

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

When the American Revolutionary War ended, the colonists faced many problems. Even though people from different colonies had joined together to fight the British, they still felt that they were citizens of their own separate colonies. The **Articles of Confederation** set up a new government that was very loosely organized. The "Articles" gave most of the power to the states and very little power to the national government. Under the Articles of Confederation, there was no national executive or court system. The national government could not raise an army, collect taxes, or regulate trade between the states. Even though the new government could print and coin money, many states printed their own money. Some even placed **tariffs on goods** from other states. Just imagine the problems this created! To buy or sell goods in the next state, one might have to use a different **currency** or even pay a tariff. With no power to raise an army, the new nation was **vulnerable** to attack from other countries. Faced with debt, economic problems and struggles between the states, the Articles of Confederation were not working! Many were afraid that the states might separate into thirteen different countries.

Because of the many problems under the Articles of Confederation, each state was asked to send **delegates** to a convention in Philadelphia in May, 1787. The purpose of the convention was to discuss how to make the national government stronger. Rhode Island was the only state that did not send a delegate. Fifty-five delegates from twelve states gathered at the Pennsylvania State House. Because they wanted to be able to discuss and debate their ideas "freely," it was decided to conduct all meetings in secret. Guards were placed at the doors and the State House windows were covered. So began long months of discussion, debate, and compromise. Early in the convention, the delegates came to an unexpected decision. They decided that rather than try to fix the Articles of Confederation, a new plan of government with a new constitution needed to be developed. As the discussion and debate proceeded, a division took place among the delegates. One group, the **Federalists**, believed in a strong national government. The other group, the **Anti-Federalists**, favored states and individual rights.

Who Were the Federalists?

The Federalists believed in a strong national government that would have power over the states. They believed that a large **republic** was the best way to protect individual rights and freedom. The members of this group were more likely to be wealthier merchants, bankers, lawyers, manufacturers, and plantation owners. The Federalists tended to be more educated. John Adams, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton were important Federalists.

The Federalists were in favor of a national bank and did not think that a bill of rights was needed. They were in favor of **ratifying** the Constitution.

Who Were the Anti-Federalists?

The Anti-Federalists were against a strong national government. They believed that each state should have its own independent government. Many Anti-Federalists didn't have a lot of trust in government and feared that a strong national executive might become a king or **dictator**. They also felt that only a small republic could protect individual rights and freedom. The Anti-Federalists were mostly farmers and tradesmen and less likely to be wealthy. Among the important Anti-Federalists were Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, George Mason, Edmond Randolph, and Elbridge Gerry. The Anti-Federalists were opposed to a national bank and believed that a bill of rights was important and necessary. They were opposed to **ratifying** the Constitution.

The Great Debate

The delegates discussed, debated and compromised for many long months. Finally, in September the final draft was ready to be signed. Some of the delegates were not happy with the new Constitution and some left Philadelphia. On the signing day, September 17th, only 42 delegates were present. Three delegates refused to sign the Constitution that day- Anti-Federalists George Mason, Edmond Randolph, and Elbridge Gerry.

The new Constitution had to be approved (ratified) by 9 of the 13 states. Debates and arguments started throughout the states. Essays and letters were written; newspaper articles and pamphlets appeared that supported and opposed the new constitution. Political celebrations, parades and protests were held. Speeches were made in meeting houses, taverns and on street corners. Friends, neighbors, workers and family members discussed and debated the issues. One of the most hotly debated issues was that the Constitution did not have a bill of rights. By the end of July 1788, eleven states had **ratified** the Constitution. North Carolina and Rhode Island still would not approve the Constitution until it had a bill of rights. Finally, James Madison drafted a bill of rights in 1789. By November, North Carolina had ratified the constitution. But it would not be until May of the following year that Rhode Island would vote to **ratify**. It was the Anti-Federalist outcry that caused the Bill of Rights (the first 10 **amendments**) to be added to the United States Constitution. These 10 amendments guarantee rights and freedoms that are basic to all Americans.

