

Republicanism as a safeguard from faction and government unaccountability



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The Federalist was written at a time when republican government, historically, was not popular. It had failed throughout history, and monarchies were thriving in Europe. Yet the Americans, with their extraordinary potential as a nation, proposed to adopt it. Why, when more authoritative regimes were flourishing, would this make sense? Or if it really remained to be seen “ whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force” (Federalist 1), why would they not adopt a democracy in which people have the most control over their government? The Federalist Papers’ answers in support of republican government are only made more influential by their defiance of the prevailing form of monarchical rule at the time. Yet this idea, that perhaps what the majority (in this case of nations) believes or is doing is not what is best for all men, is precisely what justifies this organization of government. The Federalist supports republicanism because it secures the good of the society in the face of potentially dangerous popular opinions, and through political responsibility strikes a balance between democratic and tyrannical rule.

Republican government is superior to democracy because it better protects a state from government corruption and more adequately defends the rights of its people. The ends of the horrific “ majority faction” takeover Madison so vehemently denounces are precisely these two inherently related evils: corruption and violation of individual rights. If a faction can take over political power, it will pursue policies and actions for its own good against that of the public, for a faction is “ a number of citizens, whether amounting

to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community” (Federalist 10). This is by definition the corruption of the government. The cause of this faction being, according to Madison, “ the diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate... [and] the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately result; and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of the society into different interests and parties” (Federalist 10). Because this faction originates from economic inequality, it is then likely that in order for the faction to pursue its goals, it will take the property of others to correct a perceived wrong and in doing so encroach upon citizens’ rights. It is therefore the government’s job to protect that property and other individual rights from the actions of a corrupt or factious government. Having now defined what a republican government seeks to safeguard, or why it is superior to democratic rule, the question of how this form of government executes this objective can now be addressed.

Federalist 10 is Madison’s primary explanation for how republican government will best combat faction. First, he identifies the two ways to get rid of faction as “ the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests” (Federalist 10). He says that the latter is impossible, and the former is not worth doing. As such, faction is “ sown in the nature of man” and cannot be stopped, yet its effects can be limited.

Madison then specifically attacks democracy as a means of controlling those

effects, saying that “ a pure democracy...can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual” (Federalist 10). This means that when a faction is created, regardless of if it is antithetical to the public good or infringes on the rights of others, there will be nothing to check its power in a democracy. The structure of a republican government, conversely, is superior, shown in the comparison that “ the two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.” (Federalist 10). How the first point reduces faction is that when government is delegated to a small number of people, the passions of the public or a popular majority cannot influence policy-maker’s decisions, especially those “ whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations”. However, Madison then admits that this small group of people could become corrupt, which seems to contradict the idea that republic prevents corruption. Yet Madison’s second point, although it relates more to the size of republic rather than a republic versus a democracy, remedies this issue by noting that a large republic better represents a wider-range of citizens (in the American case, specifically in the senate) and as such it will be more difficult for one faction to gain too much power. In a democracy, should a majority faction arise and vote in its own interest, their harmful ideas will simply become law. A republic however will make it both

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harder for that faction to arise as well as put a check on its power by allowing informed representatives to judge these ideas first. A large, representative government is superior to democracy (or a small republican government) because it can better control the natural phenomenon of faction. The effects for citizens of this superior control is that the large republican government will be more difficult to corrupt with policies that oppose the public good, and the rights of citizens will be less likely to be violated.

Republican government has more qualities superior to democratic government that are discussed in the Federalist than simply keeping faction at bay, yet they primarily have the same effect that guarding against faction does in that they again protect personal rights and justice in the government. Federalist 49, for example, is titled “guarding against encroachments” to power for it discusses how republican governments, in which power is removed from the people, are inherently more legitimate than those in which people exercise power more often. In his disagreement with Jefferson that a constitutional convention should be called whenever two branches of government disagree on a constitutional question, Madison writes that “the danger of disturbing the public tranquillity by interesting too strongly the public passions, is a still more serious objection against a frequent reference of constitutional questions to the decision of the whole society” (Federalist 49). In other words, a democratic government which by necessity often “disturbs” the public tranquility would be a worse method of solving constitutional problems. Furthermore, “every appeal to the people would carry an implication of some defect in the government, frequent

appeals would, in a great measure, deprive the government of that veneration which time bestows on every thing” (Federalist 49). A Republican government then is more legitimate because it distances the people from it, which in turn creates a respect for it that could not exist if people were constantly consulted to change the laws. This distance is precisely what distinguishes republicanism and democracy. A Republican government lets the people be the source from which power is derived, but then keeps their own wills out of individual decision-making. For example, “ a dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions” (Federalist 51). These precautions are inherent to the organization of republican government and its previously discussed nature of prohibiting faction in that “ the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests, and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority” (Federalist 51). In this way, republicanism also protects the rights of the minority, and the result of a republic will be that faction is hard to consolidate due to widespread participation and diversity in politics, yet tyranny of the majority is also improbable for the same reason, as the people would not allow it to come into power. As such, the separation of the people from the government and the increased legitimacy of that government serve to protect individual rights even when they are in the minority, as well as keep public interests a degree separate from those of decision-makers to in turn keep them from corruption.

