

Ratification Debate Documents

Opposition to Ratification of the Constitution:

Document 1 (rights and balance of power)

“ [The proposed Constitution] leaves the powers of government, and the representation of the people, so unnaturally divided between the general and state governments, that the operations of our system must be very uncertain. My uniform federal attachments, and the interest I have in the protection of property, and a steady execution of the laws, will convince you, that, if I am under any bias at all, it is in favor of any general system which shall promise those advantages. The instability of our [current] laws increases my wishes for firm and steady government; but then, I can consent to no government, which, in my opinion, is not calculated equally to preserve the rights of all orders of men in the community.”

Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican, I, published in the *Poughkeepsie Country Journal* on October 8th, 1787. The author may be VA delegate to the Continental Congress Richard Henry Lee, who lived in NY at the time or Melancton Smith of New York.

Link: <http://www.constitution.org/afp/fedfar01.htm>

Document 2 (power of taxation):

“When I recollect how lately congress, conventions, legislatures, and people contended in the cause of liberty, and carefully weighed the importance of taxation, I can scarcely believe we are serious in proposing to vest the powers of laying and collecting internal taxes in a government so imperfectly organized for such purposes... — I admit that it is not probable that any prudent congress will attempt to lay and collect internal taxes, especially direct taxes: but this only proves, that the power would be improperly lodged in congress, and that it might be abused by imprudent and designing men.”

Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican, III, published in the *Poughkeepsie Country Journal* on October 10th, 1787. The author may be VA delegate to the Continental Congress Richard Henry Lee, who lived in NY at the time or Melancton Smith of New York.

Link: <http://www.constitution.org/afp/fedfar03.htm>

Document 3 (system of representation):

“The territory of the United States is of vast extent; it now contains near three millions of souls, and is capable of containing much more than ten times that number. Is it practicable for a country, so large and so numerous as they will soon become, to elect a representation, that will speak their sentiments, without their becoming so numerous as to be incapable of transacting public business? It certainly is not...

In a republic of such vast extent as the United-States, the legislature cannot attend to the various concerns and wants of its different parts. It cannot be sufficiently numerous to be acquainted with the local condition and wants of the different districts, and if it could, it is impossible it should have sufficient time to attend to and provide for all the variety of cases of this nature, that would be continually arising.

In so extensive a republic, the great officers of government would soon become above the controul of the people, and abuse their power to the purpose of aggrandizing themselves, and oppressing them.”

“To the Citizens of the State of New-York.” *New York Journal*, 18 October 1787. Written by a person writing under the pseudonym “Brutus” and thought by most scholars to have been Robert Yates, a New York judge, delegate to the Federal Convention, and political ally of anti-federalist New York Governor George Clinton.

Link: <http://www.constitution.org/afp/brutus01.htm>

Document 4 (civil liberties and system of representation):

“[W]e entertained an opinion that a general government, however guarded by declarations of rights, or cautionary provisions, must unavoidably, in a short time, be productive of the destruction of the civil liberty of such citizens who could be effectually coerced by it...”

“...a few only were vested with a power of legislation, the interests of a great majority of the inhabitants of the United States must necessarily be unknown; or, if known, even in the first stages of the operations of the new government, unattended to.”

Letter from New York Constitutional Convention delegates Robert Yates and John Lansing, Jr. to Governor George Clinton of New York explaining their decision to leave the convention. July 1787.

Link: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(ed001217\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field(DOCID+@lit(ed001217)))

Document 5 (presidential power)

To the Citizens of the State of New York.

...[T]he great powers of the President, connected with his duration in office would lead to oppression and ruin. ...[T]he president cannot represent you because he is not of your own immediate choice, that if you adopt this government, you will incline to an arbitrary and odious aristocracy or monarchy the that the president possessed of the power, given him by this frame of government differs but very immaterially from the establishment of monarchy in Great Britain..."

Letter published in *The New-York Journal*, November 22, 1787, by a person writing under the pseudonym "Cato," thought by many to be New York Governor George Clinton.

Link: http://www.constitution.org/afp/cato_05.htm

Document 6 (taxation and power in hands of elite):

We contended with Great Britain...because they claimed a right to tax us and bind us in all cases whatever. And does not this Constitution do the same? Does it not lay all taxes, duties, [import fees], and excises? And what more have we to give? ... These lawyers, and men of learning, and moneyed men, that talk so finely and gloss over matters so smoothly, to make us poor illiterate people swallow down the pill, expect to get into Congress themselves; they expect to be the managers of this Constitution, and get all the power and all the money into their own hands, and then they will swallow up all us little folks..."

