

Visions of Government

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although the original purpose of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was to amend the Articles of Confederation, the majority of delegates moved quickly to create a new framework for a more powerful national government. This decision proved controversial beginning in the fall of 1787, when the convention released the Constitution for ratification among the 13 states. The subsequent ratification debates were split between Federalists, or those who supported the implementation of the Constitution, and Anti-Federalists, who opposed it for fear that it limited the power of state governments and dismissed the concerns of individual Americans.

This tutorial examines the Federalists, Anti-Federalists, and their respective visions for the national government during the ratification debates of 1787 and 1788:

1. Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

When the American public learned of the new constitution, most people opposed it. To salvage their work in Philadelphia, the architects of the new national government began a campaign to sway public opinion in favor of their blueprint for a strong central government. In the fierce debate that erupted, the two sides articulated contrasting visions of the American republic and of democracy.

Supporters of the 1787 Constitution, known as **Federalists**, made the case that a centralized republic, with a strong federal government, provided the best solution for the future. Convention delegates **Alexander Hamilton**, James Madison, and **John Jay** best expressed the Federalist vision of the Constitution in a series of essays that, gathered together in 1788, were titled *The Federalist*, also known as *The Federalist Papers*.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Alexander Hamilton

First secretary of the treasury, leading figure in the Federalist Party, key advisor to George Washington, and architect of the nation's financial system.

John Jay

American diplomat, patriot, author of the Federalist Papers, and first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.



TERMS TO KNOW

Federalist

Supported ratification of the Constitution.

The Federalist Papers

Series of 85 essays written in support of ratifying the Constitution; written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay.



DID YOU KNOW

The Federalist comprised 85 essays, each published under the pseudonym Publius, that originally appeared in New York newspapers beginning in October 1787. Alexander Hamilton wrote 51 of the essays, James Madison wrote 29, and John Jay wrote the rest.

Federalists argued that the Constitution could best protect individual liberty because the system of checks and balances implemented by the new national government would prevent abuse of power by any one body of government at the national or state level. Here are a few common examples:

➞ **EXAMPLE** Under the Constitution, the President can veto any law passed by Congress. However, Congress can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority vote.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Under the Constitution, the President has the authority to appoint federal judges. However, Congress must approve the appointment. Federal judges are then able to serve for life.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Under the Constitution, Congress writes the “supreme Law of the Land” when it comes to matters such as interstate commerce and taxation. However, local, day-to-day matters such as law enforcement and education are left to the states.

Arguments on behalf of checks and balances reinforced the Federalists’ belief in a hierarchical society and their concerns toward democracy, which Hamilton and others often labeled “mobocracy.” They recognized that government must reflect the will of the people, but they also worried that the people were subject to corruption. According to the Federalists, a new federal government complete with distinct executive, legislative, and judicial branches, along with the respective state governments, could best protect individual liberty while also ensure that the United States could pay off its debt and become a respectable, independent nation by centralizing many powers in the hands of the federal government. Federalists also believed that only this type of government could best govern a nation of the size and diverse population of the United States. Compromises would be reached in a large republic and citizens would be represented by representatives of their own choosing.

Opponents to the ratification of the Constitution, known as **Anti-Federalists**, argued that the document would consolidate all power in a national government and rob the states of the ability to make their own decisions. They believed that the United States covered too large of a territory to sustain a republican form of government that protected the interests of all the people. Rather, they believed that the federal government proposed by the Constitution would soon mimic the British regime, in which a far-off government made laws that trampled upon individual liberty and local interests. Similar to Great Britain, Anti-Federalists believed that wealthy elites would run the new federal government and that they would monopolize power to benefit their own interests, at the expense of those of ordinary citizens. Most important, Anti-Federalists pointed out that the proposed Constitution did not contain a bill of rights, which stipulated the individual liberties that government could not infringe upon.



TERM TO KNOW

Anti-Federalist

Opponents to ratification of the Constitution.

In order for the new national government to be implemented, delegates at the Constitutional Convention agreed that each state should hold a special ratifying convention. When nine of the 13 states had approved the new government, the Constitution would go into effect.

In the meantime, a fierce debate ensued as each state elected delegates to attend their respective ratifying convention. Hundreds of articles and pamphlets were published, each discussing the pros or cons of the proposed Constitution. Numerous other public meetings were held. Meanwhile, debates within the ratifying conventions were spirited.

Notable Federalists and Anti-Federalists included:

Federalists	Anti-Federalists
Alexander Hamilton (New York)	Samuel Adams (Massachusetts)
James Madison (Virginia)	John Hancock (Massachusetts)
John Jay (New York)	Patrick Henry (Virginia)
John Adams (Massachusetts)	Melancton Smith (New York)

2. Tyranny by the Majority or by the Few?

Having just fought for independence against a perceived corrupt and centralized government in Great Britain, both Federalists and Anti-Federalists remained fearful of tyranny. When reading the debates over the ratification of the Constitution, however, it becomes clear that both sides feared the tyranny of one group in particular.

