

Ratification: Federalists v. Antifederalists

Many famous American patriots fought against ratification of the United States Constitution. Patrick Henry saw a plot to destroy American liberty: “In some parts of the plan before you, the great rights of freemen are endangered; in other parts, absolutely taken away.” Virginia’s George Mason, as well as John Hancock and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, doubted the wisdom of new government. Even Thomas Jefferson complained, “I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive.” Why did so many Founding Fathers think the Constitution was a bad idea, when George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton believed it was vital to replace the Articles of Confederation?

It was necessary for conventions in at least nine states to ratify the Constitution. If large states such as Massachusetts, New York, or Virginia did not accept the Constitution, most people believed the new government would not work. These conventions inspired serious debates. Supporters of the Constitution were federalists; those who opposed it became antifederalists.

The federalists insisted a strong central government with the power to raise money through taxes was essential to America’s survival. *The Federalist Papers*, which Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote, asserted that without such a government the United States might eventually collapse. They argued that the new Constitution struck a strong balance between the rights and powers of citizens, states, and the federal government.

The antifederalists countered that the Constitution lacked a bill of rights. Most state constitutions contained a bill of rights protecting freedom of speech, religion, the press, and other individual rights; they worried that without a bill of rights the new president could become a dictator. Mason, Henry, and Jefferson also feared the new powers given to the national government would destroy the power of the states to conduct their own affairs.

The antifederalists could not convince enough people to vote against the Constitution to prevent its ratification, although they came close to defeating it in several states. However, they convinced Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Virginia, and New York to support the Constitution if a bill of rights were added during the first session of Congress. Thus, American citizens owe rights to free speech, trial by jury, a free press, and other fundamental protections to the antifederalists.

Name: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. What were the two chief complaints antifederalists had about the United States Constitution?
2. Name some prominent antifederalists.
3. What did supporters of the Constitution call themselves?
4. How did the antifederalists affect the ratification conventions of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Virginia?