

The Constitution—Balancing Competing Interests

Part A.

Americans' experience with British rule and the Articles of Confederation gave rise to considerable apprehension about the placement of power in a new government. The Founding Fathers attempted to allay those fears through compromises that safeguarded the interests of competing groups. The following chart lists some of those fears. Research the Constitution and related sources to identify the cause of each fear and how one or more provisions of the Constitution calmed that fear. Your completed chart should enable you to understand part B on the conflicting view of later historians about the motives of the Founding Fathers.

Fear	Source of fear	Provision to calm the fear
Fear of large states		
Fear of the people		
Fear of weak central government		
Fear of central government		
Fear of unwritten word		
Fear of other states		
Fear of foreign powers		
Fear of strong executive		
Fear of losing individual rights		

Part B.

Study the following readings in preparation for a discussion about motives of the Founding Fathers in writing the Constitution.

The *Progressive point of view* was most ably expressed in Charles A. Beard's book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, published in 1913. Although other scholars—historians like Richard Hildreth and John Marshall and political scientists like J. Allen Smith—had taken an economic approach to the Constitution; none had been able to demonstrate as convincingly as Beard that the document might be best interpreted in economic terms. The key to Beard's pathbreaking study was a person-by-person examination of the economic holdings and status of the framers of the Constitution. Using the Treasury Records, Beard was able to show that most of these men held public securities—a form of personal property which would obviously increase in value if a new Constitution were written to strengthen the government and improve the credit standing of the country. His research showed also that these men had heavy investments in three other kinds of personal property. Beard's findings led him to conclude, "The movement for the Constitution of the United States was originated and carried through principally by four groups of personal interests which had been adversely affected under the Articles of Confederation: money, public securities, manufactures, and trade and shipping." His implication was clear: the framers had designed the Constitution to safeguard the kind of property in which they had a pocketbook interest.

If the lower class represented a majority of the population, how could personal propertyholders who were a minority control the Constitutional Convention? Beard's answer to this question rested mainly upon his interpretation of the property qualifications for voting. Most small farmers and workingmen, according to him, were in debt or owned so little property that they could not qualify for voting rights. "A large propertyless mass was, under the prevailing suffrage qualifications, excluded at the outset from participation . . . in the work of framing the Constitution." Thus Beard viewed the Constitution as an undemocratic document foisted upon the majority of the American people by a propertied minority.

When it came to ratifying the Constitution, the "propertyless masses," according to Beard, were excluded once again from political participation. Only one-fourth of the adult white men in the nation voted on the question of ratification, because the rest were either disfranchised or disinterested. The total number voting in favor of the Constitution came to no more than one-sixth of the adult white males. Those who supported ratification on the state level, Beard wrote, had precisely the same economic interests as the framers of the document. In his eyes the voting on ratification, like the framing of the Constitution itself, gave clear evidence of a class conflict: the struggle pitted men with substantial personal property on the one hand against small farmers and debtors on the other.

There is little doubt that the Anti-federalists would have won a Gallup poll.

In this situation, however, the Federalists were the realists. They had learned from experience that the natural rights philosophy, taken straight, would go to a nation's head and make it totter or fall . . .

Federalists believed that the slogans of 1776 were outmoded; that America needed integration, not state rights; that the immediate peril was not tyranny, but disorder or dissolution; that certain political processes, such as war, foreign affairs, and commerce, were national by nature; that the right to tax was essential to any government; and that powers wrested from king and parliament should not be divided among thirteen states, if the American government was to have any influence in the world.

Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 5th ed (New York: Oxford Univ., 1962), I, 290.¹