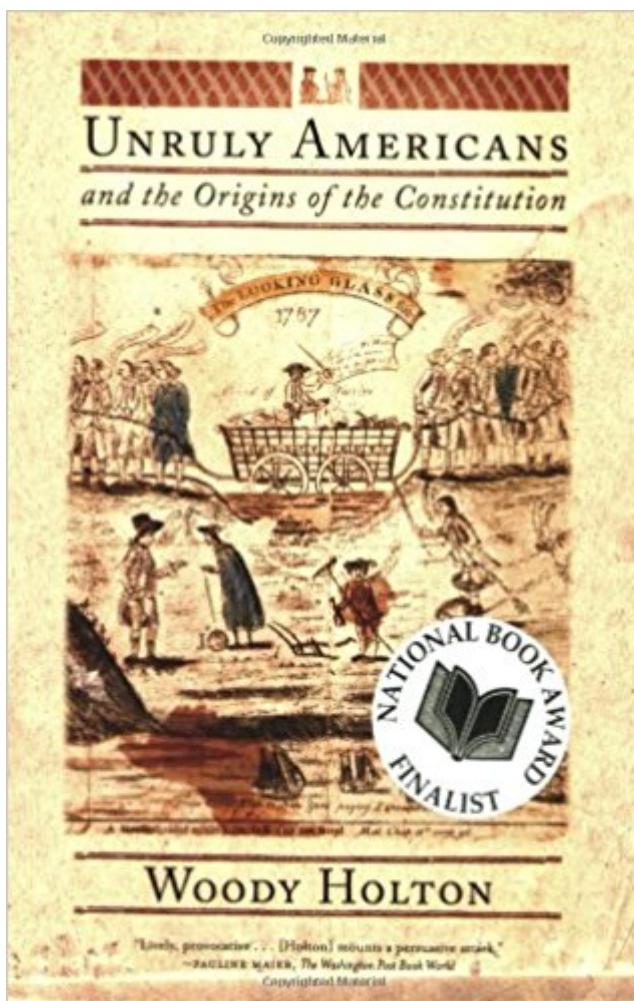


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# Unruly Americans And The Origins Of The Constitution



## Synopsis

Average Americans Were the True Framers of the Constitution Woody Holton upends what we think we know of the Constitution's origins by telling the history of the average Americans who challenged the framers of the Constitution and forced on them the revisions that produced the document we now venerate. The framers who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 were determined to reverse America's post-Revolutionary War slide into democracy. They believed too many middling Americans exercised too much influence over state and national policies. That the framers were only partially successful in curtailing citizen rights is due to the reaction, sometimes violent, of unruly average Americans. If not to protect civil liberties and the freedom of the people, what motivated the framers? In *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, Holton provides the startling discovery that the primary purpose of the Constitution was, simply put, to make America more attractive to investment. And the linchpin to that endeavor was taking power away from the states and ultimately away from the people. In an eye-opening interpretation of the Constitution, Holton captures how the same class of Americans that produced Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts (and rebellions in damn near every other state) produced the Constitution we now revere. *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* is a 2007 National Book Award Finalist for Nonfiction.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Is the Constitution a democratic document? Yes, says University of Richmond historian Holton (*Forced Founders*), but not because the men who wrote it were especially

democratically inclined. The framers, Holton says, distrusted the middling farmers who made up much of America's voting population, and believed governance should be left in large part to the elites. But the framers also knew that if the document they drafted did not address ordinary citizens' concerns, the states would not ratify it. Thus, the framers created a more radical document—“an underdogs' Constitution, Holton calls it—than they otherwise would have done. Holton's book, which may be the most suggestive study of the politics of the Constitution and the early republic since Drew McCoy's 1980 *The Elusive Republic*, is full of surprising insights; for example, his discussion of newspaper writers' defense of a woman's right to purchase the occasional luxury item flies in the face of much scholarship on virtue, gender and fashion in postrevolutionary America. Holton concludes with an inspiring rallying cry for democracy, saying that Americans today seem to have abandoned ordinary late-18th-century citizens' intens[e]... democratic aspiration, resigned, he says, to the power of global corporations and of wealth in American politics. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The motivation of the framers of our constitution is a constant and often hotly debated topic among historians. At one extreme are those who see the framers as brilliant, democratic politicians who did a masterful job of juggling competing interests while remaining true to the ideal of personal liberty. At the other extreme are the economic determinists who view the founders as members of the privileged classes, insistent upon protecting their interests from the encroachments of the masses. Holton certainly would be most comfortable in the latter camp, but his arguments here are free of dogmatism, and he offers some interesting twists on old assertions. He maintains that the delegates to the convention were attempting to limit the democratic tendencies of the individual state legislatures by curbing their powers to issue paper money and offer relief to debtors. Faced with vehement popular opposition to ratification, the Bill of Rights, Holton claims, was promised only to tip the balance in favor of ratification. Although he makes a credible case that some delegates feared the dangers of democracy, he glosses over the commitment many showed to protecting personal freedom as their top priority. Freeman, Jay --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Why did the Founders create the Constitution? This has been an argument that stretches back to the days when the ink was still drying on the document. Even the men who created it differed as to why they had done so which should surprise no one. They had created a new national government

