

DBQ: Ratifying the Constitution

Directions- Read all the documents answer all the questions and the essay on loose-leaf.

Historical Context: Today, over 200 years after it was written and ratified (approved), most Americans think of the US Constitution as something almost sacred. We assume that this great document has always been honored and looked up to. This is NOT true. When it was written in 1787 and submitted to the states for ratification, it set off months of fierce and often bitter debate. There were, of course, many who welcomed it as a stronger and more effective national government which could successfully tie the 13 states together into one nation, The Articles of Confederation had been unable to do so. The supporters of the Constitution were known as Federalists. But others, known as anti-federalists, were afraid of this proposed powerful new national government. Why should they now set up a new distant central government which could threaten their liberties just as King George and Parliament had? During the Constitutional Convention, George Mason suggested a Bill of Rights to protect the individual freedoms of the people from a powerful central government. The debate went on in towns and villages across the country for months. Some of the smaller states ratified the new Constitution quickly, but in most states the debate continued. In February of 1788, the Massachusetts convention voted 187 to 168 to ratify or approve the Constitution. In June, Virginia ratified 89 to 79. New York followed almost immediately. Now, with the approval of 11 states, the new government was established. In April of 1789 George Washington was sworn in as President, even though two states still had not approved the Constitution. It took North Carolina until November 1789 and Rhode Island until May 1790 to join the new government.



Document Based Question: (will be explained in class)

Documents 1

This excerpt is from a newspaper, *The Massachusetts Sentinel*, October 20, 1787.

Let us look and [see] the [problems that exist] in every part of our country . . . the complaints of our farmers . . . the complaints of every class of [people who loan money] . . . the [sad] faces of our working people . . . our ships rotting in our harbors . . . the insults that are [made against America] in every court in Europe . . . View these things, fellow citizens, and then say that we do not require a new, a protecting, and efficient federal [national] government if you can.

- 1) Why does the editor of this newspaper support ratifying the Constitution?

Document 2

This excerpt from "Observations on the New Federal Constitution and on the Federal and State Conventions," by Mercy Otis Warren. It originally appeared as a newspaper article in the spring of 1788.

There is no security in the system [under the proposed new U.S. Constitution] either for the rights of [people with different ideas] or the liberty of the press . . . The executive and the legislature are so dangerously [combined] that [it should cause people to be alarmed] . . . There is no [system] for [making sure that power does not stay] in the same hands for life.

- 2) Why was Mercy Otis Warren against the new Constitution?

Document 3

These excerpts are adapted from a letter written by George Washington to John Jay, dated August 1, 1786. In these lines, Washington is agreeing with Jay's criticism of the Articles of Confederation.

Your [opinion], that our [situation is quickly coming] to a crisis, [agree] with my own ... We have errors to correct. We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation (i.e. the Articles of Confederation) . . . thirteen [powerful], independent, disunited States are in the habit of . . . refusing [to obey our national Congress] . . . [I pray that we can act in time to prevent the bad things we fear may happen].

3) What did Washington mean by saying "we have errors to correct?"

Document 4

This excerpt is from a speech by Patrick Henry, a delegate to the Virginia State Constitutional Ratification Convention, given in June 1788. (From Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1836.)

[The Constitution] is a [proposal] as [big a change] as [the document] which separated us from Great Britain (i.e. the Declaration of Independence). [It is such a major change because it has the following effect]; our rights and privileges are endangered [by the new Constitution], and the [power] of the states will be [given up] . . . The rights of [free thought], trial by jury, liberty of the press . . . are [placed in danger].

4) Why does Patrick Henry oppose the Constitution?

Document 5

During the Federal Convention, on [September 12, 1787](#), Elbridge Gerry and George Mason proposed that a committee be appointed to prepare a Bill of Rights. This proposal was unanimously rejected by the State delegations, and in consequence both withheld their signatures from the new Constitution. With time others came to agree with Mason and the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution in 1789. Mason wrote his [Objections to This Constitution of Government](#) which began.

"There is no Declaration of Rights, and the laws of the general government being paramount to the laws and constitution of the several States ,(the federal laws are above state laws that protect rights) the Declarations of Rights in the separate States are no security."

5) Why did Mason believe the Constitution needed a Bill of Rights?