



# CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

[csac.history.wisc.edu](http://csac.history.wisc.edu) > Ratification at a Glance > Connecticut > Connecticut Ratification > Significant Events and Individuals in Connecticut Politics

## Introduction to Ratification in Connecticut

The “constitution” of Connecticut until 1818, when the state wrote its first constitution, was the charter granted by King Charles II in 1662. The charter was similar to those granted to companies of sixteenth century English merchants trading overseas. It created a “Body Politick and Corporate” with a governor, deputy governor, and twelve assistants chosen annually from among the “freemen” of the “company,” and provided that they should meet twice a year in a “General Assembly” with not more than two deputies from each town.

The outline thus provided was filled out by the legislature during the next century. Unlike the royal colonies where governors, upper houses, and supreme courts, and local judicial and militia officials were appointed by the king or the governor, every official in Connecticut was elected by the voters or by the legislature. The governor, deputy governor, the twelve members of the Council (assistants), the secretary, and the treasurer were elected annually in colony-wide elections. When candidates for governor and deputy governor did not receive a majority of votes, the legislature elected them.

Only freemen could vote in colony-wide elections. Freemanship was granted by the selectmen of the towns on petition from individuals, and had to be approved by “the Authority,” a justice of the peace representing the state. Freemen had to be twenty-one years of age, own a freehold estate worth forty shillings annually or personal property worth £40, and be “of a quiet and peaceable behavior, and civil conversation. . . .”

Freemen’s meetings elected delegates to the House of Representatives every six months. They nominated twenty men for governor, deputy governor, and the Council every fall, and elected twelve councillors and the governor and deputy governor every spring. The legislature annually elected the judges of the superior court, judges of the county courts, and justices of the peace, of whom there were nearly three hundred and fifty by 1776.

The towns annually elected a variety of local officials ranging from selectmen to fence viewers. Voters in town meetings had to own land worth fifty shillings a year, or personal property worth £40. Freemen could also vote in town meetings even if they did not meet the higher land-value qualification.

\* \* \* \*

In 1776 Connecticut was a self-governing republic whose powers were limited only by the occasional royal veto of laws and the occasional appeal of cases from the colony’s courts to the King’s Privy Council. Independence removed those restraints. Otherwise there was no constitutional change, much less a revolution. In October 1776 the legislature resolved to continue the charter of 1662 as the “constitution” of the new state.

So far as there was a political revolution, it occurred ten years before the Declaration of Independence. In the 1750s the eastern part of the colony was a center of discontent, and there was a scarcity of good land for a growing farm population. Eastern leaders developed the argument that the upper Susquehanna Valley in Pennsylvania was within the boundaries of Connecticut's "sea to sea" charter. In 1753 they organized the Susquehannah Company and sent settlers to the Wyoming Valley of the Susquehanna River despite the protests of the Pennsylvania proprietors and the opposition of western Connecticut leaders, including Thomas Fitch of Norwalk who became governor in 1754.

After 1763 easterners were the "popular leaders" of opposition to British measures. Their opportunity to win control of the colony came when Governor Fitch took an oath to enforce the Stamp Act, and a leading citizen of New Haven, Jared Ingersoll, was appointed stamp distributor. In the elections in the spring of 1766, Governor Fitch was defeated and replaced by Deputy Governor William Pitkin of Hartford. After Pitkin's death in 1769, eastern leader Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., of Lebanon became governor. The easterners who won control in 1766, and their allies in the west, led the colony into the War for Independence without the political upheaval that took place in other colonies.

Some writers since the Revolutionary era have pictured Connecticut as a "town meeting democracy," but contemporaries did not. When lawyer David Daggett delivered the Fourth of July oration in New Haven in 1787, he described Connecticut's government before 1776 as "a most perfect aristocracy" because "the minister, with two or three principal characters were supreme in each town. Hence the body of the clergy, with a few families of distinction, . . . in effect, ruled the whole state." In 1808 John Adams said much the same. Connecticut, he wrote, "has always been governed by an aristocracy. . . . Half a dozen, or, at most, a dozen families, have controlled that country when a colony, as well as since it has been a state."

Connecticut politics were indeed controlled by a small group of men who were quite literally "elder statesmen." In the sixty years between 1724 and 1784, Connecticut had six governors, all of whom first served as deputy governors. Three of them died in office at ages seventy-two, seventy-six, and seventy-five; two were defeated for re-election at ages seventy-five and sixty-six; and Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., elected in 1769, refused to run for re-election in 1784 at age seventy-three. Long tenure was also characteristic in lesser offices. Hezekiah Wyllys, his son, and grandson held the office of secretary of the colony and of the state for ninety-eight years—from 1712 to 1810.

