

The Nature of Republican Government

Introduction

Antifederalists argued that the Constitution would destroy the states and create one large, consolidated republic that would deteriorate into a despotic monarchy or aristocracy. They espoused a traditional position based on Montesquieu and other political theorists that a republic—by which they meant a government in which the people consent to be governed by representatives they elect either directly or indirectly on a regular basis—could exist only in a relatively small territory populated by people who shared similar values and interests.

Antifederalists believed that in a small republic the representatives know the minds of their constituents and the people know their representatives. This enables the people to understand their government and the laws. Such a government commands the confidence and support of the people.

This intimacy between the people and their representatives is impossible in a large republic, in which representatives would be little known and distant, and the government and laws would become complex. A large country would contain a diverse population, with different, sometimes conflicting, interests. The result would be a constant clashing and disorder. A large, peacetime standing army would be needed to enforce the central government's laws, especially on the periphery.

Instead of the single large republic, Antifederalists advocated a confederacy of smaller republics (the states), which would delegate to the central government only such powers as were required to maintain the Union. The central government, like the Confederation Congress, would act, not directly on the people, but through the states.

Federalists believed that a confederacy was not an adequate government for the United States. They denied that the Constitution would destroy the states or create one large, consolidated republic. The Constitution, they said, would create a government that was partly national and partly federal.

Federalists denied the charge that the Constitution violated traditional republican theory, citing Montesquieu whenever possible. Federalists argued that the states were appropriately-sized federal republics that under the Constitution united to form a limited central government with only delegated powers. Interestingly, James Madison devised a theory that valued a large and diverse polity as the solution to the great problem of republican government: to secure the public good and private rights from the tyranny of the majority while still retaining popular government. The clashing of diverse interests in a large republic becomes not an evil to be avoided, but a cure for the ancient disease afflicting republican government. Thus, representatives in this extended republic would effectively filter the varied interests so as to “refine and enlarge the public views.” Madison's interpretation, embodied in *The Federalist* #10, fell on deaf ears as virtually no one either supported or attacked his theory.

Sources

Antifederalist

- Cato (George Clinton?) III, *New York Journal*, 25 October 1787
Federal Farmer (Elbridge Gerry?): *Letters to the Republican*, c. 8 November 1787
Cato (George Clinton?) V, *New York Journal*, 22 November 1787
Brutus (Melancton Smith?) IV, *New York Journal*, 29 November 1787
Federal Farmer (Elbridge Gerry?): *An Additional Number of Letters to the Republican*,
New York, 2 May 1788
George Mason: Speech in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, 4 June 1788

Federalist

- Publius (John Jay): The Federalist 2, *New York Independent Journal*, 31 October 1787
Publius (James Madison): The Federalist 10, *New York Daily Advertiser*,
22 November 1787
James Wilson: Speech in the Pennsylvania Convention, 24 November 1787
A Landholder (Oliver Ellsworth) IV, *Connecticut Courant*, 26 November 1787
Publius (Alexander Hamilton): The Federalist 35, *New York Independent Journal*,
5 January 1788
Publius (James Madison): The Federalist 39, *New York Independent Journal*,
16 January 1788
Publius (James Madison): The Federalist 56, *New York Independent Journal*,
16 February 1788

Roles in Script–8 (L–large role; M–medium role; S–small role)

- Moderator (L)
Antifederalist Panel
 Cato (M)
 Brutus (S)
 Federal Farmer (L)
 George Mason (S)
Federalist Panel
 A Landholder (S)
 Publius (L)
 James Wilson (M)

Script

Moderator: Good evening and welcome. Tonight we have a group of individuals with differing views regarding the Constitution that was proposed by the recent convention that gathered in Philadelphia. Federalists maintain that the Constitution is the solution to many of our country's problems. Antifederalists insist the Constitution is deeply flawed and dangerous and requires revision or needs to be rejected. In tonight's discussion we will focus our attention on what many believe to be a core issue in the events leading to the American Revolution. Our consideration is, what constitutes a legitimate system of representation within a republic? Gentlemen, welcome.

Panelists: Hello, Pleased to be here, etc.

Moderator: I would like to start our discussion by starting with a simple question that seems to be the central dilemma in not just this particular Constitution but in all forms of government. Given the size of our country, is it possible for Americans to be united in a republican form of government?

