

Summary

2.1 The Pre-Revolutionary Period and the Roots of the American Political Tradition

For many years the British colonists in North America had peacefully accepted rule by the king and Parliament. They were proud to be Englishmen. Much of their pride, however, stemmed from their belief that they were heirs to a tradition of limited government and royal acknowledgement of the rights of their subjects.

Colonists' pride in their English liberties gave way to dismay when they perceived that these liberties were being abused. People had come to regard life, liberty, and property not as gifts from the monarch but as natural rights no government could take away. A chain of incidents—the Proclamation of 1763, the trial of smugglers in courts without juries, the imposition of taxes without the colonists' consent, and the attempted interference with self-government in the colonies—convinced many colonists that the social contract between the British government and its citizens had been broken. In 1776, the Second Continental Congress declared American independence from Great Britain.

2.2 The Articles of Confederation

Fearful of creating a system so powerful that it might abuse its citizens, the men who drafted the Articles of Confederation deliberately sought to limit the powers of the national government. The states maintained the right to govern their residents, while the national government could declare war, coin money, and conduct foreign affairs but little else. Its inability to impose taxes, regulate commerce, or raise an army hindered its ability to defend the nation or pay its debts. A solution had to be found.

2.3 The Development of the Constitution

Realizing that flaws in the Articles of Confederation could harm the new country and recognizing that the Articles could not easily be revised as originally intended, delegates from the states who met in Philadelphia from May through September 1787 set about drafting a new governing document. The United States that emerged from the Constitutional Convention in September was not a confederation, but it was a republic whose national government had been strengthened greatly. Congress had been transformed into a bicameral legislature with additional powers, and a national judicial system had been created. Most importantly, a federal system had been established with the power to govern the new country.

To satisfy the concerns of those who feared an overly strong central government, the framers of the Constitution created a system with separation of powers and checks and balances. Although such measures satisfied many, concerns still lingered that the federal government remained too powerful.

2.4 The Ratification of the Constitution

Anti-Federalists objected to the power the Constitution gave the federal government and the absence of a bill of rights to protect individual liberties. The Federalists countered that a strong government was necessary to lead the new nation and promised to add a bill of rights to the Constitution. *The Federalist Papers*, in particular, argued in favor of ratification and sought to convince people that the new government would not become tyrannical. Finally, in June 1788, New Hampshire became the ninth state to approve the Constitution, making it the law of the land. The large and prosperous states of Virginia and New York followed shortly thereafter, and the remaining states joined as well.

2.5 Constitutional Change

One of the problems with the Articles of Confederation was the difficulty of changing it. To prevent this difficulty from recurring, the framers provided a method for amending the Constitution that required a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress and in three-quarters of state legislatures to approve a change.

The possibility of amending the Constitution helped ensure its ratification, although many feared the powerful federal government it created would deprive them of their rights. To allay their anxieties, the framers promised that a Bill of Rights safeguarding individual liberties would be added following ratification. These ten amendments were formally added to the document in 1791 and other amendments followed over the years. Among the most important were those ending slavery, granting citizenship to African Americans, and giving the right to vote to Americans regardless of race, color, or sex.

Key Terms

Anti-Federalists

those who did not support ratification of the Constitution

Articles of Confederation

the first basis for the new nation's government; adopted in 1781; created an alliance of sovereign states held together by a weak central government

bicameral legislature

a legislature with two houses, such as the U.S. Congress

Bill of Rights

the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution; most were designed to protect fundamental rights and liberties

checks and balances

a system that allows one branch of government to limit the exercise of power by another branch; requires the different parts of government to work together

confederation

a highly decentralized form of government; sovereign states form a union for purposes such as mutual defense

Declaration of Independence

a document written in 1776 in which the American colonists proclaimed their independence from Great Britain and listed their grievances against the British king

enumerated powers

the powers given explicitly to the federal government by the Constitution (Article I, Section 8); power to regulate interstate and foreign commerce, raise and support armies, declare war, coin money, and conduct foreign affairs

federal system

a form of government in which power is divided between state governments and a national government

Federalists

those who supported ratification of the Constitution

Great Compromise

a compromise between the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan that created a two-house Congress; representation based on population in the House of Representatives and equal representation of states in the Senate

natural rights

the right to life, liberty, and property; believed to be given by God; no government may take away

New Jersey Plan

a plan that called for a one-house national legislature; each state would receive one vote

republic

a form of government in which political power rests in the hands of the people, not a monarch, and is exercised by elected representatives

reserved powers

any powers not prohibited by the Constitution or delegated to the national government; powers reserved to the states and denied to the federal government

separation of powers

the sharing of powers among three separate branches of government

social contract

an agreement between people and government in which citizens consent to be governed so long as the government protects their natural rights

supremacy clause

the statement in Article VI of the Constitution that federal law is superior to laws passed by state legislatures

The Federalist Papers

a collection of eighty-five essays written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in support of ratification of the Constitution

Three-Fifths Compromise

a compromise between northern and southern states that called for counting of all a state's free population and 60 percent of its enslaved population for both federal taxation and representation in Congress

unicameral legislature

a legislature with only one house, like the Confederation Congress or the legislature proposed by the New Jersey Plan

veto

the power of the president to reject a law proposed by Congress

Virginia Plan

a plan for a two-house legislature; representatives would be elected to the lower house based on each state's population; representatives for the upper house would be chosen by the lower house