The patterns established before 1776 remained unchanged afterwards. William Williams (1731–1811) of Lebanon was but one example. He was town clerk, 1752–96; selectman, 1760–85; delegate to the House of Representatives, 1757–76, 1780–84, and Speaker of the House, 1774–75, 1781–84; judge of the Windham County Court, 1775–1805 and of Windham District Probate Court, 1775–1809; member of the Council, 1776–80, 1784–1803; delegate to Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, 1776–77; and delegate to the state Convention, 1788.

Leaders such as Williams often quarrelled with one another, but as a group they controlled the legislature, and through it and the courts—with the legislature itself as the final court of appeals—they controlled every facet of life in the state.

Discontented voters might elect new men to the House every six months, but the method of electing the Council guaranteed stability most of the time. Each voter could nominate twenty

men in the fall elections. A legislative committee then prepared a ticket containing the names of the twenty men receiving the most nominating votes. But the ticket was not arranged according to the number of votes. The governor and deputy governor were placed first, with councillors and ex-councillors following in order of seniority. Thus in 1790, William Williams, the senior councillor, ranked twentieth in the number of nominating votes, whereas a newcomer was first. The committee placed Williams third on the ticket, and the newcomer last. Williams was re-elected and the newcomer was defeated.

In the spring elections as each name was called off, beginning with the head of the ticket, voters handed in a ballot. Few voters seem to have had the courage to withhold ballots in order to vote for someone at the bottom of the ticket. As the Reverend Timothy Dwight explained in his *Travels*, the method of election enabled “senior councillors” to “continue in office until they resign or die.” They, he said, “are literally representatives of the wisdom and worth of the community.”

\* \* \* \*

A government designed to maintain continuity in office and political stability, and one in which the all-powerful legislature was accustomed to make the most minute decisions, was not equipped to meet demands imposed by the War for Independence. The legislature was reluctant to delegate authority, but in the end it was forced to allow the governor, the Council of Safety, judges of the courts, and town officials to carry on much of the business of providing men and supplies, and to take care of such matters as the needs of soldiers’ families. However, the legislature always made it clear that the delegation of authority was temporary.

Connecticut became a remarkably dependable source of war supplies, particularly of food, and the providing of them brought about a revolution in the economy of the state. The demand for food gave farmers markets such as they had never had before. Supplies were sent by safe inland roads to American forces, and some of it to the British in New York as well. The farmers made money, but the merchants who bought and transported goods to the armies made far more. By 1783 Connecticut contained a group of men far wealthier than the wealthiest men before the war. Outstanding among them was Jeremiah Wadsworth, the orphaned son of a minister who had gone to sea as a common sailor and had become a ship captain by 1775. Between 1775 and 1783 he was successively commissary for Connecticut troops, commissary of purchases for Congress, and commissary for the French forces. After the war, he was one of the wealthiest men in America.

The economic revolution was accompanied by increasing conflict between what was called “the landed interest” and “the trading interest.” Farmers charged merchants with profiteering, and the legislature passed laws fixing prices, forbidding trade with the enemy, and requiring that state and Continental paper money be accepted at face value. Furthermore, the legislature taxed merchants’ profits, and cash and goods on hand.

Merchants denounced farmers as extortioners who were amassing wealth at the expense of widows and orphans and insisted that price-fixing was an example of despotic government. In 1780 they gained a measure of influence, and during that year the legislature made paper money payable at real value rather than face value, and lowered taxes on merchants.

After 1780 the conflict between the mercantile and agrarian interests continued, although neither group won complete control of the legislature. Governor Trumbull himself was accused of trading with the enemy and of taking bribes to favor Loyalists. In 1780, 1781, and 1783 he

did not receive a majority of the popular votes, although the legislature re-elected him each year. In October 1783 he delivered a “farewell address” announcing that he would not run for re-election, and urging the legislature to grant the Confederation Congress more power, and in particular, the power to raise money to pay the debts of the late war.

The address came at a time when the state was in the midst of a political upheaval unmatched since the dispute over the Stamp Act. Much of it centered around pensions for Continental Army officers. Such pensions had been an issue since 1778 when Congress promised officers half-pay for seven years after the war. Then in 1780, while the British were winning one victory after another, the threat of mass resignations by American officers forced Congress to promise them what they demanded—half-pay for life as in European armies. The next year, Congress asked the states to amend the Articles of Confederation to give it the power to collect import duties. Connecticut agreed, provided that the money collected would not be used to pay officer pensions. Congress abandoned the proposed amendment in December 1782 because unanimous ratification by the states, as the Articles required, could not be obtained.

