

# ANGRY, BORED, CONFUSED

A Citizen  
Handbook of  
**AMERICAN  
POLITICS**



**Michael J. Kryzanek**

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CONFUSED**



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## **A CITIZEN HANDBOOK OF AMERICAN POLITICS**

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**MICHAEL J. KRYZANEK**

BRIDGEWATER STATE COLLEGE

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
New York London

First published 1999 by Westview Press

Published 2018 by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kryzaneck, Michael J.

Angry, bored, confused : a citizen handbook of  
American politics / Michael J. Kryzaneck

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8133-6884-7 (hc.) — ISBN 0-8133-6885-5 (pbk.)

1. United States—Politics and government. 2. United States—  
Politics and government—1993— —Public opinion. 3. United States—  
Social conditions—1980— —Public opinion. 4. Public opinion—  
United States. 5. Political culture—United States. I. Title.  
JK271.K795 1999

320.973—dc21

98-55173  
CIP

ISBN 13: 978-0-8133-6885-6 (pbk)

*To my mother*  
*Mary Kryzanek*



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*I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore.*

—Peter Finch in *Network*

*Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn.*

—Clark Gable to Vivien Leigh in  
*Gone With the Wind*

*Who are those guys?*

—Paul Newman to Robert Redford in  
*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*



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## PREFACE

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I am sure you have played the word association game—a word is stated, and you answer with the first word that comes into your mind. If you try the word association game using “American government” as the starting point, the responses will likely be distressing. I play this game in my classes on a regular basis, and I have yet to elicit responses that suggest my students feel much in the way of trust, support, and hope when it comes to the American government. The responses usually range from “corrupt” to “sleazy” to “bribes” to “scandals.” Rarely do I get responses like “effective,” “common good,” or “honest.” My students’ responses reflect the deep-seated and disturbing belief among Americans that the politicians who lead their government are self-serving, money-grubbing connivers who run this country to benefit special interests and ultimately themselves.

In my classes, I try my best to give a balanced picture of American government, with its flaws and its opportunities, but I often run up against the latest newspaper headline or television news program that reinforces the perception that all is not well in Washington. I tell the students that they must see government as made up of human beings, some of whom use their power and authority to advance the interest of the people, and others who can be easily tempted by the perks of their office. Unfortunately, my modest cheerleading for what is good about American politics runs up against the constant drumbeat of scandal and petty partisanship. Wherever I look I find evidence that confirms that Americans have tuned out and turned off. Here is just a sampling of that evidence:

54.2 percent of the voting age population cast ballots in the presidential election in 1996, the lowest level since the



Census Bureau began compiling figures in 1964. In 1998, voter turnout was 36 percent, the lowest turnout in an off-year election since 1942.

25 percent of Americans feel that they can trust the U.S. government most of the time; this is down from 71 percent in 1964.

21 percent of the American public expressed confidence in the U.S. Congress in 1995.

40 percent of Americans polled in 1996 could not name the Vice President of the United States, 94 percent could not name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

(Answer—Albert Gore and William Rehnquist.)

In 1998, 26.7 percent of college freshmen said that “keeping up with political affairs is very important.” In 1966, 57.9 percent said so.<sup>1</sup>

These bits of data lend credence to my choice of the title for this book. It would appear that Americans are indeed angry, bored, and confused when it comes to their view of government. They may not be angry, bored, and confused all at the same time, but it is a safe bet that their feelings about American government can be described by at least one of these adjectives. Unfortunately, these negative terms reflect one aspect of the reality of public life in the 1990s, which further feeds the current cultural malaise that accents all that is wrong with this country.

