Standard 8.32 Lesson

Say Thanks to the Authors
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8.32 Explain the ratification process and describe the conflict between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over ratification, including the need for a Bill of Rights and concern for state’s rights, citing evidence from the Federalist Papers N.10 and 51 and other primary source texts. (H,P)

***EXTENDED RESPONSE LESSON

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists
Federalists and Anti-federalists debate - from www.teachingamericanhistory.org

http://teachingamericanhistory.org/fed-antifed/

**Federalists**

( Pictured Above: Along with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, James Madison penned The Federalist Papers.)

The supporters of the proposed Constitution called themselves "FEDERALISTS." Their adopted name implied a commitment to a loose, decentralized system of government. In many respects "FEDERALISM" — which implies a strong central government — was the opposite of the proposed plan that they supported. A more accurate name for the supporters of the Constitution would have been "NATIONALISTS."

The "nationalist" label, however, would have been a political liability in the 1780s. Traditional political belief of the Revolutionary Era held that strong centralized authority would inevitably lead to an abuse of power. The Federalists were also aware that that the problems of the country in the 1780s stemmed from the weaknesses of the central government created by the Articles of Confederation.

For Federalists, the Constitution was required in order to safeguard the liberty and independence that the American Revolution had created. While the Federalists definitely had developed a new political philosophy, they saw their most import role as defending the social gains of the Revolution. As James Madison, one of the great Federalist leaders later explained, the Constitution was designed to be a "republican remedy for the diseases most incident to
The Federalists had more than an innovative political plan and a well-chosen name to aid their cause. Many of the most talented leaders of the era who had the most experience in national-level work were Federalists. For example, the only two national-level celebrities of the period, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, favored the Constitution. In addition to these impressive superstars, the Federalists were well organized, well funded, and made especially careful use of the printed word. Most newspapers supported the Federalists’ political plan and published articles and pamphlets to explain why the people should approve the Constitution.

In spite of this range of major advantages, the Federalists still had a hard fight in front of them. Their new solutions were a significant alteration of political beliefs in this period. Most significantly, the Federalists believed that the greatest threat to the future of the United States did not lie in the abuse of central power, but instead could be found in what they saw as the excesses of democracy as evidenced in popular disturbances like Shays’ Rebellion and the pro-debtor policies of many states.

How could the Federalists convince the undecided portion of the American people that for the nation to thrive, democracy needed to be constrained in favor of a stronger central government?

**Antifederalists**

( *Pictured Above: Patrick Henry delivers his famous "If this be treason, make the most of it!" speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses* )
The ANTIFEDERALISTS were a diverse coalition of people who opposed ratification of the Constitution. Although less well organized than the Federalists, they also had an impressive group of leaders who were especially prominent in state politics.

Ranging from political elites like James Winthrop in Massachusetts to Melancton Smith of New York and Patrick Henry and George Mason of Virginia, these Antifederalist were joined by a large number of ordinary Americans particularly yeomen farmers who predominated in rural America. The one overriding social characteristic of the Antifederalists as a group was their strength in newer settled western regions of the country.

( Pictured Above: Along with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, James Madison penned The Federalist Papers. )

In spite of the diversity that characterized the Anti Federalist opposition, they did share a core view of American politics. They believed that the greatest threat to the future of the United States lay in the government’s potential to become corrupt and seize more and more power until its tyrannical rule completely dominated the people. Having just succeeded in rejecting what they saw as the tyranny of British power, such threats were seen as a very real part of political life.

To Antifederalists the proposed Constitution threatened to lead the United States down an all-too-familiar road of political corruption. All three branches of the new central government threatened Antifederalists’ traditional belief in the importance of restraining government power.

The President’s vast new powers, especially a veto that could overturn decisions of the people’s representatives in the legislature, were especially disturbing. The court system of the national government appeared likely to encroach on local courts. Meanwhile, the proposed lower house of the legislature would have so few members that only elites were likely to be elected. Furthermore, they would represent people from such a large area that they couldn’t really know their own constituents. The fifty-five members of the proposed national House of Representatives was quite a
bit smaller than most state legislatures in the period. Since the new legislature was to have increased fiscal authority, especially the right to raise taxes, the Anti Federalists feared that before long Congress would pass oppressive taxes that they would enforce by creating a standing national army.

( Pictured Above: The preamble of the United States Constitution: Most of the world’s democracies have based their constitutions on this document.)