Amos Singletary, a farmer, at the Massachusetts State Ratifying Committee, 1788

Link: <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1998/4/98.04.02.x.html>

Document 7 (slavery):

[According to the Constitution] [t]he migration, or importation of such persons, as any of the states shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by Congress prior to the year eighteen hundred and eight--By the importation of the persons above-mentioned is doubtless meant the Guinea trade, by which thousands and millions of poor negroes have been wrested from their native country, their friends and all that is dear to them, and brought into a state of the most abject slavery and wretchedness—

By the above article, this cruel and barbarous practice is not to be prohibited by Congress for twenty years to come, and even then, it is not said, it shall cease--Here is a permission

granted, for the enslaving and making miserable our fellow men, totally contrary to all the principles of reason, justice, benevolence and humanity, and all the kind and compassionate dictates of the Christian Religion. Can we then hold up our hands for a Constitution that licenses this bloody practice? Can we who have fought so hard for Liberty give our consent to have it taken away from others? May the powers above forbid.

“A Friend To The Rights Of The People: Anti-Federalist No. I,” *Exeter Freeman's Oracle*, February 8, 1788.

Document 8 (elite authors)

When we see the adherents to this constitution chiefly made up of civil and ecclesiastical gown men....There are many men destitute of eloquence, yet they can see and hear— They can think and judge, and are therefore not likely to be wheedled out of their senses by the sophistical reasonings of all the advocates for this new constitution in the country combined.

...[T]hey tell us, that the constitution must be good, from the characters which composed the Convention that framed it. It is graced with the names of a Washington and a Franklin. Illustrious names, we allow—worthy characters in civil society. Yet we cannot suppose them, to be infallible guides, neither yet that a man must necessarily incur guilt to himself merely by dissenting from them in opinion.

Massachusetts Yeomen Oppose the “Aristocratick” Constitution, “All Men Are Born Free and Equal,” *The Massachusetts Gazette*, Vol.7, No. 403, Boston, January 25, 1788.

Link: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6213>

Document 9 (civil liberties):

“In this Constitution, sir, we have departed widely from the principles and political faith of '76, when the spirit of liberty ran high, and danger put a curb on ambition. Here we find no security for the rights of individuals, no security for the existence of our state governments; here is no bill of rights, no proper restriction of power; our lives, our property, and our consciences, are left wholly at the mercy of the legislature, and the powers of the judiciary may be extended to any degree short of almighty.”

Thomas Tredwell speaking at the Ratifying Convention for New York State on July 2, 1788 in Poughkeepsie.

Link: http://www.constitution.org/rc/rat_ny.htm

Support for the Ratification of the Constitution

Document 10 (government stability)

“Your sentiments, that our affairs are drawing rapidly to a crisis, accord with my own... We have errors to correct. We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation. Experience has taught us, that men will not adopt & carry into execution, measures the best calculated for their own good without the intervention of a coercive power. I do not conceive we can exist long as a nation, without having lodged somewhere a power which will pervade the whole Union in as energetic a manner, as the authority of the different state governments extend over the several States.”

Excerpt from a letter to John Jay from George Washington about the problems with the Articles of Confederation, written August 15, 1786.

Link: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=370>

Document 11 (economic stability):

Never was it known since society has been established among men, that any country has had so fair a chance as this country has at this time of rising superiour to every difficulty—of paying off its national debts without distressing the industrious citizen—of supporting its publick credit and eventually of becoming the admiration of the surrounding universe.

Should the several States agree (and there appears but little doubt remaining that they will) to adopt the federal system, we shall at once be acknowledged our proper rank among the nations of the earth— our laws respecting trade will be such as will soon convince the British nation that unless she will consent to deal with us upon terms of reciprocal advantage, her vessels will not be admitted to our ports, and that the produce of these States is necessary to the very existence of her settlements in Nova-Scotia, New-Brunswick, and the West-Indies...

By adopting the federal government, the value of the landed interest will immediately be increased— taxes will lessen—Commerce, Arts and every species of industry will rapidly increase—Emigrations from the old countries will instantly begin—the wilderness will be cultivated, and the fullest wishes of every true American will in a short time be realized.

“A True American,” published in the *Massachusetts Centinel* on September 29, 1787.

Link: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/ratification/digital/display.asp?fn=0024.pdf>

Document 12 (security):

A FIRM Union will be of the utmost moment to the peace and liberty of the States, as a barrier against domestic faction and insurrection.

Federalist No. 9: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection For the *Independent Journal*, by Alexander Hamilton

Link: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_09.html

Document 13 (economic stability)

To the People of the State of New York:

The effects of Union upon the commercial prosperity of the States have been sufficiently delineated... The prosperity of commerce is now perceived and acknowledged by all enlightened statesmen to be the most useful as well as the most productive source of national wealth, and has accordingly become a primary object of their political cares.

