

Anti-Federalists & the Issue of Representation

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects: U.S. Government or U.S. History

Time Requirement: 60-minute class period

Objective: Understand the Anti-Federalists' objections to the proposed Constitution, specifically as they related to representation.

Background: Opponents of the Constitution, known as Anti-Federalists, worried it would reduce the power of the states and create a large, overly-powerful republic far removed from the people. Voters would be physically too far distant from their representatives. This reality, they feared, would lead to corruption and political domination by elite colonists. It is important to remember that colonists' belief that English Parliamentary members were corrupt constituted a major cause of the American Revolution. Thus, the fear of having fraudulent representatives loomed large in the minds of many Americans.

Lesson Plan:

Part 1: Warm Up Activity (10 minutes)

Below is a list of some of the services that members of the House of Representatives provide for their constituents. Their staff can be contacted through email, letters, phone calls, and visits to the offices.

1. Assist them in securing federal grants offered by nonprofits, businesses, and state and local governments.
2. Help with immigration-related matters.
3. They can help them to apply for federal benefits such as Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security and assist them if they are having problems with receiving benefits.
4. Offer internships, in the local and national offices, for high school students.
5. Provide nominations to Service Academies.
6. Arrange tours of the US Capitol.



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TEACHER'S GUIDE

Put students into small groups and have them work on the following questions:

1. Identify the two services you consider the most important and explain why.
2. Do you think you would obtain the same level of assistance from U.S. Senators or the U.S. President? Why or why not?
3. Today each House member represents about 760,000 people. Some believe that is too many and advocate enlarging the body beyond the current 435 members. Do you believe we should expand it to 1,000 Representatives so each would represent only about 300,000? Why or why not?

Part 2: Set the Stage (10 minutes)

Before examining the debate over representation, help students to understand how the proposed Constitution would radically change representation in the U.S. by reviewing the following points about the Articles of Confederation and state legislatures:

1. Though the Articles had a national legislature, it was weak and largely ineffective. It was more desirable to be a member of one's state House of Representatives rather than the national one, something that would be unimaginable today.
2. It was generally very easy to meet your state House member since the districts were small both in terms of size but also in population.
3. Unlike today, it would be common for you to literally run into your state House member at a tavern, a horse race or store.
4. Under the Articles, there were few members in the national legislature, so you likely had little contact with them.
5. Under the proposed Constitution, each House member would represent around 30,000 people which was far more than most state representatives (but also far less than today).
6. The projected Constitution mandated elections every two years for members of the House of Representatives. This is a short period but less so than the terms for members of state legislatures which were typically one year.

Summary: The U.S. Constitution would create a shift in nature of representation in the republic.



Part 3: Primary Source Analysis (20 minutes)

Below is an excerpt from an Anti-Federalist, writing on the issue of representation in the new Constitution. Read it together as a class and then work on the question below in small groups.

Letters from a Federal Farmer, no. 7, December 31, 1787

A small representation can never be well informed [knowledgeable] 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: a representation must be extremely imperfect where the representatives are not circumstanced [in a position] to make the proper communications to their constituents [voters], and where the constituents in turn cannot, with tolerable convenience [easily], make known their wants, circumstances, and opinions, to their representatives;

where there is but one representative to 30,000 or 40,000 inhabitants, it appears to me, he can only mix, and be acquainted with a few respectable characters among his constituents, even double the federal representation, and then there must be a very great distance between the representatives and the people in general represented.

On the proposed plan, the state of Delaware, the city of Philadelphia, the state of Rhode Island, the province of Main [Maine], the county of Suffolk and Massachusetts will have one representative each; Their content [relationship] be but little personal knowledge, or few communications, between him and the people at large of either of those districts.

It has been observed, that mixing only with the respectable [wealthy] men, he will get the best information ideas from them; he will also receive impressions favorable to their purposes particularly.

Reflect: Identify three problems raised about representation in a large republic:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



Part 4: Other challenges with representation in a large republic (15 minutes)

The nation's capital—now the seat of incredible federal power—almost certainly will be far away, and you likely will never see it or know what it looks like. What might this mean?

- Americans might lack confidence in a government so remote from them and could be disinclined to obey it. Laws coming from an unknown place would remind them of royal orders coming from across the Atlantic.
- In the colonies and states many people would have visited their capital such as Williamsburg or Charleston. Seeing the seat of government would inspire trust. Even if they did not like the legislation, simply knowing it was close to their place of residence would inspire some confidence. What would happen with a distant capital they never saw or visited?
- Today we constantly see our representatives or our president in D.C. so we know they are working for us even if we don't agree with their decisions. Anything familiar is always more reassuring than something not.

Questions:

1. Can voters and their representatives make informed and knowledgeable decisions in a large republic as opposed to smaller state-based ones? Why or why not?
2. Would elites and wealthy individuals have unchecked and enormous power in a large republic as the author worried? Do you believe they have outsized power today? Why or why not?
3. Can you identify how modern media technologies (e.g. Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.) might effectively address these challenges, or potentially make them worse?

Part 5: Review and Check for Understanding (5 minutes)

- The new Constitution significantly altered the structure and role of representation in the American republic.
- Today Americans are far more removed from their representatives than they were under the Articles and during the early years of the republic.
- Anti-Federalists worried that representatives would be too distant from their voters, leading to corruption and control by elites.