

# [***Opinion: James Madison and Benjamin Franklin were wrong about a lot of things, but not this***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C04-PP91-DY7V-G010-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; You wouldn't know it from today's political climate, but changing your mind is a deeply American thing to do.

Just look at America's founders. When James Madison was on his deathbed, his niece noticed an odd expression on his face and asked if he was okay. [*He replied*](https://theweek.com/articles/462494/last-words-final-moments-38-presidents), "Nothing more than a change of mind, my dear." And then, according to his niece, the Father of the Constitution died. What did he change his mind about? The viability of a bi-cameral legislature? The bedroom wallpaper? We'll never know.

The important thing for us to remember, these hundreds of years later, is that he changed his mind. Many times. He was a great mind-changer on all sorts of issues throughout his career. At first, for instance, [*he'd opposed the Bill of Rights*](https://www.history.com/news/bill-of-rights-constitution-first-10-amendments-james-madison), but later became one of its greatest champions.

Our founding fathers had many flaws. They were elite men of the 18th-century mindset, which is to say most of them were racist and sexist. But they also had many virtues, including one that should not be underestimated: They were flexible thinkers. They had epistemic humility, and often changed their minds when presented with new evidence or reasoning.

Nowadays, changing your mind, especially when it comes to political opinions, is seen by many as a weakness. What are you, a flip-flopper?

Studies suggest that current Americans - both politicians and ordinary citizens - are much less likely to change our minds than in decades past. [*We've become entrenched*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/). We are stuck in our tribal mindsets about almost every topic - the economy, climate change, identity and foreign affairs. Social media has helped to create and intensify [*echo chambers*](https://www.wired.com/story/media-echo-chamber-extremism/) where our beliefs are rarely challenged, and where the other side is often demonized.

While it's our current normal, this intransigence is not a traditional American stance. The founding fathers, at their best, were profoundly flexible in their thinking. You can see it in Madison's notes on the Constitutional Convention, where so much was fluid. Should the president be a single person, or should there be a council of several co-presidents? Should senators' terms last for two years, six years or for life? Where should the government be located? The delegates had read widely, absorbing ideas from philosophers of all stripes, both ancient and modern.

At the Constitutional Convention, the individual votes of the delegates were counted but not recorded by name. The founders didn't want the delegates to feel locked into a position. They wanted them to be able to change their minds in the future with ease.

As all institutions do over time, American government has become much more fixed and static. But while we've gained stability, we've lost our thirst for fresh solutions. We should return to some of the fluidity that marked our birth.

Benjamin Franklin was perhaps the pinnacle of this mindset. At the Constitutional Convention, Franklin said, "I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects ... It is therefore that the older I grow the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment." In his autobiography, Franklin advised readers never to use the words "certainly" or "undoubtedly" when stating our beliefs. Instead say "I imagine it to be so; or it is so, if I am not mistaken."

Franklin liked to tell a short parable. He said there was a "French lady, who, in a little dispute with her sister said: 'I don't know how it happens, sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that is always in the right.'"

Franklin's point was that we are all that French lady. We all believe we have a monopoly on the truth. I know I feel that way most of the time. But I fight that inclination. I try to remind myself: What are the odds that I, one of 8billion humans on earth, happen to be that singular person who has discovered the correct take on ***politics***, literature, the environment, religion and all other topics? Probably two to one. Maybe even three to one.

There have been occasional instances in modern ***politics*** of leaders bravely changing their minds - though they almost never put it that way; they usually say their beliefs have "evolved." I don't much care what they call it, as long as their shift in views is based on reason, evidence, and what's best for the country. President George H.W. Bush made a famous campaign promise: "Read my lips. No new taxes."

As president, he changed his mind and agreed to a compromise that raised some taxes to reduce the budget deficit. It damaged his political career and contributed to defeat for a second term, but it was the right thing to do for America. President Barack Obama also made the right choice in changing his mind on legalizing same-sex marriage.

Flexible thinking is part of America's DNA. We need to return to some of the fluidity of early America. Or so goes my hypothesis. Maybe I'll discover that flexible thinking is terrible and I'll change my mind.

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