Cato: Whoever seriously considers the immense extent of territory comprehended within the limits of the United States . . . will receive it as an intuitive truth, that a consolidated republican form of government therein, can never form a perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to you and your posterity.

Moderator: Then why is unity impossible for the United States?

Cato: [Well for starters,] the variety of its climates, productions, and commerce, the difference of extent, and number of inhabitants in all; the dissimilitude of interest, morals, and policies, in almost every one. . . .

Publius: [I need to interrupt here.] It has until lately been a received and uncontradicted opinion, that the prosperity of the people of America depended on their continuing firmly united . . . and efforts of our best and wisest Citizens have been constantly directed to that object.

Cato: The extent of many of the states in the Union, is at this time, almost too great for the superintendence of a republican form of government, and must one day or other, revolve into more vigorous ones, or by separation be reduced into smaller . . . ones.

James Wilson: [However,] animosities, and perhaps wars, would arise from . . . different confederacies. . . . [There is a real] danger resulting from foreign influence and mutual dissensions [which could happen if we have] different confederacies.

Moderator: Good point, Mr. Wilson.

Publius: [But,] Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people, a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the

same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs.

Cato: [Any] legislature [created for this nation, will be] . . . composed of interests opposite and dissimilar in their nature, will in its exercise [of power], emphatically be, like a house divided against itself.

Publius: America was not composed of detached and distant territories, but that one connected, fertile, wide spreading country was the portion of our western sons of liberty. Providence has in a particular manner blessed it with a variety of soils and productions, and watered it with innumerable streams. . . . A <series>¹ of navigable waters forms a kind of chain round its borders, as if to bind it together.

Cato: The <frontiers>² are also too remote from the usual seat of government, and the laws therefore too feeble to afford protection to all its parts, and insure domestic tranquility without the aid of another principle.

Moderator: And what is that other principle?

Cato: Will this consolidated republic, if established, [get any] compliance, among the citizens of these states . . . without the aid of a standing army—I deny that it will.

James Wilson: And [the] connection of lakes and rivers . . . all indicate an enlarged government to be fit and advantageous for them.

Publius: [This] present[s] them with highways for the easy communication of friendly aids, and the mutual transportation and exchange of their various commodities.

Moderator: OK, OK, OK, We get it. You believe that Americans are united!

Publius: By their . . . counsels, arms and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general Liberty and Independence.

Moderator: Yes, we understand, can we . . .

Publius: They formed [this nation] almost as soon as they had a political existence; at a time, when their habitations were in flames, when many of their Citizens were bleeding. . . .

Cato: [The foundation] on which this new form of government is erected, declares a consolidation or union of all the thirteen parts, or states, into one great whole, under the firm of the United States.

Moderator: And the problem with this would be?

Cato: [I would repeat,] from the vast extent of your territory, and the complication of interests, the science of government will become intricate and perplexed, and too misterious for you to understand, and observe; and [eventually] . . . be conducted into a monarchy.

Moderator: Wow. That seems to be a stretch.

Cato: What [else] can you promise yourselves, on the score of consolidation of the United States, into one government . . . your freedom [is] insecure.

Publius: [Do we need any] further proof . . . of the republican complexion of this system, [than the Constitution's] absolute prohibition of titles of nobility, both under the federal and the State governments; and in its express guaranty of the <representative>³ form to each of the <states>?⁴

Cato: You must risque much, by . . . placing trusts of the greatest magnitude, into the hands of individuals, whose ambition for power, and agrandisement, will oppress and grind you.

Moderator: This seems to be a valid point? When you look at history what examples are there to serve as a guide for us?

James Wilson: [Cato's opinions] seem to be supported . . . by the history of governments in the Old World.

Narrator: But, isn't Cato's point valid regardless of time and location?

George Mason: It is ascertained by history, that there never was a Government [that existed] over a very extensive country, without destroying the liberties of the people.

James Wilson: The situation and dimensions of those [past] <systems>,⁵ and the state of society, manners, and habits in them, were so different from those of the United States, that the most correct descriptions could have supplied but a very small fund of applicable remark.

Moderator: But what, if anything can we glean from the past?

James Wilson: [We could] adopt any one of four different systems. [We] may become consolidated into one government, in which the separate existence of the states shall be entirely absorbed. [We] may . . . act as separate and unconnected states. [We] may form two or more confederacies. [We] may unite in one federal republic. Which of these systems ought to have been formed by the Convention?

Federal Farmer: [But for us,] in erecting the federal government . . . each state must be known as a sovereign body.

James Wilson: [But,] Devoid of national power, we could not . . . derive a revenue. Devoid of national importance, we could not procure, for our exports, a tolerable sale at foreign markets. Devoid of national credit, we saw our public securities melt in the hands of the holders, like snow before the sun.

Federal Farmer: [Any time you] form a consolidated, or one entire government, there must be no state, or local governments, but all things, persons and property, must be subject to the laws of one. . . . Each state government . . . is consolidated, or one entire government.

James Wilson: Devoid of national dignity, we could not . . . perform our treaties, on our parts . . . nor compel the performance of them on the part of others. Devoid of national energy, we could not carry into execution our own resolutions, decisions, or laws.

Moderator: OK, let's step back a bit. Perhaps it might be best for us to define what a republic actually is. Another way to approach this might be, what is a republic and how does your definition influence your views on how representation would work within your definition of a republic?

Publius: [Absolutely.] We may define a republic to be . . . a government which derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people, and is administered by persons holding their offices . . . for a limited period [of time], or during good behavior.

Moderator: OK. That sounds good, but I am pretty sure Antifederalists see it differently. What is the problem with this definition Publius has offered?

Federal Farmer: [The problem lies in how representation works in this proposed Constitution.] In this extensive country it is difficult to get a representation sufficiently numerous. . . . A free elective government cannot be extended over large territories . . . one government and general legislation alone never can extend equal benefits to all parts of the United States: Different laws, customs, and opinions exist in the different states.

Moderator: In other words you believe that the United States is too big for a truly representative government to work.

Federal Farmer: [Yes.] The people in a small <republic>⁸ can unite and act <cooperatively>⁹ and with vigour; but in large territories . . . one part is often played off against the other.

George Mason: [Precisely,] history shew[s] us, that monarchy may suit a large territory, and . . . popular Governments can only exist in small territories.

Moderator: So what is it about smallness that is important when considering how the people are to be represented?

Federal Farmer: A full and equal representation, is that which possesses the same interests, feelings, opinions, and views [of] the people themselves . . . were they all assembled.

George Mason: Representatives . . . ought to mix with the people, think as they think, feel as they feel, ought to be perfectly <cooperative with>¹⁰ them, and thoroughly acquainted with their interest and condition.

Moderator: So we can conclude that you want representatives to mirror the interests of their constituents, correct?

Federal Farmer: [Correct. The problem is that] the United States contain about a million of square miles, and in half a century will, probably, contain ten millions of people; and from the center to the extremes is about 800 miles.

Moderator: And for you the size of the nation presents a challenge to this type of representation. Would it follow then that you would suggest increasing the number of representatives in the legislature of this Constitution?

Cato: [Certainly.] It is a very important objection to this government, that the representation consists of so few; too few to resist the influence of corruption, and the temptation to treachery . . . and yet the number of senators and representatives proposed for this vast continent, does not equal those of your own state.

Moderator: But, if we commit to your preferences, wouldn't the number of representatives in the legislature be huge since the country itself is so large?

A Landholder: [Exactly.] If so numerous a representation were made from every part, [city, and district] of the United States, with our present population, the new Congress would consist of three thousand men.

Moderator: Publius, you seem to be anxious to address these issues. If I am not mistaken, you are not as committed to a direct form of representation that is espoused by Antifederalists.

Publius: [Correct. Direct] democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths.

Moderator: In other words, you think direct representation in democracies ends up in chaos.

A Landholder: [Correct.] Were it possible for all the people to convene and give their personal assent, some would think this the best mode of making laws, but in the present instance it is impracticable.

Moderator: And since it's impossible logistically to gather the people, I assume you think it's better for a smaller group to assemble and sift through or filter the wishes of the people.

Publius: [Yes. Representatives in the United States should] refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens.

Federal Farmer: [That's the problem.] A small representation can never be well informed as to the circumstances of the people, the members of it must be too far removed from the people, in general, to sympathize with them, and too few to communicate with them.

Moderator: Am I correct in assuming that you fear these representatives would essentially form an aristocracy?