Federalists were skeptical toward democracy, or direct representation and majority rule. Such practices, Federalists argued, could lead to tyranny by the majority or, in the words of Alexander Hamilton, an “ungovernable mob.”

During the ratifying convention in New York, Alexander Hamilton presented a bleak picture of this phenomenon in reply to the Anti-Federalist critique that the Constitution would not reflect the will of the people:

Alexander Hamilton, Federalist

“It has been observed by an honorable gentleman [Melancton Smith], that a pure democracy, if it were practicable, would be the most perfect government,” Hamilton began. He continued:

“Experience has proven, that no position in politics is more false than this. The ancient democracies, in which the people themselves deliberated, never possessed one feature of good government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity. When they assembled, the field of debate presented an ungovernable mob, not only incapable of deliberation, but prepared for every enormity. In these assemblies, the enemies of the people brought forward their plans of ambition systematically. They were opposed by their enemies of another party; and it became a matter of contingency, whether the people subjected themselves to be led blindly by one tyrant or by another.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Why did Hamilton believe that democracy was not “the most perfect government?”

In contrast, Anti-Federalists argued that the ratification of the Constitution would lead to tyranny by an elite few who would trample upon individual liberty and self-government, especially without an added bill of rights. **Patrick Henry** of Virginia, who had denounced the British Crown by issuing the Stamp Act Resolutions in 1765, was among the most notable Anti-Federalists.



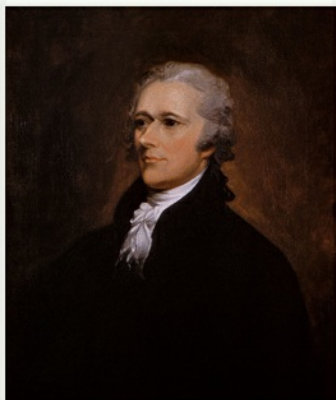
PEOPLE TO KNOW

Patrick Henry

American revolutionary who was an outspoken critic of the Constitutional Convention and the Federalists

Whereas Federalists feared tyranny by the majority, Henry argued that the Constitution would consolidate political power into the hands of a few political elites at the national level, at the expense of state governments and individuals.

Tyranny by majority



Alexander Hamilton
(Federalist)

Tyranny by elites



Patrick Henry
(Anti-Federalist)

In one particular argument against the Constitution during Virginia’s ratification convention, seen below (Foner, 2014), Henry painted a grim picture of what such a government might look like:

Patrick Henry, Anti-Federalist

“But now, Sir, the American spirit, assisted by the ropes and chains of consolidation, is about to

convert this country to a powerful and mighty empire. If you make the citizens of this country agree to become the subjects of one great consolidated empire of America, your Government will not have sufficient energy to keep them together. Such a Government is incompatible with the genius of republicanism. There will be no checks, no real balances, in this Government.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Why did Henry believe that the federal government under the Constitution would be a danger to liberty?



BRAINSTORM

Do you think that Americans’ experiences during the imperial crisis with Great Britain and the nation’s early struggles under the Articles of Confederation influenced the ratifications in any way? If so, how?

The statements by Hamilton and Henry reflect the broader concerns toward the abuse of power that was central to much of the debate over the Constitution. Where both sides differed lay in who tended to abuse power. Hamilton described democracy as rule by an “ungovernable mob,” in which factions around particular interests emerged and tyrants, informed by individual ambitions, could arise amidst the chaos. Meanwhile, by using language such as “consolidation,” “empire,” and “subjects,” Henry envisioned a government under the Constitution that might not have looked much different from Great Britain’s during the colonial period. Rather than a federal government, complete with a system of checks and balances that respected various interests and localities, Henry foresaw a government in which the interests of individuals and the states were subject to imperial rule.

3. Distinct Governments or a Consolidated Government?

When criticizing the Constitution, a popular argument that many Anti-Federalists utilized was the idea that the United States was too large and diverse a nation to sustain a republican form of government. They pointed to history by suggesting that previous republican governments, such as the Dutch Republic or the Italian city-states during the Renaissance period, existed only in small territories.

Many Anti-Federalists argued that only the republican governments of the respective states, with minimal oversight by the Congress under the Articles of Confederation, could best reflect the will and interests of the people. Patrick Henry in particular worried that the national government under the Constitution would adopt many responsibilities better left to the states, essentially replacing the state governments in the process.

Henry asked, “Is the Government of Virginia a State Government after this [national] Government is adopted?” He then argued that officials would carry out their responsibilities on behalf of the national government at the expense of the states:

Patrick Henry, Anti-Federalist

“Bring forth the Federal allurements, and compare them with the poor contemptible things that the State Legislatures can bring forth. On the part of the State Legislatures, there are Justices of Peace and militia officers — and even these Justices and officers are bound by oath in favour of the Constitution. A constable is the only man who is not obliged to swear paramount allegiance to this

beloved Congress. On the other hand, there are rich, fat Federal emoluments — your rich, snug, fine, fat Federal offices — the number of collectors of taxes and excises will outnumber anything from the States.”



