

Historical Attempts to Call an Article V Convention



Article V of the U.S. Constitution provides two methods for proposing amendments: by a two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress (the method used for all 27 existing amendments) or by a convention called by Congress upon applications from two-thirds of state legislatures (34 out of 50 states today). The convention method has **never been successfully invoked** to hold such a gathering, but there have been numerous attempts throughout U.S. history. These efforts have often focused on specific issues, reflecting political priorities of the era, but none have reached the required threshold. Below is an overview of major attempts, drawn from a variety of historical records.

Key Historical Attempts				
Issue	Time Period	States Applying (Peak)	Outcome	Notes
Repeal of the 18th Amendment (Prohibition)	1920s–1933	33	Fell short by 1 state; Congress proposed the 21st Amendment instead	Closest historical call; states sought to end Prohibition via convention, but Congress acted directly to avoid a convention.
Apportionment/Redistricting Reform (Reversing "one person, one vote" rulings like <i>Reynolds v. Sims</i>)	1960s	33	Fell short by 1 state	Led by Sen. Everett Dirksen; aimed to allow unequal legislative districts based on population. Effort ended with Dirksen's death in 1969.
Balanced Budget Amendment	1970s–1980s	32	Fell short by 2 states	Took 7 years to organize; some applications later rescinded. Revived in recent decades with 28 states as of 2024.

Direct Election of Senators	19th– early 20th century	~31 (exact peak unclear)	Congress proposed the 17th Amendment in 1912	Preceded the congressional route; convention effort gained traction but was bypassed.
Federal Regulation of Child Labor	Early 20th century	28	Fell short; Supreme Court struck down related laws	Progressive Era push; Congress never called due to insufficient applications.
Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)	1970s	30	Fell short by 4 states	Sought gender equality protections; convention alternative to Congressional proposal (which passed but failed ratification).
Term Limits for Congress	1990s	23	Ongoing but far short	Conservative-led; some states have rescinded applications in recent years.

Current and Ongoing Campaigns (as of 2025)

Modern efforts are more fragmented, with overlapping applications on related topics. No single issue has reached 34 states, but combinations could theoretically trigger a convention if Congress deems them sufficient. Major campaigns include:

- **Balanced Budget Amendment (BBA):** 28 states. Focuses on mandating fiscal restraint; supported by fiscal conservatives.
- **Convention of States (COS):** 19 states. Broader push for limits on federal power, including term limits and fiscal restraints. Critics fear it could lead to a "runaway convention" proposing unrelated changes.
- **Wolf-PAC (Campaign Finance Reform):** 6 states. Aims to overturn *Citizens United* and regulate money in politics.
- **Term Limits:** Overlaps with COS; ~23 states total across efforts.

Together, these account for applications from about 28 states (some multi-issue), but legal debates persist over whether applications must be identical or time-limited.

Why No Convention Has Occurred

- **Threshold Barrier:** Reaching 34 states requires sustained bipartisan coordination, which has proven elusive amid partisan divides.
- **Congressional Preemption:** When close (e.g., Prohibition, senators), Congress has proposed amendments directly to sidestep a convention.
- **Fears of a "Runaway Convention":** Like the 1787 Philadelphia Convention (which exceeded its mandate to amend the Articles of Confederation), a modern one might propose sweeping changes. Article V offers no rules on scope, delegate selection, or proceedings, leaving it to Congress and states—fueling opposition from groups like Common Cause.
- **Rescissions:** States can (and have) withdrawn applications, diluting momentum.
- **Historical Pace:** Efforts often span decades, with slow state legislative action acting as a natural brake.

These attempts highlight Article V's role as a "safety valve" for state-driven reform, but its unused status underscores the preference for congressional proposals. For deeper dives, resources like the Congressional Research Service reports provide detailed timelines.