Federalists and Anti-Federalists Fight Over the Constitution

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America’s core ideas were shaped at the Philadelphia Convention. Many leaders came together to write the framework of the new Constitution of the United States.

But many questions remained, and not everyone agreed on what had been written.

Could this proposed system be made into the law of the land — the way this brand new country would be governed?

**Articles of Confederation**

The Articles of Confederation, established in 1781, served as the first Constitution of the new United States. They established a weak central government and left many powers to the 13 individual states.

The new Constitution would put more power back into the central government. This would be hard to sell to many people in the public.

A great debate about the future of the nation was about to begin.
Federalists

The supporters of the new Constitution called themselves "Federalists." They favored a government that had a stronger central government.

For Federalists, the Constitution was required in order to safeguard the liberty and independence that the American Revolution had created.

The Federalists had an innovative political plan and many talented leaders on their side. For example, the only two nationally popular celebrities of the period, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, favored the Constitution. In addition to these superstars, the Federalists were well organized, had money, and expressed their ideas well in the papers they wrote to support their views. Most newspapers supported the Federalists' political plan, and published articles and pamphlets to explain why the people should approve the Constitution.

In spite of their advantages, the Federalists still had a hard fight in front of them. Their new solutions would be a big change from the traditional political beliefs in this period. Most significantly, the Federalists believed that the greatest threat to the future of the United States did not lie in the abuse of central power. Instead, the threat could be found in what they saw as too much democracy, such as in the Shays' Rebellion. In that event, many poor rural farmers rose up in anger to fight against the Massachusetts government, who they believed was unfair in enforcing debts.

How could the Federalists convince the American people that for the nation to thrive, democracy needed to be held back in favor of a stronger central government?

Anti-Federalists

The anti-Federalists were a coalition of people who opposed ratification of the Constitution. Although less well organized than the Federalists, they also had an impressive group of leaders who were especially prominent in state politics.

Many political elites were anti-Federalists, as were popular champions of the people such as Patrick Henry and George Mason of Virginia. They were joined by a large number of ordinary Americans, particularly farmers who predominated in rural America, many of them from the western regions of the country that were just beginning to be settled.

This mixed group believed that the greatest threat to the future of the United States was in the government’s potential to become corrupt and seize more power until it completely dominated the people. America had just succeeded in rejecting what it saw as the tyranny of the British king, so such threats were seen as a very real possibility.

To anti-Federalists, the proposed Constitution threatened to lead the United States down an all-too-familiar road of political corruption. All three branches of the new central government threatened anti-Federalists' traditional belief in the importance of restraining government power.
The president's vast new powers were particularly disturbing to the anti-Federalists. They feared how the president could overturn decisions made by the legislature, whose members were seen as leaders of the common people. Anti-Federalists also feared that the court system of the national government would have more power than local courts.

Meanwhile, the proposed lower house of the legislature (Senate) would have so few members that only rich, powerful elites were likely to be elected. Furthermore, these representatives would lead people from such a large area that they couldn't really know everyone they represented.

The 55 members of the proposed national House of Representatives was quite a bit smaller than most state legislatures in the period. The new legislature was to have increased authority over money, especially the right to raise taxes. Because of this, the anti-Federalists feared that Congress would soon pass unfair taxes that it would enforce with a national army.

The core objection of anti-Federalists came down to the sweeping new powers of the new central government.

The most powerful argument by the anti-Federalists was based on the lack of protection for individual liberties in the Constitution. In that era, many states had written their own constitutions, most of which had been built upon the blueprint created by the state of Virginia. It included a clear protection of individual rights that could not be intruded upon by the government. This bill of rights was seen as a major revolutionary improvement over the old British constitution, which didn't clearly protect individual rights.

**The future of the nation**

Why, then, had the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention not included a bill of rights in their proposed Constitution? Most anti-Federalists thought that such protections were not granted because the Federalists wanted to take away freedoms earned by ordinary people during the Revolution.

The anti-Federalists and Federalists agreed on one thing: the future of the nation was at stake in the contest over the Constitution.