

WSJ Print Edition

When the Declaration was signed in 1776, it marked 13 distinct rebellions across separate colonies.



CROSS COUNTRY

Americans Love Their Country—and Their States

Americans love their states. You've likely felt a sense of devotion to the place where you grew up or now live. It's a pride built on sports loyalties, local dishes and the familiar landscapes of home. But this affection isn't only about culture or bragging rights. It reflects something deeper: the abiding truth that our identity and self-government began not in Washington or even Philadelphia, but in the states and communities we call home.

We should remember the independent spirit of the colonies and their multitude of rebellions that helped shape our federalist system—one in which states and citizens aren't subjects of a distant authority, but active participants in self-government. The revolutionary belief that people need not be ruled by a sovereign took root in county courthouses, churches and local assemblies—long before it was declared in Philadelphia in 1776.

America's system of government gives more power to the states, and therefore, the people, than to Washington. States and communities are largely in charge of the policies and laws that shape our everyday lives. The states are the foundation of our political system. Yet while state pride is still booming, the nation has lost hold of too much of the self-governing sentiment that sparked the revolution. The 10th Amendment, designed to keep power close to the people, has become one of the Constitution's most ignored protections.

When the Declaration of Independence was signed in the summer of 1776, it marked not just one revolt but 13 distinct rebellions brewing across separate colonies. In the words of John Adams, it wasn't until that year that "thirteen clocks were made to strike together." Massachusetts offered one of the main sparks of the armed rebellion with the shots fired at Lexington and Concord. Virginia added not only George Washington as commanding general but much of the intellectual heft of the rebellion in Thomas Jefferson.

North Carolina's flag proudly displays two dates that predate the revolution. May 20, 1775, refers to what's known as the Mecklenburg Declaration, when the residents of Mecklenburg County reportedly declared themselves no longer subjects of the British crown. April 12, 1776, marks the Halifax Resolves, when North Carolina became the first colony to proclaim independence from Britain. That sense of autonomy and local control still lives on in the bold words many states chose to define themselves—mottos like "Live Free or Die" (New Hampshire) "Thus Always to Tyrants" (Virginia), "Mountaineers Are Always Free" (West Virginia) and "We Dare Defend Our Rights" (Alabama).

In 1932, Justice Louis Brandeis dubbed the states "laboratories of democracy" given their energy and innovation at crafting public policy. While states tend to borrow and adapt successful approaches from one another, Washington typically offers one-size-fits-all solutions. These usually fail because they can't account for the differences in Oklahoma, New York, Idaho or Vermont.

Our federalist system still gives us the best path to exercise and practice self-government. Our challenge is to embrace the Founders' wisdom. Doing so can not only cool the temperatures of national strife and divide but also renew civic trust and help us improve our local communities. Independence Day is a welcome reminder not to fret obsessively over who is running Washington. Rather, we should work to remember our inheritance and govern our local communities with renewed conviction and accountability.

When we celebrate the sovereignty of the several states, and the richness of our regional differences, we affirm the genius of America: *E pluribus unum* . Out of many, one.

Mr. Nothstine is a writer and editor at the State Policy Network.

By Ray Nothstine

Copyright (c)2025 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 7/5/2025
Powered by TECNAVIA

The following is a digital replica of content from the print newspaper and is intended for the personal use of our members. For commercial reproduction or distribution of Dow Jones printed content, contact: Dow Jones Reprints & Licensing at (800) 843-0008 or visit djreprints.com.