THINK ABOUT IT

In what ways did Henry fear that the federal government would adopt responsibilities traditionally left to the state officials?

Federalists countered arguments such as Patrick Henry’s by suggesting that the structure of the new national government, with a system of checks and balances between its respective branches, along with the size and diversity of the United States, would effectively secure individual liberty and not infringe upon the state governments. Rather than a “consolidated government” that Henry predicted, Federalists such as James Madison envisioned a “compound republic” in which local, state, and national governments were in balance with each other.

Madison (1787) outlined the “compound republic” in *The Federalist*, No. 51:

James Madison, Federalist

“In a single republic, all the power surrendered by the people is submitted to the administration of a single government; and the usurpations are guarded against by a division of the government into distinct and separate departments. In the compound republic of America, the power surrendered by the people is first divided between two distinct governments, and then the portion allotted to each subdivided among distinct and separate departments. Hence a double security arises to the rights of the people. The different governments will control each other, at the same time that each will be controlled by itself.”



THINK ABOUT IT

What are the “two distinct governments” to which Madison referred, and how could such a distinction counter the criticisms of Patrick Henry and other Anti-Federalists?

Whereas Patrick Henry feared a national government that would take control of all responsibilities that had heretofore been left to the states under the Articles of Confederation (most notably, taxation), James Madison argued that the Constitution created a governing structure, or “compound republic,” in which the national government and state governments would have distinct responsibilities. Each would check the other, thus preserving liberty.

Demarcating responsibilities in this manner, Madison believed, also ensured the survival of the republic in a nation as large as the United States:

James Madison, Federalist

“Whilst all authority in [government] will be derived from and dependent on the society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests, and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority.”

In other words, the size and diversity of American society would prevent any consolidation of the national government under the Constitution that Anti-Federalists such as Patrick Henry feared.



BRAINSTORM

Debates over individual liberty, state governance, and federal authority remain prevalent in contemporary American society. Using the provided primary source selections as evidence, can you see traces of these debates in the original ratification debates of 1787 and 1788? If so, why do you think they remain relevant today?

4. Ratification or Why Did the Federalist Argument Win?

By the fall of 1788—in large part because the Federalists were better organized—the Constitution narrowly won approval in the United States. The Federalists dominated the press and much of the public conversation over the Constitution. Indeed, according to one estimate, only 12 American newspapers or magazines published a significant number of pieces written by Anti-Federalists.

Generally, sentiment in favor of the Constitution coalesced in urban areas and rural areas with close ties to marketplaces. That such areas expressed support for the Constitution makes sense given the dire economic and financial straits that the United States was in under the Articles of Confederation. In addition to all of the political arguments that Federalists utilized within the ratification conventions, a number of other supporters of ratification expressed hope that a new national government under the Constitution would help revive the depressed economy.

Still, the votes for ratification were narrow in many conventions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In New York, the vote was 30 in favor to 27 opposed. In Massachusetts, the vote to approve was 187 to 168, and some claim supporters of the Constitution resorted to bribes in order to ensure approval. Virginia ratified by a vote of 89 to 79, and Rhode Island by 34 to 32.

By the fall of 1788, it was clear that the Federalists' vision of government prevailed. However, implementing this vision would be quite a challenge.

Additional Resources

Meet the framers of the Constitution and read the full text of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, at the [National Archives](#).



SUMMARY

The debate over the ratification of the Constitution was split between Federalists, or those who supported the implementation of the Constitution, and Anti-Federalists, or those who opposed it and sought to preserve the Articles of Confederation. At the heart of the dispute between both groups was a difference in visions of government. Anti-Federalists such as Patrick Henry feared that the Constitution would subject individual Americans and their respective state governments to rule by an

elite few. In contrast, Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison certainly expressed distrust toward direct democracy, but also argued that the new national government under the Constitution had a sufficient system of checks and balances that could preserve local interests, in addition to helping the nation emerge from the financial and economic crises of the 1780s. In the end, the Federalists' vision prevailed.

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REFERENCES

James Madison, The Federalist, No. 51 (1787), in Eric Foner, Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History, 4th ed., vol. 1 (2014), pp. 123-24,

Patrick Henry's argument against the Constitution (1788), in Eric Foner, Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History, 4th ed., vol. 1 (2014), pp. 126-28,



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John Jay

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Patrick Henry

American revolutionary who was an outspoken critic of the Constitutional Convention and the Federalists.

**DATES TO KNOW****1787**

The Constitutional Convention takes place and the Constitution is released for state ratification.

1788

The Federalist Papers is published; states ratify the Constitution.