A discussion of the gap between the people and their policy-makers is perhaps the best way to answer the second question proposed by this essay, of what the role of responsibility is for those people in the government who are disconnected, presumably for a good reason, from the people.

Responsibility for Madison and Hamilton had two different but important meanings: politicians had the responsibility to make the best decisions for the people (not just the ones the public seemed to want), and the politicians had to be held responsible for the decisions they made. These two definitions are related in creating a good republican government, as a politician who is completely responsive to the people would effectively make the republic a democracy, but one who is not held responsible for his actions would effectively make the republic a tyranny. The previously discussed papers have already pointed out why the role of government is not simply to respond to the people, as factions can arise in which the people promote an idea that is bad for them or threatens the rights of others, such as Japanese internment during WWII (which the government was unsuccessful in stopping) or opposition to integration of schools during the Civil Rights Movement (which the government, through the judiciary, was successful in stopping). As Madison puts it, “if men were angels, no government would be necessary” (Federalist 51), implying the obvious need for government to control the imperfect and potentially damaging interests of men. In many ways this is very Wilson-esque in that government officials should act in the true interests of the people and should be able to discern what they really want, and consequently move them in that direction, rather than simply following what men they say they want. In concordance with Wilson and his focus on the Leaders of Men, Hamilton too specifically delineates this quality <https://assignbuster.com/republicanism-as-a-safeguard-from-faction-and-government-unaccountability/>

of resisting public passions to the executive, writing that when “ the interests of the people are at variance with their inclinations, it is the duty of the persons whom they have appointed to be the guardians of those interests, to withstand the temporary delusion, in order to give them time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection” (Federalist 71). Indeed, not only the legislative branch must be careful to “ withstand the temporary delusion,” as this is also the responsibility of the executive. Resisting dangerous public passions is perhaps the most clearly evident conclusion from the Federalist in terms of government responsibility. But what has not yet been discussed is the second definition, that “ responsibility” also means “ accountability” in the Federalist.

In reference to frequent elections in Federalist 57, Madison assures Americans that representatives in the republic before making potentially bad decisions or laws “ will be compelled to anticipate the moment when their power is to cease, when their exercise of it is to be reviewed, and when they must descend to the level from which they were raised” (Federalist 57). In other words, if they hope to be re-elected, they must make good (although not necessarily in accordance with the public will) decisions. This best accounts for the House of Representatives that he is discussing in Federalist 57, but the Senate with its longer terms also addresses the importance of responsibility. Madison writes that “ responsibility...must relate to operations of that power,” and a senate “ having sufficient permanency to provide for such objects as require a continued attention, and a train of measures, may be justly and effectually answerable for the attainment of those objects” (Federalist 63). The creation of the Senate then will also further the role of

responsibility promoted by Madison, as its members will have enough time in office in their six years to accomplish what they would like and see the effects of their decisions so that they cannot claim to be irresponsible of the outcomes due to a lack of time. While the House of Representatives can potentially escape some responsibility due to their short terms, they are still bound by frequent elections. While the Senate does not have frequent elections, it is made responsible by making the results of its decisions invariably tied to its members themselves. Both of these aspects of republicanism let the people retain control of the government, while the other definition of responsibility in which politicians do not succumb to the ills of faction opposes civic control. Although the “responsibility” of republican government has multiple meanings, the term itself is a descriptor of the careful balance a government must strike between being responsive to the people, and being overtaken by them.

Republican government better defends societal good and individual rights from the dangers of faction than democratic government does. In a democracy, the popular opinion is not just an opinion, it is law. In a republic, hopefully, the popular opinion is just that, an opinion, while reason is what guides the law. The separation of the people from the government, while that same people give the government its power, is what makes this so. By keeping politicians responsible for their decisions and their continued role in the government, the people maintain a check on the government. The government itself must then be responsible not for the people’s whims and passions, but for their good. When the government is successfully responsible for the people, the people in turn continue to give them that

decision-making power. This structure keeps factious ideas away from policy decisions when democracy would not, and holds those who do make decisions responsible, when democracy would not.