Brutus: [Certainly. These representatives] will not be viewed by the people as part of themselves, but as a body <disconnected>¹¹ from them.

Federal Farmer: It is deceiving a people to tell them they . . . can chuse their legislators, if they cannot . . . chuse men from among themselves, and genuinely like themselves: . . . the yeomanry . . . the fishermen, mechanics and traders . . . the merchants.

Moderator: What makes these types of individuals preferable as representatives?

Federal Farmer: They possess less <self-interest>¹² and a larger share of honesty: their dependence is principally on middling and small estates, industrious pursuits, and hard labour.

Moderator: Is it possible to over state the virtues of the common man?

Publius: [I believe it is.] At present some of the states are little more than a society of <farmers>.¹³ Few of them have made much progress in those branches of industry, which give a variety and complexity to the affairs of a nation.

Moderator: So, I assume you would insist that this type of representative lacks the necessary knowledge needed to govern a nation?

Landholder: [A few] wise men chosen from each state . . . will be more competent than an hundred.

Publius: [Precisely.] A few representatives . . . from each state may bring with them a due knowledge of their own state, every representative will have much information to acquire concerning all the other states.

Moderator: OK. But, Publius, why do you think there needs to be a filtering of the views of the people? Many believe that direct democracies are preferable.

Publius: [Yes. But, in a democracy a] faction . . . whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and <motivated>¹⁴ by some common impulse of passion, or of interest . . .

Moderator . . . Will probably oppress the rights of others?

Publius: [Yes. This factious spirit is] chiefly . . . [responsible for] the unsteadiness and injustice which has <ruined>¹⁵ recent <policies made by our state governments>.¹⁶

Moderator: And I presume you would suggest the purpose of representation is to control factions rather than reflect the natural tendencies of factions?

Publius: [Exactly. It's very simple. A legislature should consist of those] whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice, will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such . . . the public voice pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more <in agreement>¹⁷ to the public good, than if pronounced by the people themselves.

Moderator: So, essentially, a representative body in the American context should serve a different purpose?

Publius: [In] a pure Democracy, a Society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the Government in person, can <not claim to>¹⁸ cure . . . the mischiefs of faction.

Federal Farmer: [But if we aspire to have a democratic system] representation . . . [representation in this system will] be extremely imperfect . . . the representatives are not circumstanced to make the proper communications to their constituents, and where the constituents in turn cannot, with tolerable convenience, make known their wants, circumstances, and opinions, to their representatives.

Moderator: In other words, you are suggesting that if the interests of the people are not directly reflected in government policy, you question whether you can call it a democratic system?

Federal Farmer: [Exactly.] By the proposed system . . . I think it has been fully shewn, the people will have but the shadow of representation, and but the shadow of security for their rights and liberties.

Brutus: [Here is another way to think about this.] In order for the people safely to <trust>¹⁹ their rulers . . . They should be satisfied that those who represent them are men of integrity, who will pursue the good of the community with <faithfulness>.²⁰

Publius: [But I would ask this of Brutus.] Is the man whose situation leads to extensive inquiry and information less likely to be a competent judge . . . than one whose observation does not travel beyond the circle of his neighbours and acquaintances?

Moderator: So, in other words Publius, you prefer those that can see the bigger picture to filter through all the issues before reaching a decision?

Publius: [Yes.] The representatives . . . will not only bring with them a considerable knowledge . . . of their respective districts; but will probably . . . have been members . . . of the state legislature, where all the local information and interests of the state are assembled, and . . . they may easily be conveyed by a very few hands into the legislature of the United States.

Brutus: [Let me conclude here with this analogy using an employer and employee relationship.] If the person confided in, be a neighbour with whom his employer is intimately acquainted, whose talents, he knows . . . his honesty and <faithfulness>²¹ unsuspected, and his friendship and zeal for the service of this principal unquestionable, he will commit his affairs into his hands with unreserved confidence, and feel himself secure.

Moderator: And I would conclude that for you the kind of representation espoused by Federalists lacks this type of close relationship.

Brutus: [Yes.] If the person employed be a stranger, whom he has never seen, and whose character for ability or <trustworthiness>²² he cannot fully learn. If he is constrained to choose him, because it was not in his power to procure one more agreeable to his wishes, he will . . . be suspicious of all his conduct.