In the spring of 1783, three events outside the state created a storm of popular opposition within it. In March Congress “commuted” the promise of half-pay for life to full-pay for five years. In April Congress requested the power to collect import duties for twenty-five years (the “Impost”), and a grant of supplemental funds from the states. Then in May a group of Continental Army officers created an hereditary organization, the Society of the Cincinnati, and some 250 Connecticut officers became members.

The creation of an hereditary order in the new republic, in which titles of nobility were forbidden, aroused alarm throughout the nation. “Commutation” aroused popular opposition, especially in New England, and above all in Connecticut whose congressional delegates voted for commutation. The Articles of Confederation required the votes of nine states for the passage of all important measures. On 10 March 1783 only eight states voted for commutation while Connecticut’s vote was divided, with Oliver Wolcott, Sr., voting for and Eliphalet Dyer voting against the measure.

But Dyer, like some other members of Congress, was fearful of any army whose officers were threatening to mutiny over the pay issue. Therefore, a few days later, after writing a preamble declaring that commutation was preferable to lifetime pensions, Dyer switched his vote and Congress adopted commutation.

Dyer lost his seat in Congress and in the Connecticut Council as a result of his vote, but commutation had far wider consequences. Governor Trumbull and the Council supported commutation and the Impost, as did Continental Army officers. And so too did merchants with large holdings of the national debt, particularly the “bonds” (i.e., Continental loan office certificates) which Congress had issued to borrow money and to buy military supplies. In 1783 the loan office debt was estimated at about eleven and a half million dollars, and over eleven percent of it was held in Connecticut.

Many people, including state militia officers and soldiers, who would not benefit from commutation, opposed the measures. One town charged that Congress was using the army to acquire powers contrary to the Articles of Confederation. Another charged that commutation would end in the creation of an aristocracy, and that the people would be excluded from any share in government which would be committed “to the great and powerful alone.”

On 5 June 1783 the House responded to petitions from the towns by adopting a letter of protest to Congress, but the Council refused to agree. The opponents of commutation then called a convention at Middletown, and a majority of towns sent delegates to the second session on 30 September. The Convention sent the legislature a petition denouncing “the GRATUITY made by the honorable American Congress to the officers of the army for services not to be performed. . . .” Connecticut had compensated its Continental officers for their actual services “far beyond their fellow citizens” and “the extra gratuity aforesaid is unconscionable [and] not warranted by the federal constitution. . . .”

The petition also demanded political reforms that were—for Connecticut—revolutionary. The public accounts of the state should be settled and public defaulters brought to justice. Expenditures of public money should be made public. Unnecessary public officials should be fired. The constitution of the state should be revised. The votes of the legislature should be published and the “House of Assembly” should be opened to the public.

More than sixty percent of the representatives lost their seats in the fall election, and when the new House met in October, agrarian leaders James Wadsworth, Erastus Wolcott, Joseph Hopkins, William Hillhouse, and others proposed an address to Congress. The Council refused to agree, whereupon the House adopted an “Address & Remonstrance” and ordered Speaker William Williams to send it to Congress.

The Address noted that Congress had asked for the power to collect import duties, and then noted that five million dollars for Continental Army officers was included in a statement of the public debt. The Address then declared that the House was not satisfied that the grant to the officers was “warranted by the Articles of Confederation, or that the power to make such a grant was ever delegated to Congress. This is generally disgusting and is considered as an unnecessary exercise, if not an unwarrantable stretch of power. . . .”

The House reminded Congress of political reality. After reviewing what the state had done for its Continental officers at the request of Congress, the Address concluded that “these considerations have made such deep impressions on the minds of this House and the people of this state that it seems impracticable to execute any measure for raising its quota of the debt stated.” The House backed up the threat, for in January 1784, when the Council voted to approve the Impost of 1783, the House rejected it by a vote of 69 to 37.

The results of the elections in the spring of 1784 were mixed. Half the House members were not re-elected, including more than half of those who had voted against the Impost in January. On the other hand, agrarian William Williams, who had been Speaker of the House since 1781, was elected to the Council. Lieutenant Governor Matthew Griswold, who had been associated with Governor Trumbull ever since they were first elected in 1769, neither received enough nominating votes to be placed on the official ticket, nor a majority of the popular votes in the spring of 1784. However, the legislature followed tradition and elected him to replace Trumbull as governor.

