Virginia and the Ratification of the Constitution

TEACHER ANSWER KEY

Topic 1: If the legislature has the power to decide the time and place of elections, will they abuse that power?

Anti-Federalists expressed concern about legislators having the power to determine the time and place of elections. They argued that legislatures could abuse this power by making elections happen at inconvenient times and places, skewing votes in their favor in order to maintain their positions of power. Federalists, on the other hand, assured them that this would not happen. First, they argued, state legislatures had the same power and did not abuse it. Second, they pointed out that if legislators did try to abuse their power in this way, their constituents would be angered and vote them out of office.

Topic 2: Do we even need a new form of government, or are things fine under the Articles of Confederation?

Anti-Federalists were not convinced that a new Constitution was needed. Patrick Henry argued that the state of the country under the Articles of Confederation had been peaceful and tranquil, and that the debates over the Constitution were creating “unease.” Federalists responded by listing all of the ways the country had not been peaceful under the Articles of Confederation and argued that the Articles had been too weak and needed replacement.

Topic 3: Is the United States too large to be a republic?

Anti-Federalists also charged that the form of the Constitution, a republic, was not viable because the United States was too large to be a republic. Since the Constitution created a strong federal government that held more power than state governments, the federal government could make decisions on behalf of all citizens. The problem, according to Anti-Federalists, was that the United States was made up of people with very different needs and the federal government couldn’t possibly understand all of their needs or make decisions that would benefit so many different people. Federalists countered that the federal government would only have general powers meant to “protect, defend, and strengthen” the United States, and that those goals would apply to all Americans. They argued that it would be impossible to decide what exact size a republic should be.
Topic 4: Will members of Congress have too much power?

Anti-Federalists worried that despite the people’s best efforts to vote for legislators who would be virtuous, that inevitably some elected officials would be good and some bad. They worried that the bad legislators would seize power and “oppress the people.” Federalists argued that voters would always choose virtuous legislators, and any attempt to oppress the people would be stopped quickly through voting bad actors out of office.

Topic 5: Is it necessary for the Constitution to include a “Bill of Rights” that guarantees certain rights for citizens?

Anti-Federalists were extremely concerned that the Constitution did not include a Bill of Rights guaranteeing certain rights to all citizens. They wanted to ensure that every right not explicitly given to the federal government was held by the states and the people. Federalists argued that a Bill of Rights was not necessary. First, state Constitutions preserved certain civil rights like a trial by jury. They also argued that the Constitution only granted limited powers and thus protected people’s rights.

Topic 6: Will having a standing army be dangerous to liberty or protect it?

Anti-Federalists also expressed concern about having a standing army, which they saw as a serious threat to liberty. They worried that a standing army could be used by the federal government to oppress the people, and that state militias would not be able to defend against the force of the federal government. Federalists argued that a standing army was a necessary defense against foreign invasions, and without one the United States would be weak and open to attack. Anti-Federalists claimed there was no real foreign threat against the United States.

Topic 7: Does the President have too much power?

Anti-Federalists compared the power given to the president in the Constitution to a monarchy. They worried that the president could easily get away with breaking the law by manipulating the army to protect him. Or, he might try to avoid answering for his crimes by becoming a monarch and holding on to power to protect himself. Federalists did not believe that this would possibly happen, claiming that the powers given to the president were too limited for him to be able to oppress the people.

Topic 8: Will the Constitution giving the federal government the power to tax destroy state sovereignty?

The topic of taxes also divided Federalists and Anti-Federalists, and the topic brought the issue of sovereignty to the forefront. Anti-Federalists argued that it was the power of the federal government to directly tax its citizens that shifted the government of the United States from a confederation of states to a unified government, which would eventually subvert the state governments. They worried that citizens having to pay taxes to both the state and federal...
government would be excessive, and specifically warned that federal taxes would come to be the main form of taxes. This would be bad for citizens because the federal government wouldn’t know enough about the situation of each state to tax fairly. Federalists were not convinced and argued that the federal government absolutely needed the power to tax in order to defend the United States. Without the ability to tax, they would not be able to fight in any wars.