...[B]y promoting the introduction and circulation of the precious metals... it serves to vivify and invigorate the channels of industry, and to make them flow with greater activity and copiousness. The assiduous merchant, the laborious husbandman, the active mechanic, and the industrious manufacturer,--all orders of men, look forward with eager expectation and growing alacrity to this pleasing reward of their toils.

Excerpt from Federalist No. 21 by Alexander Hamilton. From the *New York Packet*. Tuesday, November 27, 1787.

Link: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_12.html

Document 14 (slavery):

“If, for no other consideration than that it opens a door for the abolition of the Slave Trade, in America, in a given number of years--the new proposed Constitution for the United States is incomparably preferable to the old one, in which no provision is made either for the suppression or circumscription of this wicked trade--and must therefore meet the wishes, and derive the support of every friend to humanity, and the common rights of mankind.”

Excerpt published in the *Massachusetts Centinel*, June 14, 1788.

Document 15 (stable government and security):

“I am a plain man, and get my living by the plough....I have lived in a part of the country where I have known the worth of good government by the want of it. There was a black cloud [Shays' Rebellion] that rose in the east last winter, and spread over the west....It brought on a state of anarchy and that led to tyranny. I say, it brought anarchy. People that used to live peaceably, and were before good neighbors, got distracted, and took up arms against government....

Our distress was so great that we should have been glad to snatch at anything that looked like a government. Had any person that was able to protect us come and set up his standard, we should all have flocked to it, even if it had been a monarch, and that monarch might have proved a tyrant.”

Jonathan Smith, Massachusetts farmer

Document 16 (security):

“The principal purposes to be answered by union are these the common defense of the members; the preservation of the public peace as well against internal convulsions as external attacks; the regulation of commerce with other nations and between the States; the superintendence of our intercourse, political and commercial, with foreign countries.”

Federalist No. 23: The Necessity of a Government as Energetic as the One Proposed to the Preservation of the Union. From the *New York Packet*. Tuesday, December 18, 1787. Alexander Hamilton.

Link: http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_23.html

Document 17 (economic advantages)

To the Holders and Tillers of Land: It may be assumed as a fixed truth that the prosperity and riches of the farmer must depend on the prosperity, and good national regulation of trade. Artful men may insinuate the contrary—tell you let trade take care of itself, and excite your jealousy against the merchant because his business leads him to wear a gayer coat, than your economy directs. But let your own experience refute such insinuations.

Your property and riches depend on a ready demand and generous price for the produce you can annually spare. When and where do you find this? Is it not where trade

flourishes, and when the merchant can freely export the produce of the country to such parts of the world as will bring the richest return? ... You cannot expect many purchasers when trade is restricted, and your merchants are shut out from nine tenths of the ports in the world. While they depend on the mercy of foreign nations, you are the first persons who will be humbled.

Every foreign prohibition on American trade is aimed in the most deadly manner against the holders and tillers of the land, and they are the men made poor. Your only remedy is such a national government as will make the country respectable... The regulation of trade ever was and ever must be a national matter. A single state in the American union cannot direct, much less controul it.

“A Landholder No. 1” written by *Oliver Ellsworth* on November 5, 1787.

Link: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1650>

Document 18 (peer pressure):

Friends and Fellow Citizens [of New York]: ... You know the geography of your State, and the consequences of your local position. Jersey and Connecticut, to whom your impost [tax/tariff] laws have been unkind—Jersey and Connecticut, who have adopted the present plan, and expect much good from it... now consider your opposition as dictated more by your fondness for your impost, than for those rights to which they have never been behind you in attachment. You have but one port and outlet to your commerce, and how you are to keep that outlet free and uninterrupted, merits consideration.

What advantage Vermont in combination with others, might take of you, may easily be conjectured; nor will you be at a loss to perceive how much reason the people of Long Island, whom you cannot protect, have to deprecate being constantly exposed to the depredations of every invader.

Reflect that the present plan comes recommended to you by men and fellow citizens who have given you the highest proofs that men can give, of their justice, their love for liberty and their country, of their prudence, of their application, and of their talents. They tell you it is the best that they could form; and that in their opinion, it is necessary to redeem you from those calamities which already begin to be heavy upon us all.

“A Citizen of New York” written by John Jay, New York, printed by Samuel and John Loudon, 1788.

Link: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1791>

Document 19 (structure of the new government):

What one would think should greatly recommend the new constitution to an inhabitant of this state is, that it is as much like the constitution of this state, as a national government can be like that of a state. It is an elective government, consisting of three branches— legislative, judicial, and executive—having power to do nothing but of a national kind— leaving the several states full power to govern themselves as individual states. This power, which is so dreaded by some, is, therefore, one of the greatest excellencies of the new federal government...”

"Common Sense," essay published in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, Boston, January 11, 1788.

Link: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1710>