The results of the legislative sessions during the rest of the year were as mixed as the elections, with both the mercantile and agrarian factions achieving something of what they wanted. The first recorded act of the spring session of 1784 was a triumph for the agrarians. The act excluded, after May 1785, judges of the Superior Court from seats in the legislature and in Congress. Since the Lieutenant Governor, who presided over the Council, was elected Chief Judge of the court

each year, and the other four judges were usually members of the Council, the act was a clear blow at the power of the Council which supported commutation and increased power for Congress. The blow was softened, in appearance at least, by establishing the Council as the Supreme Court of Errors to hear appeals from the Superior Court, and by substituting tenure during the pleasure of the Assembly for annual elections. That provision was ignored, and the Assembly continued to elect Superior Court judges annually even though the Council blocked repeal of the provision in 1785.

The mercantile faction was able to win approval of the Impost of 1783 by a vote of 93 to 42. The *Connecticut Courant* greeted the act with a declaration of the need for congressional power that far outdid Governor Trumbull's farewell address of the previous autumn. The *Courant* declared: "Never did people in general feel more satisfaction at any public measure than in consequence of this act. Every well wisher to a *Continental* Union must feel every hour, the necessity of a *Continental* head—the necessity of harmonious concert in *Continental* measures—the absolute necessity of *unanimity* and *vigor* in all our federal operations."

The *Courant* did not mention that the foes of commutation had forced the supporters of the Impost to pay a price. The act approving the Impost contained a "*Provided always*" section which quoted a resolution of Congress of 16 December 1782. In that resolution, Congress promised Rhode Island, which had refused to ratify the Impost of 1781, that the money raised would be used solely to pay the interest on and principal of the national debt, "and shall on no account be diverted to any other use." Connecticut thus made it clear that Congress could not pay any of the money collected to former Continental Army officers.

Merchant arguments for commercial development were more persuasive. During 1784 the legislature adopted such measures as an act levying higher duties on foreign goods imported by way of other states than when brought directly into Connecticut ports from overseas. Another measure was the establishment of two free ports to attract trade to the state. The legislature also responded to appeals from growing urban centers and their merchant inhabitants by incorporating New Haven, New London, Hartford, Middletown, and Norwich. Merchants argued that city governments would benefit commerce. And, not incidentally, incorporation freed merchants from having to cope with farmers from the surrounding countryside in town meetings.

In 1785 the legislature granted Congress' request for the power to regulate trade for a period of fifteen years. All but the most recalcitrant agrarians agreed with merchants on measures to free the state from its economic dependence on other states. Two years later one of the major arguments for the Constitution was that the regulation of trade and the collection of import duties by Congress would lower taxes on Connecticut farmers and save the state from paying a "tribute" of as much as £50,000 a year on foreign goods brought in from New York. Paradoxically, such arguments were often coupled with assertions that the commerce of Connecticut, and of the country as a whole, was in a state of utter collapse.

The adoption of such measures did not mean that the merchant faction was gaining control. The reverse was true. After the fall elections in 1784, James Wadsworth, the aggressive agrarian and future Antifederalist leader, was elected Speaker of the House, and he was re-elected Speaker after the spring elections in 1785.

In those elections William Williams and Joseph Platt Cooke were re-elected to the Council, and another agrarian, William Hillhouse, was elected for the first time. The act barring Superior

Court judges from seats in the legislature went into effect, and the agrarians made further gains. Judges William Pitkin, Roger Sherman, and Richard Law, who had been re-elected to the Council, resigned as councillors in order to be re-elected to the Superior Court, along with Eliphalet Dyer. Two of the replacements on the Council were agrarians Erastus Wolcott and Jonathan Sturges who had helped prepare the address to Congress against commutation in the fall of 1783. And then when Oliver Ellsworth was elected the fifth judge of the court, the House elected its Speaker, James Wadsworth, to take Ellsworth's place on the Council.

The agrarians increased their strength in the House during the next two years by creating eighteen new and predominantly agrarian towns, and the legislature adopted and continued policies which benefited farmers. Taxes were made payable in soldiers' notes, which the state had used to pay its militia, and in other forms of state debt. This measure, which had been defeated by the Council in January 1784, was passed in May 1784 and made more generous in May 1785. It helped taxpayers and made it possible to reduce the state debt from nearly four million dollars in 1783 to under two million by 1789. In 1785 the towns were allowed to abate part or all of the taxes of individuals who could not pay, provided the amount did not exceed five percent of a town's total tax. Measures were also adopted to help farmers directly. In 1784 yearling cattle and all swine were removed from the list of taxable property, and in 1786 farmers were allowed to deduct a portion of their sheep from the tax list. However, there was one means of relief the legislature refused to adopt—an issue of paper money.

