

THE DEBATE OVER RATIFICATION

Newspapers printed the Constitution for the public because nine of the thirteen legislatures would be needed to ratify it. This led an anonymous writer in New York newspapers to warn that the new Constitution was not all it seemed—and thus the debate over ratification began. What readers found was a plan that would create a “federal” system, in which a strong national government would share power with the states. Before long, the entire country was debating whether the Constitution should be ratified as it was written or if it needed to be changed to better ensure and protect the rights of individuals. Those who were for or against ratification debated in newspapers, through pamphlets, and on the floors of state conventions.

Federalists

The supporters of the Constitution as it was written called themselves “Federalists.” The Federalists argued that the Constitution would create a national government that was strong enough to unite the quarreling states into a single republic. A strong central government, they argued, would be better prepared to deal with foreign nations and their influence.

James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay led the Federalist campaign for ratification. In a series of newspaper essays, they recalled the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. They showed how the Constitution would correct those weaknesses by creating a stronger, more effective union of the states.

The Federalist leaders also addressed the fears of many Americans that a strong national government would threaten their freedom or take away their individual rights. The powers given to the government, they pointed out, were strictly limited. The federal government held only certain powers, while state governments retained some powers. In addition, the Constitution established separation of powers. Federal powers were divided among three branches: legislative, judicial, and executive. Each branch of the government had the ability to check the power of the other two so that no one branch could become too powerful. The influential articles written by Madison, Hamilton, and Jay were later collected and published as the Federalist Papers.

Anti-Federalists

Opponents of the Constitution were known as Anti-Federalists. Some notable Anti-Federalists were Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and George Mason. They were joined by many ordinary Americans, particularly farmers. They found much to dislike about the new government plan. Congress, they feared, would burden the country with taxes. They claimed the president had almost king-like power. As for the judicial branch, they worried it would overpower state courts.

The Anti-Federalists also complained about what was missing from the plan. Their main complaint was that the plan listed the powers of the government, but not the rights of the people. Anti-Federalists desired a Constitution that would include a Bill of Rights: a clear protection of individual rights that could not be infringed upon by the government. Many state constitutions at the time had a Bill of Rights.

Most of all, the Anti-Federalists feared change. The idea of giving up state power to form a stronger national government made them uneasy—particularly after fighting a war to separate themselves from a strong foreign government.

Sources

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