Publius: [But, in this system] it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practise with success the vicious arts . . . [and it] will be more likely to centre on men who possess the most attractive merit, and the most diffusive and established characters.

Moderator: We need to wrap up this session. Let's have representatives from each side offer concluding statements.

Publius: It is essential to . . . government that it be derived from the great body of the society. . . It is sufficient for such a government that the persons administering it be appointed, either directly or indirectly, by the people . . . otherwise every government in the United States . . . would be degraded from the republican character.

James Wilson: The facts recorded concerning [past] constitutions are so few and general, and their histories are so unmarked and defective . . . [when] forming this system, we were deprived of many advantages, which the history and experience of other ages and other countries would, in other cases, have afforded us. . . . The extent of territory, the diversity of climate and soil, the number, and greatness all indicate an enlarged government to be fit and advantageous for them. The principles and dispositions of [our] citizens indicate that in this government, liberty shall reign triumphant. . . . If those opinions and wishes are as well-founded . . . the late Convention was justified in proposing to their constituents, one confederate republic as the best system of a national government for the United States.

Moderator: Federal Farmer, it looks like you have the last word.

Federal Farmer: The . . . people have acquired large powers and substantial influence by the revolution. In the unsettled state of things, their numerous representatives, in some instances, misused their powers, and have induced many good men suddenly to adopt ideas unfavourable to such republics, and which ideas they will discard on reflection. Without scrutinizing into the particulars of the proposed system, we immediately perceive that its general tendency is to collect the powers of government, now in the body of the people in reality, and to place them in the higher orders and fewer hands; no wonder then that all those of and about these orders are attached to it: they feel there is something in this system advantageous to them. On the other hand, the body of the people evidently feel there is something wrong and disadvantageous to them [and they rightfully oppose this consolidated system].

Moderator: And with that we conclude our discussion. Gentlemen, thank you for sharing with us and we hope the conversation continues.

Panelists: You're Welcome. Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Endnotes

- ¹ succession
- ² extremes
- ³ republican
- ⁴ latter
- ⁵ confederacies
- ⁶ animates
- ⁷ votary
- ⁸ state
- ⁹ in concert
- ¹⁰ amenable to
- ¹¹ distinct
- ¹² ambition
- ¹³ husbandmen
- ¹⁴ actuated
- ¹⁵ tainted
- ¹⁶ public administration
- ¹⁷ consonant
- ¹⁸ admit of no
- ¹⁹ repose themselves on
- ²⁰ fidelity
- ²¹ fidelity
- ²² fidelity

Pedagogical Materials

T-Chart for Notes—The Nature of Republican Government

Instructions: As students listen to the scripted debate, they should take notes using the T-Chart below. Notes should summarize the key ideas from both Federalist and Antifederalist speakers. You may also want to assess the strength of each argument using a numerical ranking system. This chart can also be used when using the discussion questions below.

<u>Federalist Arguments</u>	<u>Antifederalist Arguments</u>

Discussion Questions—The Nature of Republican Government

1. In your opinion, were Antifederalist concerns over the size of the nation a legitimate issue as they considered the nature of representative government? To what extent do Federalists effectively address these concerns?
2. Is the Federalist view of filtered representation an effective solution to the difficulties arising in a country as large as the United States?
3. In your opinion, is the Federalist idea of filtered representation synonymous with aristocracy? If so, would it be problematic?
4. What are the similarities and differences in how Federalists and Antifederalists use historical evidence in their reasoning?
5. To what extent would you say Federalist views are optimistic? To what extent would you say Antifederalist views are pessimistic?

Extension Activities

1. Create a Political Cartoon. Students can create political cartoons from the following passages from the script that illustrate two individuals and their different points of view:

On pages 8-9, Publius and Brutus have very different views about representation.

On pages 3-4, Cato and Publius have very different views on the unity/disunity of the nation.

2. Create a Graphic novel. Instead of creating traditional book reports or writing summaries, get "graphic" by creating a comic book adaptation of an important section in the script. Characters in the story could include James Wilson, Publius, Brutus and Federal Farmer.

3. Converting speeches into poetry. Students could take lines from the script and convert them into various types of poems. For example a limerick from Publius' view of how representation should work might be:

Publius read plenty-o-books and digested
Views that were seldom suggested
This nation of great size
Needs reps that are wise
Replacing ones that merely reflected