In addition to specific tax-relief measures, some agrarian leaders hoped to “reform” the tax structure. Councillor Erastus Wolcott, in signed newspaper articles early in 1787, proposed that the share of taxes paid by farmers be lessened and that a greater share be paid by those best able to pay—merchants and professional men.

The result of the attitude of agrarian leaders, and of their legislative policies, was that Connecticut was able to relieve enough of the economic distress of its citizens to avoid the violent farmer rebellion that took place in Massachusetts during the fall and winter of 1786–87.

As for Congress, the legislature made it clear during 1785 and 1786 that it could not expect help. In October 1784 the legislature had levied additional duties on foreign goods, with the money to be used to help pay the state's quota of the interest on the national debt. A year later, however, the legislature ignored a committee report which stated that a tax on polls and estates would have to be levied to meet a congressional requisition. At the same time, it ordered the delegates in Congress to provide the legislature with an accurate list of the number of officials employed by Congress and the salaries paid to them. Then, in October 1786, the legislature bluntly ordered the Governor to tell the President of Congress, “in a summary manner,” that Connecticut had no money to pay congressional requisitions, but to assure him “of the hearty attachment of the good people of this state to the Union.”

The political alignment in Connecticut by the autumn of 1786 was summed in the *Connecticut Courant* in November. “There are two parties in the state—jealous of each other; *federal men and anti-federal*. The federal men suppose the anti-federal to be knaves, designing artful demagogues. The anti-federal suppose the federal to be ambitious tyrannical men, who are aiming at power and office at the expense of people at large.” The writer predicted that “the system of measures now pursuing by the majority of the legislature would, if carried through, inevitably bring disgrace, poverty, and ruin upon this state. . . .”

The author, Noah Webster, went on to declare: “For my own part, I confess, I was once as strong a republican as any man in America. Now a republican is among the last kinds of governments I should choose. I should infinitely prefer a limited monarchy, for I would sooner be subject to the caprice of one man, than to the ignorance and passions of a multitude.”

Webster reflected, in more temperate language than many, the feelings of “federal” men in Connecticut. They were frightened by Shays’s Rebellion in Massachusetts, horrified by Rhode Island’s economic measures, and outraged by such “anti-federal” proposals as the one that men should be taxed according to their wealth.

During the fall and winter of 1786–87 “anti-federal” leaders in Connecticut and in other states were vilified and denounced for their domestic policies and for their opposition to the increase of congressional power. The scurrilous verses of the *Anarchiad*, which were published in the *New Haven Gazette* between 26 October 1786 and 13 September 1787, pictured such men as leaders of “the young DEMOCRACY of Hell,” as men bent on destroying the Union and on establishing “Chaos” in its place. Those leaders were also satirized in a rare political cartoon, “The Looking Glass for 1787,” which was published as a broadside some time before the meeting of the legislature in May 1787.

Among the individuals attacked was Councillor William Williams who opposed the Society of the Cincinnati. He suspected that the Society and land speculators were seeking control of the Western Reserve on the southern shore of Lake Erie, which Congress had guaranteed to Connecticut in exchange for the cession of its other claims to western lands. His suspicions were published, and he was at once nicknamed “William Wimble” and made the butt of newspaper satires. And after Williams closed the Windham County Court in December 1786, Samuel Holden Parsons, president of the Connecticut Cincinnati, attacked him as a follower of Daniel Shays and a supporter of Shays’s Rebellion in Massachusetts. The bitter newspaper exchanges between the two men that followed led to the brawl between them in the Connecticut Convention in January 1788.

Above all, “federal” writers sought to destroy the political career and influence of James Wadsworth. They labelled him “Wronghead” and accused him of using his position on the Council to destroy the Union, of cowardice during the War for Independence, and of being a follower of Daniel Shays.

There were of course more serious essays on the subject of government, and on a far different level. Perhaps the best summation of Connecticut arguments for constitutional change, the kind to be hoped for from the Convention then meeting in Philadelphia, was David Daggett’s oration in New Haven on 4 July 1787.

Personal attacks in prose and poetry, and serious essays arguing for a stronger central government which could pay the debts of the United States may have had some effect on Connecticut voters. Shays’s Rebellion in neighboring Massachusetts had far more by the spring of 1787.

