

## Roots of the Constitution

At the Philadelphia Convention the founding fathers were busy at work creating a new and stronger national government, however they were unsure how their new system could be made into law. The country was divided. Some thought the new nation needed a strong central government which controlled the states and could levy taxes. There were others who felt the power should remain in the states like states in the Articles of Confederation. The framers had a tough road ahead. The leaders at the convention drafted a plan, this would be a new approach allowing the decision to be decided through a ratifying system which gave the power to the people. With this plan the new constitution would become law if nine of the thirteen states approved. Congress approved the states to hold special conventions to decide on the new constitution and began for the arrangement to elect delegates to represent the states for the new ratification process.

Those who supported the newly proposed Constitution were called the “Federalists.” The Federalists were in support of a weaker, decentralized government. The Federalists were in support of a constitution in order to protect the liberty and independence they had achieved from the American Revolution. The Federalists felt it was their duty to protect the gains achieved during the Revolution. Many of the most well-known and intelligent leaders who had the most experience nationally worked with the Federalists. The two celebrities of the time, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were in favor of the new Constitution. The Federalists had a well-organized system. They also had plenty of money to help them. They used newspapers and pamphlets to explain to people why they should be in favor of a constitution. The Federalists were strong but they needed to convince people that a straight vote by the people would not be in the nation’s best interest. The Federalists felt democracy needed to be controlled by a stronger Federal government.

The Antifederalists were a mixed group of people who were against the ratification of the Constitution. The antifederalists were not as organized as the Federalists but they also had some great leaders who were well known. Political men such as James Winthrop from Massachusetts and Patrick Henry and George Mason of Virginia. The majority of people who supported the antifederalists were mostly yeomen farmers who lived in rural America. The strength of the antifederalists was maintained in the newer western frontier regions of the country. Many antifederalists felt the constitution would lead down a road of political corruption. They wanted to restrain the government. The new powers given to the president, especially the power to veto and overturn decisions in the legislature seemed too much. They did not like the idea of a federal court system which could overturn decisions of local courts. They also felt that the legislature would be ruled by elites and aristocrats. The antifederalists thought that by giving the legislature the right to raise taxes it would only be a matter of time before they would pass oppressive taxes. The biggest concern for them was a lack of protection for civil liberties in the constitution.

Before the constitution could be acknowledged and accepted it was sent to the states to be read. They could ratify and make minor changes. Of course the states with strong Federalists accepted the document. Those with strong antifederalists supported it too but it took longer to change and compromise. The spring conventions required nine of the 13 states to be in favor for the constitution to

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become the law. Virginia and New York had large populations and were divided on the issue. New York was deeply divided with more Federalists in the cities and urban areas and more antifederalists in the upstate rural areas. The leading New York Federalist was Alexander Hamilton. When the convention began the antifederalists had a majority. Hamilton, however, was able to win by the narrow margin of 30-27. An important examination of American politics came from the division in New York. The Federalist papers were written. These were a series of 85 anonymous letters to newspapers to assure the public about the Federalist agenda. They described why America needed a strong government, especially so they could act on foreign affairs. The papers also tried to explain and convince the readers that a separation of powers and checks and balances would prevent the government from becoming tyrannical.

The antifederalists were not convinced that the separation of powers stop the government from threat of tyranny. Because of this the states beginning with Massachusetts ratified the constitution but wanted to be sure protections were added. This issue led to the creation of the Bill of Rights or the first ten amendments to the Constitution. The antifederalists, even though they lost the debate had an important impact. The creation of the Constitution was a process of political minds, hard work and compromise. Because of this the nation began to take shape and would continue to be changed.

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