

What Was on the Framers' Minds?

Quotes About Democracy

Is the office of the President a fundamentally democratic institution? It can be argued that when the Constitution was being written and then debated, the terms “democracy” and “republic” were defined and understood in very different ways than they are today. The “democratic” nature of the office of President was very much dependent on how “democratic” the new Federal government created by the Constitution was intended to be.

The Anti Federalist

Patrick Henry, revolutionary era orator and former Governor of Virginia refused to attend the Constitutional Convention, correctly suspecting that the men organizing the meeting had more than merely amending the Articles of Confederation in mind.

“What, Sir, is the genius of democracy? Let me read that clause of the Bill of Rights of Virginia which relates to this: third clause. Of all the various modes and forms of Government, that is best which is capable of producing the greatest degree of happiness and safety, and is most effectually secured against the danger of mal-administration, and *that whenever any Government shall be found inadequate, or contrary to those purposes, a majority of the community hath, an indubitable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter, or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.*” This, Sir, is the language of democracy; that a majority of the community have a right to alter their Government when found to be oppressive: But how different is the genius of your new Constitution from this? How different from the sentiments of freemen, that a contemptible minority can prevent the good of the majority?”

Patrick Henry,
speech opposing the ratification of the Constitution
June 5, 1788

1. Did Patrick Henry see the Constitution as creating a “democratic” form of government?

2. How did he contrast the proposed government under the Constitution with the principles he quoted from Virginia's Bill of Rights?
3. Based on Henry's thoughts and your background knowledge of the period, what do you think would have been the Anti Federalist's definition of "democracy"?

The Federalists

Alexander Hamilton may have been the most vigorous and active advocate for ratification of the Constitution among the Federalists. He was the principal author of the Federalist Papers, and the author of all the essays that specifically dealt with the powers and scope of the Executive Branch.

"It has been observed that a pure democracy, if it were practicable, would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies, in which the people themselves deliberated, never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity."

Alexander Hamilton,
speech urging ratification of the Constitution,
June 21, 1788

4. Based on Hamilton's thoughts and your background knowledge of the period, what do you think would have been the Federalist's definition of "democracy"?

The "Father of the Constitution"

James Madison's "Virginia Plan" was the foundation of the Constitution. In addition to assisting Hamilton and John Jay write the *Federalist* pamphlets to support ratification of the Constitution in New York, Madison kept his friend, Thomas Jefferson, up to date with the ratification debate while Jefferson was in France.

“Wherever the real power in a Government lies, there is the danger of oppression. In our Governments, the real power lies in the majority of the Community, and the invasion of private rights is chiefly to be apprehended, not from the acts of Government contrary to the sense of its constituents, but from acts in which the Government is the mere instrument of the major number of the constituents.”

— James Madison,
letter to Thomas Jefferson
October 17, 1788

5. Based on Madison’s thoughts and your background knowledge of the period, what do you think would have been his definition of “democracy”?
6. How would you predict his views on democracy would impact his actions when he served as President?

The “Spectator” in France

Thomas Jefferson was in France during the debate over the Constitution, but he kept abreast of the debate and shared his thoughts and analysis of the proposed new government through his correspondence with Madison and other friends in America.

"Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights."

Thomas Jefferson
Letter to Richard Price, January 8, 1789

7. Based on Jefferson's thoughts and your background knowledge of the period, what do you think would have been his definition of "democracy"?
8. How would you predict his views on democracy would impact his actions when he served as President?

The Powers and Limits of the Presidency In the Constitution

Evaluate Article II and the 12th, 22nd, and 25th Amendments and have students identify Executive Power with the potential for abuse and the “checks” on those powers.

Directions: Create an “Op-Ed” presentation on whether Article II gives the President and the Executive Branch too much power (and the potential to abuse it) or not enough power (and the potential to be unable to maintain order).

This could take the form of -

- A Letter to the Editor
 - Write a short essay-style opinion piece like one would have found printed in a newspaper any time between 1787 to today.
- An Original Political Cartoon
 - Design and create an original cartoon.
- A short “Tik-Tok” style video
 - Write and record.
- Choose a different presentation option and have it approved by the teacher.