

Ratifying the Constitution

MAIN IDEA

Americans across the nation debated whether the Constitution would produce the best government.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

American liberties today are protected by the U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights.

TERMS & NAMES

federalism

Federalists

Antifederalists

The Federalist papers

George Mason

Bill of Rights

ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

In 1788, in Hartford, Connecticut, 168 delegates met to decide whether their state should ratify the U.S. Constitution. Samuel Huntington, Connecticut's governor, addressed the assembly.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

This is a new event in the history of mankind. Heretofore, most governments have been formed by tyrants and imposed on mankind by force. Never before did a people, . . . meet together by their representatives and . . . frame for themselves a system of government.

Samuel Huntington, quoted in *Original Meanings*

In this section, you will learn about the ratification of the Constitution.



Samuel Huntington



Taking Notes

Use your chart to take notes about the new government.

Problems	
Western lands	
Postwar depression	
Representation in the new government	
Slavery	

Federalists and Antifederalists

By the time the convention in Connecticut opened, Americans had already been debating the new Constitution for months. The document had been printed in newspapers and handed out in pamphlets across the United States. The framers of the Constitution knew that the document would cause controversy. They immediately began to campaign for ratification, or approval, of the Constitution.

The framers suspected that people might be afraid the Constitution would take too much power away from the states. To address this fear, the framers explained that the Constitution was based on federalism. **Federalism** is a system of government in which power is shared between the central (or federal) government and the states. Linking themselves to the idea of federalism, the people who supported the Constitution took the name **Federalists**.

People who opposed the Constitution were called **Antifederalists**. They thought the Constitution took too much power away from the

Vocabulary

aristocracy:

a group or class considered superior to others

states and did not guarantee rights for the people. Some were afraid that a strong president might be declared king. Others thought the Senate might turn into a powerful aristocracy. In either case, the liberties won at great cost during the Revolution might be lost.

Antifederalists published their views about the Constitution in newspapers and pamphlets. They used logical arguments to convince people to oppose the Constitution. But they also tried to stir people's emotions by charging that it would destroy American liberties. As one Antifederalist wrote, "After so recent a triumph over British despots [oppressive rulers], . . . it is truly astonishing that a set of men among ourselves should have had the effrontery [nerve] to attempt the destruction of our liberties."

The Federalist Papers

The Federalists did not sit still while the Antifederalists attacked the Constitution. They wrote essays to answer the Antifederalists' attacks. The best known of the Federalist essays are *The Federalist papers*. These essays first appeared as letters in New York newspapers. They were later published together in a book called *The Federalist*.

Three well-known politicians wrote *The Federalist* papers—James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, the secretary of foreign affairs for the Confederation Congress. Like the Antifederalists, the Federalists appealed to reason and emotion. In *The Federalist* papers, Hamilton described why people should support ratification.

ReadingHistory

A. Making

Inferences What does Hamilton think will happen if the Constitution is not ratified?

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Yes, my countrymen, . . . I am clearly of opinion it is in your interest to adopt it [the Constitution]. I am convinced that this is the safest course for your liberty, your dignity, and your happiness.

Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist* "Number 1"

Federalists and Antifederalists

FEDERALISTS

- Supported removing some powers from the states and giving more powers to the national government
- Favored dividing powers among different branches of government
- Proposed a single person to lead the executive branch

ANTIFEDERALISTS

- Wanted important political powers to remain with the states
- Wanted the legislative branch to have more power than the executive
- Feared that a strong executive might become a king or tyrant
- Believed a bill of rights needed to be added to the Constitution to protect people's rights

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts

1. Which group wanted a stronger central government?
2. If you had been alive in 1787, would you have been a Federalist or an Antifederalist?