Yet the people that I interact with, whether in the classroom or in my daily walk through life, are not simply angry, bored, and confused. Americans are smarter than many pundits give them credit for. Yes, a negative streak shows up in the political data, but there is something else as well; there is a quest for answers, for straight talk about government. If Americans have anything in common in their attitude towards their government, it is that they are full of questions about the hows and whys of their democratic institutions and their elected leaders. They see the work of government every day in their

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<sup>1</sup>Sources: Gallup Report, 1995; *New York Times*/CBS News Surveys; *Washington Post* Survey, 1995; Higher Education Institute, 1998.

pay stubs, in the warning label on the side of the cigarette package, in the signs on the highway, and in the soldiers who parade down their streets. But more often than not they still ask in exasperation why their taxes are so high or why the government regulates their private lives or why government spends money in one area of national life and not in another.

Government for many Americans has become incomprehensible and distant. With numbers like a federal budget of \$1.7 trillion, 5,000 pages of IRS regulations, and 2.8 million employees working in hundreds of departments, agencies, and bureaus, Americans are simply overwhelmed by the scope of their government. Then when petty partisan wrangling in Congress, campaign finance scandals, and the all-too-frequent sexual escapades of politicians are thrown in the mix, the result is a recipe for anger, boredom, and confusion. Nevertheless, it is the thirst for answers, for straight talk, that best identifies the public side of Americans.

I have no illusions about this book turning Americans away from being angry, bored, and confused about their government. I do believe, however, that it is necessary to begin approaching the explanation of American government in ways that are accessible to the average citizen, without being negative. When American government is presented to a general audience, whether in mainstream books, the electronic media, or the local newspaper, the presentation usually takes a “what’s wrong with America” approach, and pounds the reader into submission with countless examples of how our government is going to hell in a hand basket.

What is missing is an old-fashioned question-and-answer handbook. Nothing fancy, nothing overwhelming, and nothing designed to make matters even more unclear. *Angry, Bored, Confused* attempts to be such a simple handbook, asking and answering the questions that are actually on the minds of the American people.

The forty questions that make up *Angry, Bored, Confused* come from my experiences in the classroom, my work as a newspaper columnist for a number of years, and my experience as a local cable talk-show host (a regional version of the *McLaughlin Group*, the *Capital Gang*, and *Washington Week in Review* all mixed together). With my ear close to the ground, I believe that I have been able to compile

a body of questions and answers that bring to the fore what really is on the mind of Americans when it comes to their government. These forty questions are organized into eight chapters that correspond to key aspects of our national government, its origins, and its current dilemmas. The questions are direct, and the answers are relatively brief. This is not an oversize college textbook or a tell-all negative narrative. It is rather a medium-sized citizen handbook that can help deal with the negativity and confusion about politics that has gripped our country.

As with any writing project, there are many who must be thanked for their inspiration and their assistance. To all my anonymous readers, I want to give my thanks for their helpful comments. To my department colleagues, Victor DeSantis, George Serra, Shaheen Mozaffar, Polly Harrington, Chris Kirkey, and Mike Ault, I want to make my acknowledgments for their support and professional assistance, particularly during those hallway conversations and coffee breaks when American government was the topic. In particular I want to express my thanks to George Serra, who painstakingly read the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions. To the best secretary in the world, Sharon Hines, I want to give my thanks for always being there to help out a nervous author. Thanks also to Silvine Marbury Farnell for her fine copyediting. And to my editor, Leo Wiegman, who is always the epitome of professionalism, many thanks. I especially want to thank my wife, Carol, who remains my compass, guiding me through family and work and gently reminding me what's important. And to my three daughters, Laura, Kathy, and Annie, who likely will not become political scientists, thanks for showing their love for the house political scientist. Finally, I want to thank my mother, Mary Kryzanek, who every Sunday scoured the newspapers for articles on American government that her son could use in his book. There is no more loyal fan than Mary Kryzanek and no more passionate supporter of our government. To her I owe an eternal debt of gratitude.

