

Political Motivations Behind the Constitution

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Abstract

The Constitution's contents determine how the United States' government operates and functions. It is perhaps the most important and influential document in the United States' history and has had severe effects on the lives of American citizens. It is widely hailed as the epitome of freedom and represents the best of America democracy, with the Founding Fathers being viewed as noble individuals who created a flawless document for the people's benefit. However, the document itself may not be as democratic as many believe it to be, and the reasons behind its creation can be view in a variety of ways. It was mainly the political tensions of the time period that forced the Founding Fathers to write the Constitution, which established a system that protected the elite from the will of the people.

Political Motivations Behind the Constitution

Out of all the documents that laid the foundation of our nation's history, the most respected and revered is the Constitution. It outlines the structure of our entire political system and represents the freedom of America in the eyes of many citizens. But just how democratic is the Constitution, and what events led to its drafting and eventual ratification? Was the Constitution created in order to form a more perfect union for the average citizen, or did the Founding Fathers have other, ulterior motives for writing it? The Constitution's conception can be viewed from numerous perspectives, including democratic, hyperpluralist, economic, and political standpoints. Though all such points of view have a certain degree of validity to them, the Founding Fathers were primarily driven to draft the Constitution because of the political pressures being exerted on the country at the time, the Founders' bias toward the upper class, and their determination to maintain the dominance of the political elite over the common people.

The greatest inhibitor to understanding the reasons motivating the creation of the Constitution is the perception of the Founding Fathers as truly noble men who selflessly coalesced in eternal brotherhood during the summer of 1787 in order to discuss and draft a perfect document that represented the true freedom of America. Such utterly foolish romanticism is commonplace in our society and many aspects of our nation's history are unjustifiably glorified and worshipped. For example, the explorer Christopher Columbus is widely hailed as an intrepid hero who sailed forth into the unknown and discovered the "New World." Though Columbus was no doubt a resolute man, he was also a brutal oppressor who launched a campaign of subjugation against the native peoples of the Caribbean Islands (Flint, 2016). With seventeen ships and over one thousand men, Columbus began his reign of terror during his second voyage

to the Caribbean. With the pretense of bringing Christianity to the “savage” people, he enslaved large portions of the population for manual labor, and any who dared opposed him were swiftly beaten, tortured, or outright killed (Selwood, 2014). Clearly Columbus was a far more complex individual than how he is commonly viewed as, and many dark aspects of his life are often glazed over in the present day. It is important to learn more about a person rather than just relying on preconceived notions about the individual. This lesson is applicable to the Founding Fathers and helps to explain why they convened in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention. Though certainly not as immoral as Columbus, the Founding Fathers nevertheless differed considerably in reality from their almost godlike image in today's society. They were generally well-educated, literate individuals who were wealthy and influential members of the time (Kertscher, 2015). Additionally, these men formed an intensely divided group that heatedly disagreed on many foreign and domestic issues, ultimately leading to a grinding gridlock between different factions (Estano, 2009). This was not some idealistically perfect congregation of people, instead the Constitutional Convention comprised of individual members who each varied in why they wanted the Constitution formed, what powers it should have, and how the proceedings should be conducted. Therefore, no viewpoint of the Constitution is necessarily wrong, and the democratic, hyperpluralist, economic, and political interpretations can all have valid arguments. However, the Founding Fathers were nonetheless all concerned with a pressing political issue at the time: the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.

The Constitution was not the first attempt made by the colonies to form a national government. Instead, just days after the Declaration of Independence, which formally broke ties with our British sovereign, had been signed, the Second Continental Congress charged John Dickinson with proposing ideas for a new system. Dickinson supported an equal representation

of the states, power of taxation, and a strong national government to oversee the country's affairs (Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union-1776, 1997). However, many members of the Second Continental Congress saw far too much similarity between Dickinson's vision and the British government that they were currently at war with. Consequently, many of Dickinson's suggestions were either heavily edited or completely omitted from the final form of the Articles of Confederation that was submitted to the states for ratification at the end of 1777 (Smith, 1997). This bastardized version of Dickinson's proposals was far weaker than his original concepts and greatly stressed states' rights and independence rather than a centralized government, which obviously pleased the states and helped to allay any fears of a monarchy developing in America. The Articles themselves created a single-house Congress that was comprised of state-appointed members whose task was to pass laws and settle disputes among the states (Remy, 1999). Congress was severely restricted in the laws it could enact and the decisions it could make, though its powers did include the ability to declare war and peace, regulate the value of currency, maintain a navy, and request troops from the states (McDonald, 1986). Because the system established by the Articles focused so much on states' rights and neglected the authority of the national government, the United States of America became the Divided States of America. Especially after the Revolutionary War ended, there were simply no longer strong bonds to hold the states together, and the numerous flaws of the Articles became increasingly apparent.

