

Unit 2: Revolution, Confederation, Constitution

DBQ 4: Ratifying the Constitution

Historical Context:

Today, over 200 years after it was written and ratified, most Americans think of the U.S. Constitution as something almost sacred. We assume that this great document has always been honored and revered. 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 a common nation. But others were fearful of this proposed powerful new national government. Only a few years earlier they had fought a war against a too powerful, distant central government. Why should they now erect a new distant central government which could threaten their liberties just as King George and Parliament had? 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 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 inaugurated 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.

◆ **Directions:** The following question is based on the accompanying documents (1–6). As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author's point of view. Be sure to:

1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions which follow each document.
3. Based on your own knowledge and on the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

Question: *What were the major arguments used by each side (the supporters and the opponents) in the debates over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution?*

◆ **Part A:** The following documents address various arguments made in support of, or in opposition to, ratifying the U.S. Constitution. Examine each document carefully, and answer the question or questions that follow.

(continued)



DBQ 4: Ratifying the Constitution *(continued)*

Document 1

This excerpt is from a newspaper, *The Massachusetts Sentinel*, October 20, 1787. (From *Voices of America: Readings in American History*, Thomas R. Frazier, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985, p. 61.)

Let us look and behold the distresses which prevail in every part of our country . . . the complaints of our farmers . . . the complaints of every class of public creditors . . . the melancholy faces of our working people . . . our ships rotting in our harbors . . . the insults that are offered to the American name and character in every court of Europe. . . . View these things, fellow citizens, and then say that we do not require a new, a protecting, and efficient federal government if you can.

Why does the editor of this newspaper support ratifying the Constitution?

Document 2

This excerpt is 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 conscience or the liberty of the press. . . . The executive and the legislat[ure] are so dangerously blended that they give just cause for alarm. . . . There is no provision for a rotation nor anything else to prevent a political office from remaining in the same hands for life.

Why did Mercy Otis Warren oppose ratifying the Constitution? _____

(continued)



DBQ 4: Ratifying the Constitution *(continued)*

Document 3

These excerpts are 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 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 . . .

. . . thirteen sovereign, independent, disunited States are in the habit of . . . refusing compliance with [our national Congress] at their option.

Would to God, that wise measures may be taken in time to avert the consequences we have but too much reason to apprehend. . . .

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

What do you suppose he meant by saying "we have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation?" _____

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.)

. . . Here is a resolution as radical as that which separated us from Great Britain. It is radical in this transition; our rights and privileges are endangered, and the sovereignty of the states will be relinquished. . . . The rights of conscience, trial by jury, liberty of the press . . . are rendered insecure.

Why did Patrick Henry oppose the Constitution? _____

(continued)



DBQ 4: Ratifying the Constitution *(continued)*

Document 5

This excerpt is from a speech by Amos Singletree, member of the Massachusetts Constitutional Ratification Convention, given in January 1788. (From Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1836.)

These lawyers and men of learning, and monied 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 . . . and get all the power and all the money into their own hands, and then they will swallow all us little folks . . .

Why did Amos Singletree oppose the Constitution? _____

Document 6

This excerpt is from a resolution from the Massachusetts Constitutional Ratification Convention, February 1788. This Convention approved the Constitution with a vote of 187 to 168. (From Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1836.)

. . . it is the opinion of this Convention that certain amendments and alterations in the said Constitution would remove the fears and quiet the apprehensions of many of the good people of the commonwealth [*the resolution goes on to recommend such amendments as*] . . . that all powers not expressly delegated by the . . . Constitution are reserved to the several states . . . that no person be tried for any crime . . . until he be first indicted by a grand jury . . .

What addition to the U.S. Constitution was suggested as a way to win the approval of many of its opponents? _____

◆ Part B—Essay

What were the major arguments used by each side (the supporters and the opponents) in the debates over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution?