Constitutional Ratification Debate: Anti-Federalists vs. Federalists

Federalists:

Who were they?  Property owners, creditors, merchants
Leaders: Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison (authored the Federalist Papers)

Beliefs:

1. Believed that elites were the best fit to govern
2. Feared “excessive democracy” would lead to mob rule and poor public policy
3. Feared instability from excessive democracy; saw Pennsylvania experiment in democracy as an abysmal failure
4. Favored strong national government and national power
5. Believed in “filtration” so that only elites would obtain governmental power
6. Believed it was better to so many complex institutions, checks and balances in order to prevent majority tyranny, bad laws being passed, and abuses of governmental power.
7. Believed in the trustee model of representation (this means that people are elected to do what is in the best interests of the people based on their own beliefs, knowledge, experience, and wisdom). The Federalists did not believe that representatives should be exactly like those they represented. They thought the people should elect the wisest, most experienced people to office.
8. Viewed the threat to republican government to be majority tyranny.
9. Favored the construction of a government with broad powers to enable the government to defend the country against foreign invasions, promote commerce, expand the economy, control domestic conflicts, and protect private property.
10. James Madison defended the difficult amendment process as being one that was not too easy to change, yet not too difficult to correct problems either.
11. Favored a “large republic” as being a positive solution to diminishing problems with special interests, majority factions, and excessive democracy.
12. Argued that Anti-federalists’ claims that the national government would destroy the state governments were ridiculous.
13. Argued there was no need for a written Bill of Rights since individual rights were inherently protected by the Constitution’s limits on national power. Also, they thought that listing individual rights would be dangerous since rights forgotten or not thought of could be later construed to not exist (this is why they added the 9th Amendment later).
14. They were afraid that subjecting legislators to annual elections would create excessive dependence on the people. They saw the House of Representatives as an institution of “popular passions.” They were afraid of popular whims of the moment, so they saw the Senate to be the institution that would “cool” the popular passions being passed in the House.
15. They defended the size of House districts as being large enough to ensure that wise, able, and experienced representatives could be found and be able to win election to the House. They also defended it as a means to ensure that the representative would not be overly dependent or close to the people.
Anti-Federalists:

Who Were they? Small farmers, frontiersmen, debtors, shopkeepers
Leaders: Patrick Henry, George Mason, Elbridge Gerry, George Clinton

Beliefs:

1. They favored a smaller republic, not a larger republic (hence the reason for Madison’s Fed. #10).
2. Believed government should be closer to the people; they did not think representatives in an extended, large republic covering thousands of square miles of territory could express the true sentiments, or feelings of the people they were supposed to represent.
3. Feared concentration of government power in the hands of elites; they saw the U.S. Senate, Electoral College, and federal judiciary as institutions of elitism.
4. Favored strong protections of individual rights.
5. They were shocked that the House would have 2-year terms—they strongly believed in annual elections in order to keep legislators more accountable to the people.
6. They feared a large, national government. They strongly favored leaving most powers in the hands of the states. They preferred a smaller, weaker central government.
7. They wanted a Bill of rights. They were fearful that by leaving this out of the constitution, the new stronger central government could violate people’s liberties and become tyrannical. The Anti-Federalists were very concerned with individual liberties.
8. They worried about the size of the electoral districts for the House—they believed they should be small enough so that the people could keep close watch on their representatives.
9. They were strong supporters of “civic virtue”; they feared that an emphasis on commercial, private activities and interests would destroy republicanism.
10. They argued that the Philadelphia Convention was supposed to have been only for revising the Articles of Confederation and not to create an entirely new government/constitution. They felt the convention’s actions were illegal. In addition, they were upset that the convention’s ratification process bypassed the Continental Congress and state legislatures by using the ratifying conventions. This was a brilliant move on the part of the Federalists since it bypassed the problem of obtaining unanimous ratification that the Articles required.
11. They did not disagree with forming a stronger union for defense, interstate commerce, foreign trade, and maintaining order among the states—but they disagreed over how to achieve this.
12. They saw aristocratic tendencies in the Constitution, particularly in the Senate and Supreme Court institutions.
13. Believed the new Constitution was a step backwards towards monarchy and that it betrayed the ideals of the American Revolution.
14. They viewed the new national government as too complex. They agreed with the need for a separation of powers and checks & balances, but feared that the complexity of the government would lend itself to potential abuses of power. If the people can’t understand it, then how can they hold the government accountable?
15. Viewed the great threat to republican government to be elitism and aristocracy.
16. Strongly supported making a list of powers the government could do and not do, to avoid the national government being able to take over and control the state governments. They saw the elastic clause and supremacy clause to be very dangerous grants of unlimited power to the federal government.
17. Believed in the delegate model of representation (the people directly tell elected leaders what to do; elected officials are to directly represent what the people want.)