out of compromises and it was quite natural for them to disagree as each saw different reasons and opportunities arise from this governmental framework. In today's culture wars the argument has often been over whether it was a conservative or liberal document, but often that is a debate influenced by modern terms and interpretations, not necessarily the same the men of 1787 would have understood. Woody Holton was an associate professor of history at the University of Richmond. He has since moved to become the Peter and Bonnie McCausland Professor of History at the University of South Carolina. This is his second book. His first was the award winning *Forced Founders: Indian, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. This latest literary work of his, *Unruly Americans*, continues in the vein of his earlier work in looking at the development of the United States. Other works have since followed and they too continue in the same vein. This also reflects a recent trend in the historiography of the American Revolution.

Instead of looking at the events from the top down perspective, Holton and other historians look at it from the bottom up approach much like Howard Zinn advocated. In examining the creation of the Constitution, Holton looked at it with both lenses, that of the Founders and what it meant through the eyes of the lower classes. In this work, Holton proposes that the Founders were men of means who were terrified of the "excess of democracy" then going on in the various states. This is a view that has been expressed by many historians over the last fifty years including Gordon Wood. Yet, Holton goes deeper than Wood did in stating that the Constitution was made to create a strong central government and would have gone farther than it did, but stopped short because the delegates were concerned that it would not be ratified if they did. In short, they wanted to limit democracy but could not. It is ironic that their attempt to rein in democracy turned out to actually encourage it albeit in different ways. In many ways, the Constitution was created for economic reasons according to Holton which echoes Charles and Mary Beard. Holton demonstrates that the compromises in the Constitution were there because the delegates felt they could not eliminate the ability of the people to participate in the political process. They wanted to limit that participation and at no point did they think that what Wood called "the middling sort" should be representing the people. Yet, that is exactly what did happen. The personal liberties and freedoms that so many people today look at were not part of the Constitution nor were they ever meant to be by those delegates. Those points were added later through the Bill of Rights only because of the stringent objections of the people which threatened ratification causing the Federalist to promise to add a list of rights to the document. Holton's scholarship is outstanding throughout the book. I disliked the use of endnotes, but that is of course a publishing decision not left to the author. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book as it made me do

some investigation of my own on some points. Holton's thesis is correct in my opinion. Economic issues were indeed a major discussion point and the evidence of it is in the Constitution itself. It is plainly obvious that financial matters were prevalent from the published letters and notes of the delegates as well. Yet, they still had to deal with the issue of democracy and that could not be so easily removed which I think Holton points out clearly. All in all, this is a very good exploration of the Constitution from multiple perspectives. Some readers may be disappointed at the lack of patriotism in the Constitution's creation, but the reality of the past shows the pragmatism of the delegates at the convention. It also reflects the larger picture of this time period as the principles of the Revolution clashed radically with all kinds of realities. The creation of the Constitution reflected that clash which I think Holton illustrates vividly.