*Michael J. Kryzanek*

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# 1

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## THE FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

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*At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.*

*—George Washington in his Farewell Address*

### *What Are the Ideas and Ideals that Our Government Was Founded On?*

Most important events that have influenced the course of history had their origins in a set of ideas, a vision of how government should treat its citizens. The French Revolution, for example, gained important momentum and legitimacy because of the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which called for a government of the “General Will” and emphasized the importance of a social contract between the people and their leaders. So too with the Russian Revolution and the bold attack against the Old Regime by the Bolshevik Communists. Revolutionary leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky were avowed students of Karl Marx, heavily influenced by Marx’s *Das*

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*Kapital* with its tirades against capitalism and its call for a workers' revolution.

In many respects the evolution of the American political system, from the impassioned calls by Patrick Henry to "give me liberty or give me death," to the inspiring "We the People" introduction to the Constitution, has underscored the importance of ideas in the formation of our nation. Early political leaders in the colonies were impressed by the writings of European political thinkers who emphasized the importance of expanding democratic rights and forming a new relationship between citizens and their state.

The first European thinker of prominence to cast his shadow on events in the colonies was Thomas Hobbes, whose emphasis on the individual and property rights was a powerful justification for the movement for independence. Although Hobbes's view of governance was rather authoritarian, he moved the thinking of his time away from reliance on monarchical rule, viewing each individual as controlling his own destiny. Then there was John Locke, who advocated a government of consent and frequently used the words "inalienable rights" in his commentaries. Many of Locke's ideas found their way into the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Our early leaders were also impressed by the French writer Montesquieu, who talked about the importance of separating powers in government to ensure that power was not abused. Creating a governing system that would protect the rights of citizens and counteract the excesses of power would always be a guiding vision in the thinking of the men who shaped our government.

In fact, if there is one attitude that defines the intentions of the founders of the United States, it is a profound mistrust of men with power. Throughout the writings and deliberations of our early leaders, it is clear that they were concerned that government control the excesses of those who occupied political office. It is not that they viewed man as inherently bad; in fact there is a surprising level of confidence in the ability of ordinary men to manage their own public affairs. But there is always grave apprehension over the potential for abuse of power. Democratic governance was on the horizon, but the early leaders of this country were nevertheless wary of the potential abuses that might accompany democratic rule.

The best way to describe many of the Founding Fathers is not so much as thoughtful democrats, but rather as savvy pragmatists. And indeed, all of them joined to their talk of grand ideas such as liberty and democracy and rights and freedom, a strong concern for less romantic details, such as how to win a war against a formidable foe, how to fashion a workable constitution that would satisfy all the colonies, and how to keep the fledgling nation together when so many forces were at work for separation.

Although the break with England and the founding of a new country is enshrined forever as one of the great moments for our democracy, it must be remembered that the establishment of the United States was the work of men of considerable means and conservative inclinations. They saw the need for a new relationship between the people and their leaders, but they were reluctant to fully embrace democratic principles and practice. Their primary concern was to end the taxation policies of the Crown, which were draining the colonists. When the colonists raised the cry of “no taxation without representation,” the objection to the way England’s taxes were taking money out of the pockets of merchants and traders played as big a role as the concern for the right to vote. Some historians would even say that the individualistic and democratic ideas of thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu served mostly as handy propaganda tools to use against the British, who were desperate for money to fight their foreign wars.

Because the movement for American independence was largely controlled by the landed and business elites, there was little pressure on leaders to move beyond the grandiose language of democracy to the actual implementation of a democratic republic. Historians and political scientists have debated for years about the motives of the Founding Fathers as they waged war against the British and laid out the governmental ground rules for a new nation. For years the common view was that desires to preserve wealth and status and to increase economic opportunity were the driving forces behind independence. Later there was the view that the new nation was founded by political pragmatists interested above all in keeping the nation together. More recently, there has been a return to the economic argument, but with more emphasis on economic stability rather than economic self-interests. But



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whatever the motivations, it is clear that the Founding Fathers were neither wide-eyed theorists nor revolutionary romantics.

