The Struggle to Call a State Convention

On 28 September 1787 Congress adopted a resolution sending the Constitution to the states with a recommendation that the state legislatures call special conventions of delegates chosen by the people to consider the new form of government. The previous day the Constitution was printed by the United States Chronicle. On 3 November the state legislature ordered over one thousand copies of the Constitution to be printed and distributed to the towns. The House of Deputies, however, rejected a motion calling a convention to ratify the Constitution, the first of many rejections during the next two years.

The Constitution fared poorly in Rhode Island for several reasons, foremost among which was the states' rights philosophy of most of the inhabitants. Because of its religious and economic unorthodoxy, Rhode Island for years had been maligned. Occasionally proposals were made to obliterate it as a political entity. The state's opposition to the new Constitution increased such suggestions. These proposals only strengthened the Country party's resolve to maintain its opposition to the Constitution. Many Rhode Islanders opposed the Constitution because it threatened their fiscal system. The Country party favored paper money and opposed the Constitution, while the Mercantile party opposed state currency and supported the Constitution. Since the Constitution banned state paper money and protected the sanctity of contracts, there was some doubt about the effect ratification would have on the money in circulation and the public-debt redemption program. Would all money have to be recalled immediately? Could the state debt still be paid in depreciated currency? What measures could the legislature enact to protect the currency? These were critical questions that no one could answer with complete assurance.

The new year started well for the Mercantile party. On 1 January 1788 Little Compton instructed its deputies to "use your utmost endeavors" to obtain a state ratifying convention. Sixteen days later news arrived in Rhode Island that Georgia and Connecticut had ratified the Constitution, followed less than a month later by news of Massachusetts' accession.

When the legislature convened on 25 February, the minority demanded a state convention. Four days later such a measure was defeated 43 to 15. Country party leaders proposed that the Constitution, like any other controversial issue, be submitted to the towns where the freemen could express their opinions. Such a referendum was approved on 1 March by a vote of 42 to 12. The legislature defeated a minority amendment to the referendum asking that the freemen instruct their deputies to call a state convention.

The Rhode Island referendum was held on 24 March 1788, when the Constitution was rejected by a vote of 2,714 to 238. Only two of the thirty towns supported the Constitution—Bristol and Little Compton. Federalists in Newport and Providence boycotted the referendum. Providence, with about five hundred freemen, voted 1 to 0 against the Constitution, while Newport, with three to four hundred freemen, voted 10 to 1 against it. Newport instructed its deputies to try to get a state convention called to consider the Constitution, and Providence and Bristol petitioned the legislature asking that a state convention be called.

The legislature met in late March. The House of Deputies rejected a motion calling a state convention by a majority of twenty-seven. The referendum results were tabulated and a letter was prepared to inform Congress that the referendum process was based "upon pure Republican Principles." Although the Constitution had been overwhelmingly defeated, the General Assembly believed that it contained some necessary provisions that "could well be added and adapted to the present Confederation." Rhode Island, the letter indicated, would be willing to grant Congress "sufficient Authority" to regulate commerce so that the public debt could be discharged.

As the annual April statewide elections approached, Rhode Islanders faced a clear choice. They could support either the Mercantile party and the new Constitution or the Country party and its fiscal policies. The election was another landslide victory for the Country party. William Ellery lamented: "We are like to have much the same administration this as we had the last year.--Indeed there is no proba[bi]lity that any material alteration will take place until our State debt is paid." When a proposal was made for a state convention during the June legislative session, the lower house brushed it aside without taking a vote.