Did the Federal Constitution of 1787 rescue or betray the Revolution? And in either case, which did the Framers intend? Both sides of those questions have been earnestly and intelligently advocated by scholars of our times, and both viewpoints were explicitly argued by the supporters and opponents of ratification in 1788-89. Woody Holton is not so foolish as to try to answer the questions conclusively in his study of "The Origins of the Constitution". Instead, he determinedly makes the case for both viewpoints as the case was made by contemporaries of the Founders; he does so by examining the financial/fiscal conditions of the years between the end of the Revolution and the framing of the new Constitution, as well as "listening" to the analyses of those conditions by people who experienced them in radically different ways. This was no easy task, the research that Holton put into the book "Unruly Americans". Don't expect any kind of lightweight popularizing if you decide to read this book or Holton's extremely significant earlier book "Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American revolution in Virginia." Holton, by the way, is a professor of history at the University of Richmond. One thing is virtually indisputable. Almost nobody was satisfied with the governance of the 13 liberated states under the structure called the Articles of Confederation. But the dissatisfaction wasn't only with the federal governance; it was more vociferously directed toward the governance of each of the states. It's hardly flagrant revisionism in 2010 CE to maintain that the Constitution of 1787 was a "conservative backlash" against runaway democracy unleashed by the Revolution itself. In fact, that's essentially the orthodoxy historical dogma since the work of Charles Beard early in the 20th C. Woody Holton acknowledges that position from the onset, but reveals that his research has led him to a more nuanced conclusion: that it was the perception of unbridled 'leveling' by the 13 states' governments which generated the desires of "leading men" to construct a stronger federal government. In other words, for Madison

and the others who assembled to frame a new constitution, the chief goal was to restrain States' Rights! So... the greatest pertinence of Holton's analysis should be the light it sheds on the hot-button question of "original intent" that roils politics in the USA today. In many ways, Holton reveals, the furious divisions over the balance of relations between the states and the federal government already existed in the 1780s. Of course, the side taken by anyone, ever, on the issue of States' Rights has always depended on "interests". The defense of slavery was the most obvious and inflammatory interest from the very start, but Holton discovers an economic dynamic -- in very simplified terms, the debtors versus the debt-holders -- that divided opinion internally in each of the 13 former colonies. There are quite a number of "amusing" ironies to be noted in the "States' Rights" arguments against a powerful federal government, even before that central government was established: \* prior to 1787, it was generally the Rich who adamantly denounced "tax relief" by the various state governments. But it has to be understood that the tax relief of the 1780s was inherently at the expense of bond holders and speculators. \* the States' Rights position was usually associated with a tolerance for inflation, for the issuance of paper money, as a means of equalizing wealth through a kind of indirect taxation. \* the supporters of the state governments, and therefore opponents of the federal, generally favored "easy" immigration and feared that a tighter-money federal government would discourage immigration and disrupt the supply of labor as well as stifle development of new lands. \* central to the political thinking of States' Rights advocates, those who wanted the state governments to be even more 'democratic', was the view that a "republican" government could only thrive in a climate of rough economic equality; thus the most articulate States' Rights spokesmen openly supported measures to "redistribute" property and to discourage "concentration" of wealth! And this objective of "redistribution" could, in their minds, be achieved most efficiently by state governments maximally answerable to the broad electorate. Thus, many strong states' rights proponents also advocated elimination of the state senates (i.e. unicameral legislatures), strict 51% majority rule on all legislation including tax proposals, and abolishment of gubernatorial/executive veto powers. For a tightly focused academic study, Holton's "Unruly Americans" manages to spare pages here and there for wide-ranging insights. One of the best chapters of the book treats the cultural paradigm of "sentiment" that both sides of the debate over debt and taxes invoked. Holton's reflections on Adam Smith are extremely enlightening; in fact, he has convinced this reader that Smith's economic thinking is incomplete and incomprehensible without taking account of Smith's other great book, "A Theory of Moral Sentiments". Holton also casts his net over the implications of the post-Revolution social turmoil for changes in expectations of equality -- of the poor, of slaves and freed slaves, and especially of women. The accounts and

activities of Abigail Adams, an astute self-interested bond speculator, form a key resource for Holton's research. I recommend both of Woody Holton's books enthusiastically, for all readers interested in American history and the deep roots of the polarization that typifies American politics today, despite the seeming tweedle-dee/tweedle-dum nature of the two political parties.

Holton spends 278 pages explaining that upset tax payers, debtors, creditors and bond speculators were the genesis of the constitution. He reiterated these concepts over and over through way too many quotes from local papers - over 70 pages of footnotes! This book could have been written in half the pages. The book may have been a finalist for an award but it must have had only one round for this competition.

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