This range of objections boiled down to a central opposition to the sweeping new powers of the proposed central government. George Mason, a delegate to the Philadelphia Convention who refused to support the Constitution, explained, the plan was "totally subversive of every principle which has hitherto governed us. This power is calculated to annihilate totally the state governments." The rise of national power at the expense of state power was a common feature of Anti Federalist opposition.

The most powerful objection raised by the Antifederalists, however, hinged on the lack of protection for individual liberties in the Constitution. Most of the state constitutions of the era had built on the Virginia model that included an explicit protection of individual rights that could not be intruded upon by the state. This was seen as a central safeguard of people's rights and was considered a major Revolutionary improvement over the unwritten protections of the British constitution.

Why, then, had the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention not included a bill of rights in their proposed Constitution? Most Anti Federalists thought that such protections were not granted because the Federalists represented a sinister movement to roll back the gains made for ordinary people during the Revolution.

The Anti Federalists and Federalists agreed on one thing: the future of the nation was at stake in the contest over the Constitution.

After the Fact: Virginia, New York, and "The Federalist Papers"

( Pictured Above: Federalist Papers were a series of essays by John Jay, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison written for the Federalist newspaper.)
The convention in Virginia began its debate before nine states had approved the Constitution, but the contest was so close and bitterly fought that it lasted past the point when the technical number needed to ratify had been reached. Nevertheless, Virginia’s decision was crucial to the nation. Who can imagine the early history of the United States if Virginia had not joined the union? What if leaders like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison had not been allowed to hold national political office? In the end Virginia approved the Constitution, with recommended amendments, in an especially close vote (89-79). Only one major state remained, the Constitution was close to getting the broad support that it needed to be effective.

Perhaps no state was as deeply divided as New York, where the nationalist-urban artisan alliance could strongly carry New York City and the surrounding region, while more rural upstate areas were strongly Anti Federalist. The opponents of the Constitution had a strong majority when the convention began and set a tough challenge for ALEXANDER HAMILTON, the leading New York Federalist. Hamilton managed a brilliant campaign that narrowly won the issue (30-27) by combining threat and accommodation. On the one hand, he warned that commercial down state areas might separate from upstate New York if it didn’t ratify. On the other hand, he accepted the conciliatory path suggested by Massachusetts; amendments would be acceptable after ratification.

( Pictured Above: America’s first native sculptor, John Frazee, was unhappy with the amount of foreign artists doing work for the new Capitol. He was more than happy to do this very classical looking bust of John Jay.)

The debate in New York produced perhaps the most famous exploration of American political philosophy, now called THE FEDERALIST PAPERS. Originally, they were a series of 85 anonymous letters to newspapers, which were co-written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and JOHN JAY. Together they tried to assure the public of the two key points of the Federalist agenda. First, they explained that a strong government was needed for a variety of reasons, but especially if the United States was to be able to act effectively in foreign affairs. Second, it tried to convince readers that because of the “separation” of powers in the central government, there was little chance of the
national government evolving into a tyrannical power. Instead of growing ever stronger, the separate branches would provide a “CHECK AND BALANCE” against each other so that none could rise to complete dominance.

The influence of these newspaper letters in the New York debate is not entirely known, but their status as a classic of American political thought is beyond doubt. Although Hamilton wrote the majority of the letters, James Madison authored the ones that are most celebrated today, especially FEDERALIST, NUMBER 10.

( Pictured Above: John Jay contributed to the Federalist Papers and was in charge of foreign affairs for the fledgling nation.)

Here Madison argued that a larger republic would not lead to greater abuse of power (as had traditionally been thought), but actually could work to make a large national republic a defense against tyranny. Madison explained that the large scope of the national republic would prevent local interests from rising to dominance and therefore the larger scale itself limited the potential for abuse of power. By including a diversity of interests (he identified agriculture, manufacturing, merchants, and creditors, as the key ones), the different groups in a larger republic would cancel each other out and prevent a corrupt interest from controlling all the others.

Madison was one of the first political theorists to offer a profoundly modern vision of self-interest as an aspect of human nature that could be employed to make government better, rather than more corrupt. In this he represents a key figure in the transition from a traditional republican vision of America, to a modern LIBERAL one where self-interest has a necessary role to play in public life.

Here is a link to Federalist Papers No. 10

http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/federalist-no-10/

Here is a link to Federalist paper No. 51

http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/federalist-no-51/