The Articles of Confederation possess numerous limitations that prevented the federal government from exercising much power, which led to harmful repercussions that affected the entire nation. For instance, Congress lacked the authority to inflict taxation on any of the states and could not regulate commerce among them. Individual states had to tax their own citizens and

were under no strict obligation to provide money for the federal government, thus limiting the ability of Congress to raise funds for emergencies (Remy, 1999). Even regular maintenance of a standing navy and army became difficult, and there was little money to compensate Revolutionary War veterans for their military service, a situation that frustrated many who had served their country. One such disgruntled soldier was former Captain Daniel Shays, who led a rebellion of farmers from late 1786 to early 1787. These people protested the increasing burden placed on them by debt collectors and forcibly closed courts in Massachusetts as a response to their apparent mistreatment (Shay's Rebellion, 2014). Funded by a group of merchants, a militia was eventually formed in order to halt the insurrection and restore order to the state. The two forces briefly clashed at an armory near Springfield, Massachusetts, and Shay's forces quickly fled and disbanded. Despite this sudden defeat, much of the sentiment that had fueled the revolt lingered throughout the colonies, causing many to doubt the state of the country's internal affairs and demand the Articles to be reformed or repealed, which directly led to the Constitutional Convention being held during that summer (Tilva, 2016). Shay's Rebellion serves as an example of how inflexible the national government was under the Articles and helped to expose many of its deficiencies. It showed how the government could not care for its war veterans properly and how it allowed them to swiftly sink into hard economic times. Congress' weak ability to raise taxes relied on state participation, and there were no executive institutions to enforce any of its laws, which prevented any action from taking place (Kelly, 2016). Additionally, the government was not responsible for ending the revolt; a privately-funded state militia had to be assembled to confront the rebels, further demonstrating how the ineffectual Articles were. The Articles simply were unable to properly manage the domestic conditions of the country and therefore became a

major influence on the decisions made during the Constitutional Convention where drastic reform was made to address these issues.

Political pressure exerted by foreign powers provided further motivation for the changes made to the Articles. The newly formed United States in the late eighteenth century was far different from the political powerhouse it would become in the twentieth century. Instead, the fledgling nation was an entirely new player on the international scene and desperately needed to validate itself in the eyes of other countries. Unfortunately, the government's limited powers under the Articles critically hampered the United States' ability to establish itself as a sovereign nation, and it quickly found itself in unfavorable clashes with foreign powers (Sage, 2012). For example, after the Revolutionary War Britain conceded control of Florida to Spain and established an agreement with the United States to allow both British and American citizens to have access to the Mississippi River. However, the Spanish disputed the northern boundary of Florida and absolutely refused to allow any Americans to sail on the Mississippi River, causing great diplomatic tensions between the two countries (Clark, 2014). With the defeat of the British, Spain quickly became the dominant force in North America and had already possessed vast tracts of land in present-day Mexico and California decades before the Revolutionary War even began. It was an established global power and had an abundance of natural resources in its vast colonial domain. Consequently, Spain had practically no desire for commercial products that the United States had to offer and wanted to prevent any American expansion near its own territory, thus making successful negotiations between the two nations almost impossible for the United States (Sage, 2012). A glimmer of hope appeared in 1786 when a proposed treaty with Spain was presented to Congress, which would have settled the boundary dispute by relinquishing any claims on the Mississippi River for twenty-five to thirty years in exchange for border of Florida

to be set at the thirty-first parallel. Additionally, trade would be established between the countries and each would aid the other in times of war, which would be particularly useful to the vulnerable United States. Unfortunately, due to a divided Congress, the treaty was not ratified as many Southern States believed a lack of access to the Mississippi River would hurt their commercial interests (Clark, 2014). The United States also had to address the issue of British forts in the north that still housed thousands of British soldiers, which was a major violation of the Treaty of Paris that had ended the Revolutionary War (Onion, 2015). Despite Britain's loss during the war, it still retained a foothold in North America and possessed a military that could easily take back control of the colonies if they were to collapse and fall into chaos. The 1780s proved to be a trying time in American history where the states had to prove their ability to govern themselves or face destruction from the increasing amount of political pressure from foreign countries. The Articles were not fulfilling this role and were in definite need of reform. The Founding Fathers recognized this situation and gathered together at the Constitutional Convention in order to fix their disastrous foreign policy and weak centralized government in an attempt to save their country.