But in the fall of 1786 the legislature ignored the recommendation of the Annapolis Convention that a constitutional convention meet in the spring of 1787. The report of the Annapolis meeting was published in the *New Haven Gazette* on 5 October, and the Assembly met in New Haven on the 12th. Presumably the report, which had been sent to the executives of the states, was among the “public letters” read in the Assembly, but no action followed. David Humphreys later reported that some opposed a convention because the freemen had not been consulted and



had not authorized the election of delegates, that others believed a convention would be an interference with or a usurpation of the powers of Congress, and that any proposed changes should originate with Congress. Furthermore, the “perfectly federal” members of the Assembly did not bring the matter up because they were convinced that if the Assembly elected delegates, they would be “some of the most antifederal men in the state who believe or act as if they believed that Congress is already possessed of too unlimited powers and who would wish apparently to see the Union dissolved.” “These Demagogues,” declared Humphreys, try to persuade the people of the “danger of having their liberties stolen away by an artful designing Aristocracy.”

Congress’ resolution of 21 February 1787 calling the Constitutional Convention solved the question of legality. The resolution was printed in six Connecticut newspapers beginning with the New Haven *Connecticut Journal* on 28 February. The Council advised Governor Huntington that a special session of the Assembly would not be worth the trouble and expense, and that no disadvantage would result from putting off the matter of electing delegates to the regular May session. Late in March David Humphreys probably reflected the fears of other “federal men” when he warned George Washington not to attend the Constitutional Convention because it was almost certain to fail. “Connecticut,” he said, “is under the influence of a few such miserable, narrow-minded, and I may say wicked politicians, that I question very much whether the legislature will choose members to appear in the Convention; and if they do, my apprehension is still greater that they will be sent on purpose to impede any salutary measures that might be proposed.”

Such fears proved unfounded, for the new Assembly which met on 10 May did elect delegates, and the men elected did not “impede” the creation of a new government. But the election was preceded by a debate, the only such debate reported as occurring in any state legislature. In debating the wisdom of sending delegates and the necessity of a change in the central government, Connecticut legislators anticipated some of the central arguments that were used a few months later in the debate over the ratification of the Constitution.

One opponent of electing delegates feared the creation of an “arbitrary power” and “the destruction of the poor.” The Articles of Confederation “were sufficient for every purpose,” and a stronger constitution might lead to a “regal government” which would endanger “the liberties of the people.”

Those who supported the election of delegates argued, as they had for years, that there was need for an “efficient general government” with the power to pay the debts of the United States and the power to regulate trade. They reiterated the idea that “an alarming crisis” was at hand. “Is not,” asked one speaker, “an efficient national government necessary to preserve peace between the states” with different interests?

After the debate the Assembly elected William Samuel Johnson, Oliver Ellsworth, and Erastus Wolcott as delegates—men who, so far as the Assembly knew, would not work for a radical change in government. Johnson was a cautious man who apparently had not taken a public stand in the debate over increasing the power of the central government, and as a member of Congress he had voted against the congressional resolution of 21 February calling the Constitutional Convention. Nor, apparently, had Ellsworth taken a public stand, although in Congress between 1781 and 1783 he had worked with Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and others to acquire more power for Congress. Wolcott, unlike his “federal” brother, Lieutenant Governor Oliver

Wolcott, Sr., was an aggressive agrarian leader. But he refused to serve on the grounds of age and because he had never had small pox, which he might acquire in Philadelphia. He did not lose any support by refusing, for he stood ninth in nomination for the Council in the fall of 1787 and was re-elected in May 1788. Wolcott was replaced by Roger Sherman. Sherman had consistently supported grants of power to Congress to collect an independent revenue and to regulate trade, but otherwise he was a staunch defender of the equality and sovereignty of the states.

While the three delegates were from the top leadership in the state, their backgrounds were remarkably diverse. Johnson, an Anglican, was born at Stratford, the son of the Reverend Samuel Johnson, the first president of King's College in New York. Johnson, a successful lawyer, was elected to the Council in 1766, but he lost that position in 1776 because he opposed independence. He retired to private life, and in 1779 he was arrested for corresponding with the enemy. He was released after taking the oath of loyalty to the state. From 1782 onward his principal role was that of representative of the state in the dispute with Pennsylvania over the Wyoming Valley, first as an attorney and then, after 1784, as a member of Congress. In 1787 he was still a member of Congress and on the point of becoming president of Columbia College (once King's) in New York.

Ellsworth was born at Windsor and graduated from the College of New Jersey. He studied theology, but turned to law and began to practice in Windsor in 1771. He could not make a living as a lawyer until he moved in 1775 to Hartford where he became an immediate success. His rapid rise to top leadership was remarkable in a society dominated by seniority. He held various wartime posts in the state and was a member of Congress from 1778 to 1783. In 1787 he was a judge of the Superior Court.

