

What Ideas Separated the Federalists and Anti-Federalists?

Following is a brief and general discussion of a few of the main ideas of the Federalists and Anti-federalists.

Limited Government and the Rule of Law

Both Federalists and Anti-federalist favored limited government and the rule of law; that is, they wanted a written constitution that restricted the powers of government officials that indicated what they could and could not do under the law of the land. However, they disagreed about how much to limit the powers of government. Anti-federalist tended to favor a weak government of the United States, such as Congress under the Articles of Confederation. They feared that a strong national government would threaten the rights of the people and their state governments. By contrast, Federalists wanted a national government that could act forcefully to maintain order, provide security, and guarantee liberty under law.

Republicanism and Federalism

Both Federalists and Anti-federalists wanted a republic-government by representatives of the people acting for the people. Both groups also wanted federalism -- a division of power between a central government and several state governments. However, the Anti-federalists preferred the kind of federal republic established by the Articles of Confederation. In the Anti-federalists definition of a federation (or confederation), the central government is only a creation of the states, who retain their sovereignty and independence of action. Anti-federalists believed that state governments should have more powers and duties than the central government, because they are closer and more responsive to the people. By contrast, the Federalists favored a division and sharing of powers between state governments and a national government in which the national government is supreme within its own sphere of action. This means that state governments cannot defy or contradict laws or actions of the national government that are permitted by the Constitution. The Constitution of 1787 gave much more power to the government of the United States than it had under the Articles of Confederation. The Anti-federalists favored states' rights and believed that the Constitution of 1787 gave too much power to the national government at the expense of the states. They believed that the Constitution of 1787 would create a consolidated government of the United States, in which the states would be greatly reduced in power and importance.

Popular Sovereignty

Both Federalists and Anti-federalists wanted popular sovereignty--government by popular consent. However, Anti-federalists believed that government by and for the people was best achieved by giving most powers of government to a legislature composed of members elected by the people. Thus, they tended to support the Articles of Confederation in which the Congress (national legislature) dominated the government. By contrast, the Federalists believed that power in the national government should be shared by legislative, executive, and judicial branches. They also believed that the people (eligible voters) should directly elect only members of one part of the legislative branch--the House of Representatives. Anti-federalists feared that the Constitution of 1787 gave too much power to the executive branch at the expense of the other branches of the government.

A Bill of Rights

Anti-federalists criticized the Constitution because it lacked a Bill of Rights to guarantee civil liberties of the people (freedom of speech and so forth) against the powers of government officials. Federalists argued that a Bill of Rights was unnecessary because the national government had only those powers granted to it in the Constitution. Thus, the government would not be able to deprive individuals of their basic civil liberties.