

# Factions, parties and the dangers of democracy in james madisons federalist no es...

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This 1787 essay by James Madison, originally a letter written to a New York newspaper in support of ratification of the Constitution, has long since become the most famous of the Federalist Papers and one of the most frequently quoted documents in U. S. political history. Although Madison published it anonymously, under the pretense that he was simply a concerned citizen, Federalist No. 10 can be taken as a definite statement by the principal architect of the Constitution on why he did not regard it as a democratic document but rather one designed to guard against the rule of the majority, particularly when it threatened the wealth and property of the upper class. State governments in the 1770s and 1780s had seemed excessively radical and democratic to men like Madison, even if they were not by contemporary standards. At the time, only white males could vote, and there were still property qualifications for voting and holding office in most states, but just the same the state legislatures often passed laws favorable to debtors over creditors, raising taxes on the wealthy, issuing paper money that wiped out the value of debts. Then there was Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts the year before, which was actually a rebellion of the small farmers against the wealthy merchants and money lenders of Boston. Madison did not refer specifically to this event, but his readers would all have been familiar with it and the danger of “faction and insurrection” he referred to in the title of his letter (Madison 1787). These factions and parties, representing the lower orders of society, were for Madison examples of the “mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished” (Madison 1787). This is what he really meant when he warned against parties and factions that represented the majority, which is to say

the lower classes, and the “ prevailing and increasing distrust of public engagements, and alarm for private rights, which are echoed from one end of the continent to the other” (Madison 1787).

Madison did not believe that under a popular government with fairly widespread voting rights that there would be any way to abolish factions and parties. He knew very well that these had existed during the colonial era in North America, and that they were also a normal part of the political system in Great Britain, no matter that the franchise was far more restricted there. By the same token, no realistic statesman or politicians would ever imagine that factions would be abolished by giving “ every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests” (Madison 1787). In one of the most significant and oft-quoted sections in Federalist No. 10, Madison recognized in very modern-sounding terms that political parties would always exist because social classes and the various forms of property that existed in society. As he phrased it in one of the key passages in the letter the “ most the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society” (Madison 1787). In a modern, capitalist economy (which was still in its infancy at the time), there were always going to be creditors and debtors, a “ landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest” and the “ regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government” (Madison 1787). All the questions of taxes, tariffs, debts, and the distribution

of wealth and property were always going to be political and governmental issues. For Madison the state would have to do justice to all classes and interest groups, striking some type of balance between them. He again stated that the main danger that the Constitution had to prevent was a 'faction' representing the majority of the people, who envied and hated the wealthy few and might trample them. They could not count on leaders like themselves ("enlightened statesmen") always being in power, given that they were outnumbered, and they could not take away voting rights that had already been granted to the common people (Madison 1787).

In 1787, there were in reality very few historical or contemporary examples of democracy to offer much in the way of practical guidance about this form of government, but Madison understood it to mean a direct democracy of the type that existed in Athens or the other Greek city-states. Their small size made it easier for the majority faction to rule, and there was no check or balance to prevent them from oppressing the "weaker party or an obnoxious individual" (Madison 1787). He did not believe that such governments survived very long, and asserted that they were dangerous in individual freedom and property. Their natural tendency was to bring about social, economic and political equality at the expense of the wealthy, and to impose a uniformity of beliefs and opinions on all their citizens. Perhaps Madison was recalling how the democracy of Athens put Socrates to death for asking too many questions and having unpopular opinions. In a republic, though, the mass of citizens would not control the state directly, but rather would elect representatives and delegates. He thought that they would be more likely to be motivated by civic virtue and the public interest instead of selfish

concerns or loyalty to parties and factions. There would be a large number of these honest and virtuous leaders in an extensive republic, would it would also be “ more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried” (Madison 1787).

Ultimately, Madison’s main answer to the supposed danger of a faction that represented the majority that had no wealth or property was the new federal system itself and the very large size and diversity of the United States.

Under federalist principles, the members of Congress would take a broader national view while the state legislatures would mostly consider local interests. In a republic whose territory covered an extensive area, sects, factions and parties would not be easily able to combine and take over the government as they did in a direct democracy like Athens. None of them would be able to “ outnumber and oppress the rest” on behalf of an “ unjust and interested majority” (Madison 1787). Religious factions would be so “ dispersed over the entire face” of the republic that they would check and negate each other, being unable to combine and take power (Madison 1787).

Madison had already learned this when he was involved in disestablishing the Church of England in Virginia, that the multiplicity and diversity of various religious sects prevented any single one of them from taking over the state government. Radical or populist parties that had “ a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project” would also have a more difficult time uniting in a very large or extensive republic (Madison 1787). At least, they would not be able to accomplish this as easily as they did on the state and

local levels, and so those with wealth and property would find themselves secure under the new Constitution.

## **WORKS CITED**

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