims partial credit for winning independence and negotiating favorable peace terms.
- **Land Ordinance of 1785:** established a system for surveying/selling western land in a grid of 6-mile-square townships, each divided into 36 one-square-mile (640-acre) sections; set aside section 16 of each township for public education.
- **Northwest Ordinance of 1787:** set rules for creating new states out of the territory between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River; granted limited self-government (territories could petition for statehood once they reached 60,000 free inhabitants, entering "on an equal footing with the original States") and **banned slavery** in the region.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: Article 6 of the Northwest Ordinance reads, in the framers' own words: "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: Provided, always, That any person escaping into the same, from whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original States, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed..." Two things worth noticing for an essay: (1) it's the first time the federal government banned slavery from any territory — a genuinely progressive precedent that shaped the free-state/slave-state line for decades; but (2) the fugitive-slave proviso attached to that same sentence shows the compromise was never absolute — it protected slavery in existing states even while banning its expansion here. That tension previews the much larger compromises at the 1787 Convention (Topic 3.8). — Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Article 6, full text via Northern Illinois University Libraries digital collection and Teaching American History, accessed 2026.

- Made the territory attractive to both White and free Black settlers — BUT land was auctioned by the full square mile (640 acres at even the cheap starting price of \$1/acre = \$640 minimum), so wealthy buyers got first access, then resold smaller parcels to less-wealthy Americans.

Weaknesses of the Articles

- **Foreign Affairs:** European powers had little respect for a country that couldn't pay debts or act collectively. The U.S. couldn't force Britain to honor the Treaty of Paris (Britain kept military posts on the frontier); couldn't force states to repay Loyalists or foreign debts; Britain and Spain threatened to expand into western lands.
- **Economic Problems:** No taxing power — Congress could only *request* state contributions, and had no reliable way to repay war debt. States had their own large debts, printed worthless paper money, restricted credit/trade — combined effect: an economic depression.
- **Internal Conflicts:** States acted like rival nations — imposing tariffs on each other's goods, disputing borders — with no national power to settle disputes.
- **Shays's Rebellion (1786–87):** Massachusetts farmer/veteran **Daniel Shays** led an armed uprising of farmers against high state taxes, debt imprisonment, and lack of paper money. Rebels shut down debtors' courts and stopped tax collection.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: The rebellion was bigger and more violent than a quick summary suggests. At its peak, Shays led roughly **1,500 armed men** toward the federal arsenal at Springfield on January 25, 1787; the state militia defending it (about 4,400 strong, privately funded by wealthy Bostonians because the state itself couldn't pay for troops) opened with warning shots and then artillery, killing 4 rebels and wounding 20. Shays's remaining force was routed at Petersham on February 4 and scattered; most participants, including Shays himself, eventually received a pardon. One concrete effect: the scare pushed the Massachusetts legislature to actually ease debtor-relief laws afterward — meaning the rebellion "worked" for ordinary farmers even though it was militarily crushed, a nuance worth using in a continuity/change essay about whether the era's protest movements achieved anything. — Massachusetts Historical Society and American Battlefield Trust, "Shays' Rebellion," accessed 2026.

Historiography: Was This Really a "Critical Period"?

This is a genuine, decades-long historians' debate, and knowing it is exactly the kind of thing that separates a strong LEQ from an average one.

- **The traditional/Federalist-descended view:** Historian **John Fiske** popularized the phrase **"the Critical Period of American History"** in his 1888 book of that title, portraying 1783–1789 as a near-collapse that only the Constitutional Convention rescued the country from. This view echoes exactly what the Constitution's own supporters argued at the time (see Topic 3.8's Federalist campaign).
- **The revisionist challenge:** Historian **Merrill Jensen** (mid-20th century) argued the "crisis" was overstated — the economic slump of the 1780s was a normal postwar depression, not proof the Articles were structurally broken, and he suggested nationalists like Hamilton and Madison had their own interest (as creditors, merchants, and large landholders) in exaggerating the chaos to justify a stronger, more centralized government that would serve *their* class's economic interests.