Who was the winner in this debate? If the Federalists hadn't won, we wouldn't have a Constitution. But if the Anti-Federalists hadn't disagreed, the Constitution would not have a Bill of Rights.

WHAT TYPE OF GOVERNMENT DID FEDERALISTS AND ANTI-FEDERALISTS PREFER?

FEDERALISTS

Hamilton was among those dissatisfied with the Articles of Confederation—the first attempt at a national governing document—because it lacked an executive, courts, and taxing powers. He was an active participant in the hot, humid summer of 1787 at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Hamilton argued for his view in the Federalist Papers, a series of documents supporting the ratification of the new Constitution.

Source #1

Federalist Position on Congressional Representation – Alexander Hamilton
- June 21, 1788 -

“*The Antifederalists seem to think that a pure democracy would be the perfect government. Experience has shown that this idea is false. The ancient democracies of Greece were characterized by tyranny and run by mobs.*

The Antifederalists also argue that a large representation is necessary to understand the interests of the people. This is not true. Why can't someone understand thirty [thousand] people as well as he understands twenty people?

The new constitution does not make a rich man more eligible for an elected office than a poor person. I also think it's dangerous to assume that men become more wicked as they gain wealth and education. Look at all the people in a community, the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant. Which group has higher moral standards? Both groups engage in immoral or wicked behavior. But it would seem to me that the wealthy overall have the advantage. Their immoral behavior often benefits the general wealth of the country, and it's less wicked and sinful.”

Source #2

Federalist Position on State/Federal Power – Alexander Hamilton
- June 28, 1788 -

“*The Antifederalists argue that the federal government should not be allowed to tax the people because it will take everything it can get.*

It is unfair to presume that the representatives of the people will be tyrants in the federal government, but not in the state government. If we are convinced that the federal government will pass laws that go against the interests of the people, then we should have no federal government at all. But if we unite, we can accomplish great things.

I must finally say that I resent the implication that I am only interested in rank and power. What reasonable man would establish a system that would reduce his friends and children to slavery and ruin?

No reasonable man would want to establish a government that is unfriendly to the liberty of the people. Do not assume, gentlemen, that the advocates of this Constitution are motivated by their ambition. It is an unjust and uncharitable view.”

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ANTI-FEDERALISTS

Melancton Smith was a New York delegate to the Constitutional Convention. He was the most important Anti-Federalist member of the ratification convention in 1788. Smith wrote many of his arguments in the pamphlet, the Federal Farmer, that circulated widely in the young states. Smith argued against ratification of the new Constitution. He feared that creating such a strong federal government would result in the same tyranny they experienced under the King.

Source #1

Anti-Federalist Position on Congressional Representation— Melancton Smith
- June 21, 1788 -

“Representatives should be a true picture of the people. They should understand their circumstances and their troubles. Therefore, the number of representatives should be so large that both rich and poor people will choose to be representatives.

If the number of representatives is small, the position will be too competitive. Ordinary people will not attempt to run for office. A middle-class yeoman (farmer) will never be chosen. So, the government will fall into the hands of the few and the rich. This will be a government of oppression.

The rich consider themselves above the common people, entitled to more respect. They believe they have the right to get anything they want.”

Source #2

Anti-Federalist Position on State/Federal Power – Melancton Smith
- June 28, 1788 -

“In a country where most people live more than twelve hundred miles from the center, I don't think one [government] body can legislate for the whole. Can such a government design a system of taxation that will be beneficial for everyone?

Won't such a centralized taxation system lead to swarms of officers, infesting our country and taking our money? People will be taxed beyond their means, and their complaints will never reach the government.

It is not possible to find a set of representatives who are familiar with all parts of the continent. Can you find men in Georgia who know what's happening in New Hampshire, who know what taxes will best suit its inhabitants, and how much they can afford? Can the best men make laws for the people they know nothing about?

We have no reason to eliminate our state governments, or think they are incapable of acting wisely. Our state governments should be the guardians of our rights and interests.”