

Debating the Constitution— Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

Like the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, the year-long national debate over ratification was a remarkable moment in American history. Throughout the United States, Americans from all walks of life vigorously debated the wisdom of replacing the Articles of Confederation with the Constitution.

Supporters of the new constitution adopted the name “Federalists” to describe themselves. Their opponents eventually took the name “Anti-Federalists.” Federalists were mainly leaders from urban or commercial regions that frequently engaged in interstate and international commerce; Anti-Federalists tended to be men from agrarian counties that participated primarily in local trade. Going into the state ratifying conventions, the Federalists had several advantages. First, they had many well-known politicians and writers on their side, including George Washington, Benjamin

Franklin, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton. These well-tested men of national experience knew and trusted one another. The Anti-Federalists, on the other hand, were generally men of local outlook and perspective. While prominent leaders in their counties and states,

they knew few fellow Anti-Federalists elsewhere, making it difficult for them to coordinate their messages in the national campaign to sway public opinion. Nevertheless, the Anti-Federalists made several compelling arguments. They argued that successful republican governments could exist only in small countries where “the feelings and interests of the people at large” could truly be represented and where men in power would be held strictly accountable to the people. Above all, Anti-Federalists feared that a distant and powerful central government would eventually become hostile to the needs and liberties of ordinary people.



“Alexander Hamilton,” engraved by E. Prud’homme, New York, New York, ca. 1835, after a painting by Archibald Robertson. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

The Federalists countered the Anti-Federalists in several ways. In particular, Madison, Hamilton, and John Jay wrote a series of brilliant essays defending the Constitution. Eventually published as *The Federalist Papers*, these essays argued that the Constitution should be ratified because it would bring political and economic stability to the nation while protecting the people’s fundamental liberties and freedoms. In Federalist No. 10, for example, Madison pointed out that factions and political instabilities occur in both small and large republics because differing opinions and interests are inherent in all human societies. The best way to protect against faction, Madison said, was “to extend the sphere” of government, just as the Federalists were proposing with the Constitution. In a large republic with multiple factions, no single group could dominate the government. Instead, various parties would have to compromise and accommodate others’ points of view. Thus, individual freedoms would be better protected and political stability preserved.