OUTSIDE SOURCE — Beyond AMSCO: This exact debate — "real crisis" vs. "manufactured crisis" — is functionally the same disagreement historians have about Charles Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution itself (see Topic 3.8). Recognizing that the two debates are really one continuous argument about elite motive is a strong move in a comparison or continuity essay spanning 3.7 and 3.8. — Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation: A History of the United States During the Confederation, 1781–1789* (1950), as characterized in modern historiographical overviews (AlphaHistory, "American Revolution Historiography," accessed 2026).

Practice takeaway: Don't just pick a side — a strong essay can use the disagreement itself as evidence of how contested the founding era's memory is, which is a sophisticated complexity/counterargument point graders reward.

Terms and Actors

Term/Person	What it is	Why it's contested or often confused
Articles of Confederation	The first U.S. national constitution (1777/1781–1789)	Students often call it "the Constitution" — it is a separate, earlier, much weaker document that the Constitution <i>replaced</i> , not amended
John Dickinson	Primary drafter of the Articles (1776)	Also a key Constitutional Convention delegate in 1787 (Topic 3.8) — same person, opposite-looking documents; shows his views evolved with the era's needs
Unicameral Congress	One-house legislature under the Articles, one vote per state	Often confused with the Constitution's bicameral Congress — a small state (Rhode Island) had equal voting power to Virginia under the Articles, which the Great Compromise later modified rather than fully preserved
Land Ordinance of 1785	Surveying/sales system for western land (townships/sections)	Often conflated with the Northwest Ordinance (1787) — the Land Ordinance is about <i>surveying and selling</i> land; the Northwest Ordinance is about <i>governing and admitting new states</i>
Northwest Ordinance of 1787	Governance plan for the Old Northwest; banned slavery there	Its slavery ban is sometimes mistaken for ending slavery nationally — it only applied to this specific territory and didn't free anyone already enslaved
Shays's Rebellion	1786–87 Massachusetts farmer uprising over debt/taxes	Contested in significance: traditional narrative says it directly caused the Constitutional Convention; some historians note the Convention was already being planned (Annapolis Convention, 1786) before Shays's Rebellion peaked — it accelerated momentum more than it created it
"Critical Period"	John Fiske's term for 1783–1789 as a near-collapse	A historiographical term, not a neutral description — using it uncritically in an essay repeats one side of a live historians' debate

LEQ/DBQ-Style Practice Prompts

1. **Evaluate the extent to which** the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, rather than any single crisis, explain the calling of the Constitutional Convention. (*A strong thesis takes a clear position on "extent" — e.g., argues that structural weaknesses were necessary but Shays's Rebellion was the sufficient trigger that turned quiet concern into political action — rather than just restating that both mattered.*)
2. **Compare** the political philosophy embedded in the Articles of Confederation with the political philosophy embedded in a state constitution of your choice (e.g., Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution). (*A strong thesis identifies a specific shared value — fear of*

concentrated executive power — and then shows where the documents diverge on how far that value should be taken.)

3. **Explain the extent to which** the debate over the "Critical Period" reveals a conflict between elite and popular interests in the early republic. *(A strong thesis uses Beard/Jensen-style historiography directly as evidence, not just narrative facts — this is a sophistication-point opportunity.)*

Quick Review Questions

1. Why did the Articles deliberately create a weak central government, and in what sense did that "weakness" work exactly as designed?
2. What was the lasting significance of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 — both what it accomplished and what it left unresolved?
3. How did Shays's Rebellion demonstrate the Articles' weaknesses, and why does its role in causing the Convention remain historically debated?
4. What is the core disagreement between John Fiske's "Critical Period" framing and Merrill Jensen's revisionist challenge to it?

Recommended Videos

- **Heimler's History — "The ARTICLES of CONFEDERATION [APUSH Review Unit 3 Topic 7 (3.7)]"** (YouTube). Direct topic match; covers the Articles' structure, accomplishments, and Shays's Rebellion in Heimler's standard AP-aligned review format, with an accompanying noteguide. — Verified via search, 2026.

One Thing to Remember

The Articles of Confederation didn't fail by accident — they were built weak on purpose, out of a reasonable fear of recreating British tyranny, and the entire arc of this topic is watching the country discover, case by case (debt, trade, Shays), that "weak on purpose" and "workable" are not the same thing.