John Jay

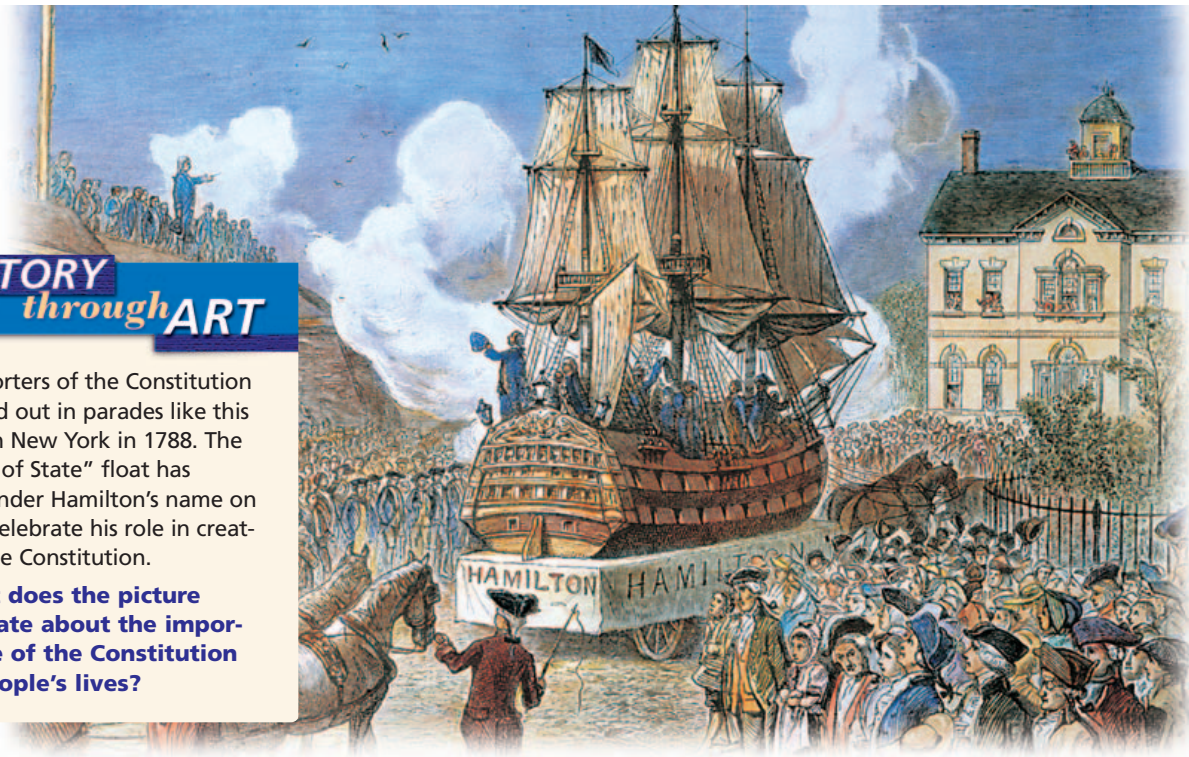


George Mason

HISTORY through ART

Supporters of the Constitution turned out in parades like this one in New York in 1788. The “Ship of State” float has Alexander Hamilton’s name on it to celebrate his role in creating the Constitution.

What does the picture indicate about the importance of the Constitution in people’s lives?



The Federalists had an important advantage over the Antifederalists. Most of the newspapers supported the Constitution, giving the Federalists more publicity than the Antifederalists. Even so, there was strong opposition to ratification in Massachusetts, North Carolina, Rhode Island, New York, and Virginia. If some of these states failed to ratify the Constitution, the United States might not survive.

The Battle for Ratification

The first four state conventions to ratify the Constitution were held in December 1787. It was a good month for the Federalists. Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania voted for ratification. In January 1788, Georgia and Connecticut ratified the Constitution. Massachusetts joined these states in early February.

By late June, nine states had voted to ratify the Constitution. That meant that the document was now officially ratified. But New York and Virginia had not yet cast their votes. There were many powerful Antifederalists in both of those states. Without Virginia, the new government would lack the support of the largest state. Without New York, the nation would be separated into two parts geographically.

Virginia’s convention opened the first week in June. The patriot Patrick Henry fought against ratification. **George Mason**, perhaps the most influential Virginian aside from Washington, also was opposed to it. Mason had been a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, but he had refused to sign the final document. Both Henry and Mason would not consider voting for the Constitution until a bill of rights was added. A bill of rights is a set of rules that defines people’s rights.

James Madison was also at Virginia’s convention. He suggested that Virginia follow Massachusetts’s lead and ratify the Constitution, and he recommended the addition of a bill of rights. With the addition of a bill of rights likely, Virginia ratified the Constitution at the end of June.

ReadingHistory

B. Drawing Conclusions How did the lack of a bill of rights endanger the Constitution?

The news of Virginia's vote arrived while the New York convention was in debate. The Antifederalists had outnumbered the Federalists when the convention had begun. But with the news of Virginia's ratification, New Yorkers decided to join the Union. New York also called for a bill of rights.

It was another year before North Carolina ratified the Constitution. In 1790, Rhode Island became the last state to ratify it. By then, the new Congress had already written a bill of rights and submitted it to the states for approval.

The Bill of Rights

Background

The seven states that asked for a bill of rights were Massachusetts, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Virginia, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island.

At the same time that seven of the states ratified the Constitution, they asked that it be amended to include a bill of rights. Supporters of a bill of rights hoped that it would set forth the rights of all Americans. They believed it was needed to protect people against the power of the national government.

Madison, who was elected to the new Congress in the winter of 1789, took up the cause. He proposed a set of changes to the Constitution. Congress edited Madison's list and proposed placing the amendments at the end of the Constitution in a separate section.

The amendments went to the states for ratification. As with the Constitution, three-quarters of the states had to ratify the amendments for them to take effect. With Virginia's vote in 1791, ten of the amendments were ratified and became law. These ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution became known as the **Bill of Rights**. (See the Constitution Handbook, pages 266-268.)

The passage of the Bill of Rights was one of the first acts of the new government. In the next chapter, you will read about other issues that faced the new government.

America's HERITAGE

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Freedom of religion was an important part of the First Amendment. Jefferson and Madison believed that government enforcement of religious laws was the source of much social conflict. They supported freedom of religion as a way to prevent such conflict.

Even before Madison wrote the Bill of Rights, he worked to ensure religious liberty in Virginia. In 1786, he helped pass the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, originally written by Jefferson in 1777.

Section 3 Assessment

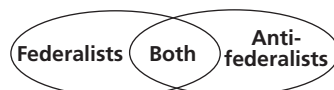
1. Terms & Names

Explain the significance of:

- federalism
- Federalists
- Antifederalists
- *The Federalist* papers
- George Mason
- Bill of Rights

2. Using Graphics

Use a diagram like the one below to compare and contrast the Federalists and the Antifederalists.



Which group do you think made the stronger argument about ratification? Why?

3. Main Ideas

- What were Patrick Henry's and George Mason's views on ratification?
- How did the Federalists and the Antifederalists try to convince people to take their sides in the debate over the Constitution?
- What was the significance of the Bill of Rights?

4. Critical Thinking

Recognizing Propaganda

Reread the quotation by Hamilton on page 235. Is it an example of propaganda? Why or why not?

THINK ABOUT

- Hamilton's use of the word *countrymen*
- Hamilton's reference to liberty, dignity, and happiness

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

SPEECH

LANGUAGE ARTS

Review the major arguments for and against ratification of the Constitution. Hold a **press conference** or write a **news report** on the ratification debate.