

Federalists and Anti-Federalists

During the period from the drafting and proposal of the Constitution between May and September, 1787, to its ratification in 1788 there was an intense debate on ratification. During this period, people basically divided into two groups, the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists.

People opposed to the ratification of the Constitution were called the Anti-Federalists. They were concerned that the Constitution gave too much power to the federal, or national, government at the expense of the state governments. They were also concerned that, within the federal government, the legislative and executive branches were too powerful. Specifically, the Anti-Federalists were concerned that the “necessary and proper” clause in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, which allows Congress to do what it believes is “necessary and proper” in order to carry out its other responsibilities, was too broad and would give Congress too much power.

Anti-Federalists were also concerned that the Constitution lacked a specific listing of rights. They believed that a bill of rights was essential to protect the people from the federal government. The Revolutionary War had just been fought because the American people needed to defend their rights. With the war experience still in mind, the Anti-Federalists did not want a powerful national government taking away those rights. The lack of a bill of rights became the focus of the Anti-Federalist campaign against ratification. To communicate their concerns, Anti-Federalists such as Patrick Henry wrote essays and newspaper articles to spread their point of view and these writings became known as the Anti-Federalist Papers.

The supporters of the proposed Constitution called themselves Federalists. For the Federalists, the Constitution was necessary in order to protect the liberty and independence that was gained from the American Revolution. The main arguments in favor of ratifying the Constitution were stated in a series of essays published in newspapers written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay called the Federalist Papers.

They believed that the three branches of the national government separated the powers and protected the rights of the people. Each branch represents a different aspect of the people, and because all three branches are equal, no one group can assume control over another. They also believed that a listing of rights can be a dangerous thing. If the federal government were to protect specific listed rights, what would stop it from violating or abusing rights that were not listed? Since they cannot list all the rights, the Federalists argued that it is better to list no rights at all.

Overall, the Federalists were more organized in their efforts. By June of 1788, the Constitution was close to ratification. Nine states had voted to ratify it (eight voted “yes” and New York at first voted “no”), and only one more (New Hampshire) was needed. To achieve this, the Federalists agreed that once Congress met, it would draft a bill of rights. Finally, New York and Virginia approved, and the Constitution was a reality. Interestingly, the Bill of Rights was not originally a part of the Constitution, and yet it has proved to be highly important to protecting the rights of the people.

Adapted from: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/16b.asp>, <http://www.thefederalistpapers.org/anti-federalist-papers> and <http://library.thinkquest.org/11572/creation/framing/feds.html>

Federalists and Anti-Federalists Guiding Questions

Directions, Read Federalists and Anti-Federalists to answer the following questions, by identifying evidence and writing responses in complete sentences.

Guiding Question	Evidence from text	Answer in Complete Sentences
What was the viewpoint of the Anti-Federalists concerning the ratification of the Constitution?		
What were the Anti-Federalist Papers?		
Why did the Anti-Federalists want to include a bill of rights in the Constitution?		
What was the viewpoint of the Federalists concerning the ratification of the Constitution?		
What were the Federalist Papers?		
Additional Notes from Class Discussion:		