"Old as I am," exclaimed Patrick Henry, "it is probable that I may yet have the appellation of rebel ... As this Government stands, I despise and abhor it."

The "Give me liberty or give me death" hero of the American Revolution, Henry was not now denouncing King George III or the English Parliament. He was sounding the alarm against the newly proposed Constitution of the United States of America.

Appointed to recommend changes in the Articles of the Confederation, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 had gone well beyond their authority and designed a new government.

To complete their political coup, they specified that the Constitution could be ratified -- not by the Congress and the unanimous consent of the state legislatures, as prescribed by the Articles of the Confederation -- but by nine of 13 special state ratifying conventions, whose members were elected by the people.

Given the opposition of "anti-federalists" like Henry to a strong central government and "the incalculable fluctuations of the human passions," Alexander Hamilton indicated, it was "almost arrogance" to make a prediction about the outcome.

Pauline Maier, a professor of history at M.I.T., sorts through an avalanche of documents as she re-visits the debates in all of the state conventions.

Although at times burdened with too many details and the rehashing of arguments, the book brings to life dozens and dozens of "remarkably well-informed" delegates who included marquee names and anonymous backbenchers.

They struggled to reconcile revolutionary ideals with new realities at one of the most pivotal and suspenseful moments in American history.

Each convention, Dr. Maier demonstrates, "played out differently" and depended, in no small measure, on the outcome in other states.

Had Virginia, the most powerful state in the union, not voted "aye," for example, New York almost certainly would have said "nay." Or accepted "upon condition" that a second convention be called to consider amendments.

Nonetheless, she points out, in the most original contribution of the book, "despite the intense, emotional fights in one state after another," the differences between the Constitution's friends and its foes was "porous at the center."

Most Americans, as one Pennsylvanian put it, agreed that the Articles of the Confederation were "so weak as to deprive us of some of the greatest advantages we had a right to expect from it."

And so, after the votes were tallied, with the exception of the citizens of Rhode Island, who didn't enter the union until May, 1790, the contestants "readily" accepted the Constitution.

To be sure, the Federalists prevailed. They got ratification of the Constitution as written, beating back a demand for a direct tax amendment that would have crippled the capacity of the federal government to raise or borrow money.

At the same time, Ms. Maier maintains, the critics got "almost everything they wanted" as well, including 10 amendments to the Constitution that came to be known as "The Bill of Rights" that protected individuals from being deprived of "life, liberty and property without due process of law."

The Constitution has been more successful and durable than anyone in the 18th century could have imagined. In "Ratification," as she illuminates deliberative democracy in all of its messy magnificence, Pauline Maier invites us to give thanks to Federalists and Anti-Federalists, who did not believe that the complicated issues confronting them "were beyond
their competence," respected majority rule," even when it went against them;" and made "the republic work."

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