

## KEY ANTI-FEDERALISTS

### Who were the Anti-Federalists?

The Anti-Federalists opposed the new Constitution.

The Anti-Federalist camp included a group of founding-era heavyweights, including:

- Virginia's George Mason, Patrick Henry, and Richard Henry Lee
- Massachusetts's Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, and Mercy Otis Warren
- New York's powerful Governor George Clinton

What about the rank-and-file Anti-Federalists? Generally speaking, Anti-Federalists were more likely to be small farmers than lawyers or merchants.

In addition, Anti-Federalist support was stronger:

- Out West rather than in the East
- In rural areas rather than in the cities
- In large states rather than in small states

While many Americans know about the *Federalist Papers*, the Anti-Federalists included their own set of powerful authors—every bit as politically potent and theoretically sophisticated as their Federalist opponents. For instance, there's "Brutus"—usually thought to be leading New York Anti-Federalists (and one-time Constitutional Convention delegate) Robert Yates—and his influential set of essays. In addition, Massachusetts poet, historian, and patriot Mercy Otis Warren penned her own widely read *Observations on the New Constitution*, using the pen name "A Columbian Patriot." Finally, other key Anti-Federalist writers included Federal Farmer (likely New York's Melancton Smith or Virginia's Richard Henry Lee) and Centinel (Pennsylvania's Samuel Bryan).

What were some of the Anti-Federalists' main reasons for opposing the new Constitution?

In many ways, the ratification battle was a debate over political power—and where to place it. In other words, it was a battle over federalism—the question of how much power to give to the national government and how much power to keep with the states.

## CONSTITUTION 101

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### Module 5: The Bill of Rights

#### 5.3 Info Brief

While the Federalists argued for a stronger national government, the Anti-Federalists defended a vision of America rooted in powerful states.

The Anti-Federalists feared that the new Constitution gave the national government too much power. And that this new government—led by a new group of distant, out-of-touch political elites—would:

- Seize all political power
- Swallow up the states—the governments that were closest to the people themselves
- Abuse the rights of the American people

For the Anti-Federalists, this was the road to tyranny.

Remember, Americans at the founding rarely traveled outside of their own towns. For them, the nation's capital—though located in New York, Philadelphia, and (eventually) Washington, D.C.—might as well have been in London. So, the Anti-Federalists weren't interested in replacing a powerful, out-of-touch, distant government in Great Britain with a new one in some distant American city. Better to keep most political power at the state and local level—where it had always been in America—and limit the powers of the national government.

In the end, the Anti-Federalists faced an uphill fight during the battle over ratification. Americans had largely concluded that the Articles of Confederation had serious problems. Even many key Anti-Federalists agreed with that.

Furthermore, to win political battles, it often takes a plan to beat a plan. The Federalists had a plan—the new Constitution. The Anti-Federalists didn't.

As a result, it was easy for the Federalists to frame the ratification fight as a battle between a new Constitution and the deeply flawed Articles of Confederation.

Even so, the Anti-Federalists almost won.