At age sixty-six, Sherman was the second oldest delegate in the Constitutional Convention. The son of a Massachusetts farmer, and a shoemaker by trade, Sherman moved to Connecticut in 1743 and eventually became a lawyer and a merchant in New Haven. Since his first political appointment in 1745, he had probably held more state and national offices than any other man in the nation. He had been a member of Congress from 1774 to 1781 and in 1783–84. He had helped write the Declaration of Independence and had played a major role in writing the first constitution of the United States, the Articles of Confederation. In 1787 he was a judge of the Superior Court and the mayor of New Haven.

In the Convention, the Connecticut delegates took a middle position between the extreme “nationalists” who wanted to subordinate the states and their citizens to the absolute power of the central government, and the extreme “federalists” who wanted to strengthen the central government by adding specific amendments to the Articles of Confederation. On the whole, Johnson and Ellsworth leaned toward the nationalists on most issues, or were ready to compromise. Ellsworth was a member of the Committee of Detail which wrote the first draft of the Constitution, and Johnson was chairman of the Committee of Style which prepared the final draft.

Sherman was a leading opponent of the extreme nationalists. He helped defeat such nationalist proposals as the congressional veto of all state laws and argued that the executive should be elected by and controlled by Congress. He was a leader of the federalists and the small states' delegates who insisted that the states, as states, must be represented in the central government. This group succeeded in establishing the election of Senators by state legislatures and in guar-

anteeing that the states would have equal votes in the Senate. When Sherman moved on 11 June that each state should have one vote in the Senate, he explained that “as the states would remain possessed of certain individual rights, each state ought to be able to protect itself, otherwise a few large states will rule the rest.”

At the end of June, Ellsworth, following Sherman’s lead, moved that voting in the Senate should be the same as in the Articles of Confederation because “we were partly national; partly federal.” Voting by population in one house would represent the national principle and “an equality of voices [in the Senate] was conformable to the federal principle and was necessary to secure the small states against the large.” This was the only ground for compromise, and if there were no compromise, the Convention “would not only be in vain, but worse than in vain.”

The delegates from the large states and those who wanted to create a national government entirely free from state control were not convinced by the argument, but a majority of the Convention forced them to accept the integrity and equality of the states in the creation of the United States Senate.

The Connecticut delegates yielded on many provisions which effectively transferred sovereignty from the states to the central government, but Sherman either did not recognize or refused to face the fact. At the end of the Convention he opposed a bill of rights because “the state declarations of rights are not repealed by this Constitution; and being in force are sufficient.” He did not reply to George Mason’s rejoinder that “the laws of the United States are to be paramount to state bills of rights.”

Whatever their understanding of the nature of the Constitution, Sherman and Ellsworth returned to Connecticut and argued that the Constitution did not provide for any fundamental change. In their report to the legislature, they stated that Connecticut would be entitled to the same number of representatives in the new Congress as in the old, and that while Congress was given some additional powers, they were “specially defined so that the particular states retain their *Sovereignty* in all other matters.”

In addition, Sherman and Ellsworth wrote for the newspapers. Sherman’s five “Countryman” essays continued the argument that the Constitution would not mean any essential change, that in essence Congress would be no different than the Connecticut legislature except that Congress would govern a far larger territory and many more people, and that the members of Congress would serve longer terms. Sherman also argued that a bill of rights would not guarantee the rights of the people. The only security for their rights, he said, was the nature of the government and the character of the men the people elected to office. Ellsworth’s “Landholder” essays covered a variety of topics all the way from an attempt to persuade farmers of the economic benefits they would derive from the Constitution to attacks on opponents of the Constitution in other states.

The Connecticut newspapers were filled with these and other writings by supporters of the Constitution, to the virtual exclusion of anything written against it. Hence there was no public debate in Connecticut. Only one Connecticut article criticizing the Constitution was published, and then only in one newspaper. There were debates in some of the town meetings that elected delegates to the state Convention, and one newspaper reported that there might be “Judases” in the Convention. But, not until after the Convention met, did a newspaper report that several towns had voted to reject the Constitution.

During the fall and winter of 1786–87, Connecticut newspapers had repeatedly attacked various “anti-federal” men in the state. In the fall of 1787 the newspapers continued to attack such men for their role in state politics, but, with the sole exceptions of Joseph Hopkins and James Wadsworth, did not mention that several of them opposed the Constitution.

