

Chapter 4 Debate: Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

Introduction

Teachers can use class debates to help students understand conflicting perspectives of a past time and place *or* of a contemporary issue. This often involves dividing the class into two or more parts and assigning each group a role. Students are then encouraged to take on that role and argue their position. They need to argue the position they are assigned, *regardless* of whether or not they agree with that position. Sometimes, teachers may encourage students to know both sides of the argument and have the two sides switch roles midway through the debate.

Objectives of This Debate

- Students will be able to list key problems faced by the Articles of Confederation.
- Students will be able to list how the new Constitution addressed those problems.
- Students will be able to explain key arguments of both the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists.
- Students will be able to explain why the Federalists ultimately prevailed on ratification for the new Constitution.

Background

Once the Constitutional Convention ended, the battle over ratification began. Federalists supported the new plan of government, while Anti-Federalists opposed the change. Americans from all walks of life discussed key issues, and papers printed and distributed by both sides were widely read. Each state had a ratifying convention. Key states like New York and Virginia ended up with very close votes for ratification after vociferous debates.

The Federalists were able to win the day with better organization, better financing, and the presence of key figures such as Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, and Madison. Also key to winning over some Anti-Federalists was the promise that adding a Bill of Rights to the new Constitution would be the first order of business of the new Congress.

Teachers can use this debate to make clear the key arguments on both sides of this issue. A possible setting would be the Virginia ratifying convention. Students can even take on the role of particular individuals who participated in that meeting.

Procedures

This debate can be done in one class period. The teacher should divide the class into two parts, each side making arguments from their particular perspective. Students should be reminded that they should stick to their role and argue *passionately* for their position,

despite what they personally may believe. They should also be encouraged to base their points on factual information, rather than opinion and emotion.

Each side of the debate should research both their position AND the position of their opponents. This is important in the event the teacher elects to have the sides change positions. It also makes for a better debate because each side is better able to counter arguments of their opponents.

Students should be able to use *America: The Last Best Hope* to find dual perspectives on these issues, but teachers will also need to provide background through short lectures or explanations. Students can also do research on their own to find arguments to support their point of view. Primary sources from the period can be particularly valuable as a side builds its case. The *Federalist Papers* and *Anti-Federalist Papers* are obvious examples.

The following chart represents basic points that should be covered by both sides. Teachers should not immediately give students these points. They might be offered to each side after students have had time to research on their own, or they might be withheld until after the debate and used as a summary or to debrief the debate.

A blank version of the chart is offered at the end of this debate. Students may use this blank chart to take notes as they research their positions in the debate.

When the debate takes place, arrange student desks or chairs with the two debate factions on opposite sides of the classroom *facing each other*. The teacher should serve as a moderator, beginning the proceedings, laying out the key issues, and calling on members of each side in alternating order. If the debate begins to lag, the teacher may call a short break and have each side “caucus” to rethink their positions and prepare responses to arguments made by the other side.

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

Federalist Perspective	Anti-Federalist Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events of the past few years have shown the need for a <i>stronger</i> central government. Shays’s Rebellion is an example. The national government had no power to intervene. • Our economy is weak. England is taking advantage of that weakness by dumping goods here. A national tariff would prevent this and help us develop more manufacturing of our own. • Our foreign policy is in shambles. Spain threatens the Mississippi. England refuses to leave forts in the Great Lakes. • Our national government is broke and cannot raise revenue or an army. It can only <i>request</i> funds and troops from the states. • Right now, factions threaten to take over state governments (such as Shays’s followers who have taken the Massachusetts government and are passing stay laws and printing more and more paper money). This threatens the property of other men. This is <i>tyranny of the majority</i>. • Such factions will not dominate the national government because it represents such a large area with so many diverse interests. No one faction could ever take control. • The national government will be immune from anyone taking too much power by a system of checks and balances. • For any nation to be great its government must be able to touch the lives of individual men – right now our national government cannot do that. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, there have been problems, but one thing we <i>do</i> have as Americans is liberty. Why risk threatening that by changing our form of government? • Why do we need a new government? The present government got us through the Revolution and has handled the great issues of the day – such as how to handle western lands. • This new plan of government is not even legitimate. The men who met were authorized to <i>revise</i> the Articles, not scrap them! • AND, it took a unanimous vote of all of the states to amend the Articles. Now we are told the new Constitution will take effect when nine of thirteen states accept it. That should not be! • States can handle their own economic policies. There is no way to have a national policy that will work for all states (some are more agricultural and some depend more on trade). • The new plan of government puts the president in charge of the armed forces. That is too much power for one man – a recipe for tyranny! • The new plan of government has no Bill of Rights like many of our state constitutions do. • The new government will be too powerful and too distant – just like the British crown was. The best government is the government close to the people – state and local governments. • We are too diverse as a people and have very different cultures and

-
- How can this new government be a recipe for tyranny? If that were true, our hero George Washington would not be a supporter.

traditions. If we give too much power to the central government, one section of our country will one day dominate that government and subdue other sections. That could lead to conflict.

Student Debate Sheet

Name _____

Date _____

As your group researches their position on these issues, use the following table to record your views and prepare for the debate. You should research and prepare for *both* sides of this debate. As the debate progresses, make notes made by the opposing side that your side did not anticipate.

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

Federalist Perspective	Anti-Federalist Perspective