Though the Constitution strengthened the power of the federal government and stabilized the country, it did not create a democratic utopia in which all people have equal representation and protection. Rather, the Founding Fathers created a system that limited the power of the popular vote and protected the interests of those who created it: affluent, landowning males. Not only did the Constitutional Convention comprise of an unrepresentative sample of society, but it also was organized without the consultation of the general populace. No direct or indirect form of popular vote was conducted in order to establish the Convention, so therefore the Founding Fathers gathered without the express consent of the people (Beard, 1916). This allowed the

Founding Fathers to draft the Constitution without fear of input or interference from the general public, which led to many aspects of our government limiting the people's power to make changes or have any significant influence. For instance, the Supreme Court's judicial review has profound consequences for the entire country and is wielded by a very select group of people. The Justices' appointments have become increasingly political, and candidates are often chosen for which party they support rather than solely for their qualifications. Despite the popularity of a given law among the citizenry, merely five of the nine Supreme Court Justices are needed to decide that the law is unconstitutional and subsequently have the law repealed, thereby affecting the lives of all Americans (Dahl, 2006). This group has traditionally been highly unrepresentative of the general population and instead consisted of well-educated, white males, a true reflection of who the political system favors. In the Court's entire history, only a mere two members have identified themselves as African American, with the first one being appointed as a Justice in 1967 (Smelcer, 2010). For the majority of our nation's history, there were no African Americans or women serving on the Supreme Court, which is supposed to make decisions for all citizens and not just for white males. Also, Supreme Court Justices are appointed by the president and approved by the Senate and therefore have no direct connection with the vast majority of the population (Black, 2016). It should hardly be surprising that such skewed demographics exist in the Supreme Court's history when its members have been chosen by the politicians in a system that has been dominated by wealthy, white males. The Justices reflect the composition of the Senate and presidency which in turn reflect the overall structure of government that favors upper class over minorities, the poor, and women. If the Constitution were truly democratic, then the people would have a direct vote in presidential elections and policy making. Instead, the Constitution intentionally did not address critical issues such as

slavery and women's rights, which limited the voice of a significant portion of the population and allowed the established elite to have even easier control over government.

The Founding Fathers' desire to create a government that would ensure the protection of the rich from the masses is best represented by their policy on private property. They intended to create a strong, centralized government that would protect the property and wealth of the affluent from regular citizens. Being part of an elite social group, many of the Founding Fathers possessed disdain for the common man and distrusted their supposedly greedy nature, thus striving to reduce the populace's control by maintaining their own class' power (Parenti, 1996). However, not every member agreed with this viewpoint, and some even objected to how little power the people actually possessed. Samuel Chase, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, opposed the Constitution because he felt “the bulk of the people can have nothing to say in it. The government is not a government of the people” (Ladenburg, 2007). These opposing viewpoints regarding the Constitution and the people's involvement in government led to the formation of the Federalist and Anti-Federalist Parties, which dominated politics in the early decades of our country. The Federalists were typically businessmen or merchants who advocated a powerful national government and supported the Constitution, including the inequality contained inherently in the system (Holloway, 2015). The formation of the Federalist Party was hardly a surprising consequence of the Constitution because of the poor economic conditions preceding its ratification. Much of the population consisted of poor farming families who were heavily in debt, such as those involved in Shay's Rebellion. The affluent quickly realized how the new government could protect their property and wealth from the common people and therefore seized the opportunity to band together into an influential political party by 1789 (Federalist Party, 2016). The Federalist Party did not happen to form by mere chance. Instead, it was a

natural product of the Founding Fathers' deliberate intent to form a national government that would protect the political elite in lieu of serving the needs of the people.

Conclusion

The Founding Fathers were not selfless and flawless human beings without any imperfections or personal bias. They were actually members of a political elite who were faced with a crumbling country that was suffering from a myriad of internal and external problems. The political environment after the Revolutionary War forced the new nation to either reform its ineffective government and address the critical issues of the time or else face complete destruction. Consequently, the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution, which created a far stronger and more resilient political structure that prevented the United States from disbanding. However, this document was not the ultimate form of democracy that brought freedom to the Western world. Instead, it supported inequality by neglecting the input of the common people and greatly favored a small minority. Events like Shay's Rebellion and the general unrest of the general population under the Articles made the Founders fear the will of the people. They desired to create a system of government that would preserve their status and place of the power of government in the hands of the few rather than the many. Ordinary citizens lacked a direct voice in many aspects of the government, and the vast majority of the population was not even allowed to vote. Slaves, free blacks, and women were either prevented or discouraged from voting for over a hundred years, leaving white males to have the most influence on politics. Out of these people, only the wealthy could afford to serve in government positions, and the political composition of the country reflected this skewed set of demographics. The Founders deliberately created a system of government for the political elite to control, which helps explain the vast

amount of inequality found in current-day politics as well as the overall apathy and disconnection experience by the average citizen.

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