The private sources that have been found are only a little more revealing than the newspapers. The eighteen letters written by Federalists contain comments about the opposition and the prospects of ratification but do not discuss the Constitution. The Antifederalist sources do, but they consist only of a letter, three drafts of a speech and a newspaper essay written by Dr. Benjamin Gale, and a letter written by Hugh Ledlie. It is possible that the speech was not given at the Killingworth town meeting on 12 November 1787, the newspaper essay was never published, and the two letters were written to Federalist William Samuel Johnson.

The public debate in other states was known in Connecticut since publishers throughout the nation exchanged newspapers. Connecticut papers reprinted large amounts of out-of-state Federalist material, but between the first printing of the Constitution and the meeting of the state Convention, they reprinted only five out-of-state Antifederalist pieces. Three of them were ignored but two of them were reprinted so they could be answered.

In contrast to the virtual blackout of news about opposition to the Constitution within the state, Connecticut newspapers attacked the opposition in other states. Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts and George Mason of Virginia were denounced for their refusal to sign the Constitution and for publishing their objections to it. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia was attacked for his opposition, as was Governor George Clinton and other New Yorkers. Connecticut Federalists were infuriated by John Lamb of New York, who sent the *Letters of a Federal Farmer* and Samuel Bryan’s “Centinel” into the state to encourage opponents of the Constitution, who could not read such Antifederalist material in their own newspapers.

In contrast to the winter of 1786–87, when the debate over government was carried on by Connecticut writers, there was an extraordinary dependence on out-of-state Federalist material during the fall of 1787. The newspapers in the state’s twin capitals illustrate the point. Aside from Roger Sherman’s “Countryman” essays, which the *New Haven Gazette* began publishing on 15 November, and a few other items, most of the material on the Constitution was reprinted from newspapers in other states. The *Connecticut Courant* and the *American Mercury* were published in Hartford, the state’s other capital. Aside from Oliver Ellsworth’s “Landholder” essays, which both papers began publishing on 5 November, they were as dependent on out-of-state Federalists as the *New Haven Gazette*. But while Connecticut newspapers depended heavily on contributions from other states, they made a major contribution in return, for the essays of Sherman and Ellsworth were reprinted in other states and became an integral part of the national debate over the Constitution.

One cannot measure with any finality the effectiveness of the newspapers in preparing the “minds of the citizens” which David Humphreys and other Federalists set out to do before the Constitution was printed in the state. Nor are there any sources to measure the effectiveness of other forms of political persuasion. Humphreys told George Washington in September 1787 that there would be opposition, but that “all the different classes in the liberal professions will be in favor of the proposed Constitution. The clergy, lawyers, physicians, and merchants will have considerable influence on society. Nor will the officers of the late army be backward in expressing

their approbation.” As for the newspapers, he said, “judicious and well-timed publications have great efficacy in ripening the judgment of men in this quarter of the continent.”

Whatever the relative effectiveness of the forces involved, a political transformation had taken place by the end of 1787. The legislature which in October 1786 refused to vote funds for Congress and ignored the call for a constitutional convention, had become, by October 1787, a legislature overwhelmingly in favor of the Constitution written by that convention. The transformation in the towns was equally overwhelming. In September 1783 a majority of the towns of the state in the Middletown Convention declared the congressional promise of full pay for five years to Continental Army officers a violation of the “federal constitution.” In November 1787 a far greater majority of the towns elected enough delegates to the state Convention to ratify the Constitution by a vote of 128 to 40.

The impact of the political transformation can be seen too in the behavior of some of the agrarian leaders who had long opposed the increase of congressional power. Thus William Williams, Joseph Hopkins, Erastus Wolcott, and Eliphalet Dyer opposed the Constitution, and criticized or spoke against it in the state Convention. But whatever their inner convictions they voted to ratify, and in Williams’ case at least, he voted contrary to the wishes of his home town of Lebanon. James Wadsworth, alone among the agrarian leaders, voted against ratification.

Ratification was followed by a total Federalist victory in the first federal elections. On 15 October 1788 the legislature elected Oliver Ellsworth and William Samuel Johnson as the state’s first United States Senators; and, in a state-wide election on 22 December, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Huntington, Jonathan Sturges, Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., and Jeremiah Wadsworth were elected to the United States House of Representatives. The state, despite rising opposition, remained in the Federalist camp until the nineteenth century.

Citations and cross-references have been removed from this Web version. For the complete citations/cross-references, please refer to the print volumes or to on-line library editions at the location listed below.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. III: Delaware, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1978), 315–32.