

Guided Readings:

Conflict over Ratifying the Constitution

READING 1

These lawyers, and men of learning, and moneyed 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 then they will swallow up all us little folks, like the great Leviathan.

Amos Singletary, Delegate to the Massachusetts Ratifying Convention, 1788 (Source: Elliot, Jonathan, ed. The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution . . . 2nd ed. (Washington DC, 1836), 2:102. Available online: "Elliot's Debates," A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: US Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875, Library of Congress.)

READING 2

I am a plain man, and get my living by the plough. . . . I have lived in a part of the country where I have known the worth of good government by the want of it. There was a black cloud [Shays' Rebellion] that rose in the east last winter, and spread over the west. . . . It brought on a state of anarchy, and that led to tyranny. I say, it brought anarchy. People that used to live peaceably, and were before good neighbors, got distracted, and took up arms against government. . . . Our distress was so great that we should have been glad to snatch at anything that looked like a government. Had any person, that was able to protect us, come and set up his standard, we should all have flocked to it, even if it had been a monarch; and that monarch might have proved a tyrant.

Jonathan Smith, Massachusetts farmer, Delegate to the Massachusetts Ratifying Convention, 1788 (Source: Elliot, Jonathan, ed. The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution . . . 2nd ed. (Washington DC, 1836), 2:102–103. Available online: "Elliot's Debates," A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: US Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875, Library of Congress.)

READING 3

A little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. . . . It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.

Thomas Jefferson, 1787 (Sources: Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, January 30, 1787, and Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, November 13, 1787. Images of the original letters available online: The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1. General Correspondence. 1651–1827, Library of Congress.)

READING 4

It cannot be denied, with truth, that this new Constitution is, in its first principles, highly and dangerously oligarchic.

Richard Henry Lee, 1787 (Source: Richard Henry Lee to Edmund Randolph, October 16, 1787, in Elliot, Jonathan, ed. The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution . . . 2nd ed. (Washington DC, 1836), 1:503. Available online: "Elliot's Debates," A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: US Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875, Library of Congress.)

READING 5

Among the numerous advantages promised by a well constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. . . . Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty; that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority. . . .

The Federalist No. 10, 1787 (Available online: The Federalist Papers, Library of Congress.)

Questions for Discussion

Use evidence from the above excerpts to answer the following questions.

1. Why did opponents object to the Constitution?
2. How did supporters of the Constitution defend the new plan of government?
3. Which quotations do you find most persuasive—those that argue that the Constitution represents a threat to the liberties of the people and an attempt to impose aristocratic rule or those that argue that the Constitution gives expression to republican values?