

Student Handout 2B: Antifederalists

Although they did not refer to themselves as such, the diverse group of people who opposed ratification of the Constitution are referred to as “Antifederalists.” They were less well organized than the Federalists; however, their ranks were composed of an impressive group of prominent state political leaders like James Winthrop in Massachusetts, Melancton Smith of New York, and Patrick Henry and George Mason of Virginia. These political elites were joined by many ordinary Americans, particularly farmers. Unlike the Federalists, whose membership appealed to eastern lawyers, bankers, and merchants, the Antifederalists’ strength lay in the newer settled western regions of the country.

Despite their diversity, Antifederalists shared a core view of American politics: the greatest threat to the future of the United States lay in the government’s potential to become corrupt and seize more and more power until its tyrannical rule completely dominated the people. They experienced the Revolution as a successful rejection of the tyranny of British power and viewed such threats a very real part of political life.

To Antifederalists, the proposed Constitution threatened to lead the United States down an all-too-familiar road of political corruption. Antifederalists believed that the new sweeping powers that the proposed Constitution granted to each of three proposed branches and central government threatened the republic. Any rise of national power would come at the expense of state power and, in the words of George Mason, “annihilate totally the state governments.”

Most importantly, Antifederalists pointed to the lack of protection for individual liberties in the Constitution. While most of the state constitutions were modeled after Virginia’s and included an explicit protection of individual rights, the proposed Constitution did not. Antifederalists viewed the protection of individual rights as a major Revolutionary improvement over the unwritten protections of the British constitution. Wouldn’t the proposed Constitution be taking a step backward in terms of rights gained?

While the Antifederalists and Federalists disagreed on the direction the government should take, they did agree that this contest over the Constitution put the fate of the nation at stake.

Adapted from “Antifederalists.” *Ratifying the Constitution*. U.S.History.org Independence All Association in Philadelphia. 2008-2018. 23 April 2018 <<http://www.ushistory.org/us/16b.asp>>.