Even though concern over the distribution of governing power and the economic future of a new nation may have been foremost on the minds of the Founding Fathers, it is important not to discount the role of democratic ideas in the establishment of this country. Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington clearly took a profound interest in the writings of those European thinkers who were calling for more popular participation in government. Jefferson and others like him were in fact vigorous proponents of democratic rule and individual rights, and Madison and others like him at least recognized that a new constitution would not win favor unless it made concessions to the new democratic thinking. The result was a fortuitous melding of principle and practicality, ideas and action, that is at the heart of the American independence movement and the formation of the constitution.

Those who focus on the philosophical component of this blend usually turn to James Madison and his famous treatise on democracy in *The Federalist Papers*, no. 10. Madison, in what is generally considered a brilliant piece of persuasive writing, told his readers that the most dangerous threat to democracy was “factions”—small groups of citizens whose major objective was to advance their narrow interests at the expense of the vast majority. Madison in clear and certain terms opted for a majoritarian democracy based on elected representatives.

In Madison’s view, the best form of government ensured that the interests of the people as a whole would not be stymied by the interests of minority factions. At the same time, however, Madison wanted to avoid creating a “tyranny of the majority.” He suggested that the ideal governing system would create a tension between multiple factions and be structured in such a way that minority opinion and rights would not be overwhelmed by the majority. In short, Madison wanted a governing system of balance and limitation so that policy decisions would be arrived at with caution and consensus. Madison is thus a firm advocate of federalism with its allocation of some powers to the central government and others to the state government. He was also in favor of creating a republican form of gov-

ernment in which a popularly elected assembly would not be the only center of power, but would be one of three separate power centers. Always fearful of power and suspicious of powerful leaders, Madison's *Federalist no. 10* reveals the heart of what has become our unique approach to governing.

While Madison's technical approach to governing in *Federalist no. 10* has become the most widely recognized contribution to American political philosophy, the passionate views of Thomas Jefferson remain forever at the core of our positive beliefs about government and our relationship to government. To refresh memories, a few lines from Jefferson's historic work, the Declaration of Independence, will suffice:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these rights are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness . . . That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

In that short excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson lays out the basic principles of American democracy—equality, popular sovereignty, and, of course, liberty. Jefferson's major contribution to American political philosophy is that he provided an important balance to the many Founding Fathers who were primarily interested in structure and process. Although no fuzzy romantic, Jefferson recognized that governing is not only about rules, but also about vision. People need to be assured that the new government they are being asked to support will give them more than procedures. To Jefferson, governing was as much about inspiration as about organization.

There is much to the observation that a country is a reflection of the people who were there at the beginning. In the case of the United States, the people who were there at the beginning were men convinced that change was in the wind and that they had an obligation

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to seize the opportunity to move their colonies in a different direction. Being practical men, the Founding Fathers would not idle over grand principle or promise heaven on earth. Rather they would lead an independence movement and later construct a constitution designed to bring stability and avoid the excesses of absolute power.

### *Box 1.1 Tocqueville's America*

From May of 1831 to February of 1832 Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, traveled the length and breadth of the United States. During his travels Tocqueville wrote down his impression of America, Americans, and American democracy. The end result of his travels and analysis was the classic *Democracy in America*, which has remained the definitive work on the United States during its formative years. Tocqueville made many cogent observations on the young United States and its people. Below is Tocqueville's description of how Americans view the importance of philosophy, which also describes the way we think and act as citizens.

I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States. The Americans have no philosophical school of their own; and they care but little for all the schools into which Europe is divided, the very names of which are scarcely known to them. Yet it is easy to perceive that almost all the inhabitants of the United States conduct their understanding in the same manner, and govern it by the same rules; that is to say, without ever having taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method common to the whole people. To evade the bondage of system and habit, of family-maxims, class-opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson to be used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for one's self, and in one's self alone; to tend to results without being bound to means, and to aim at the substance through the form; — such are the principal characteristics of what I shall call the philosophical method of the Americans. But if I go further, and seek amongst these characteristics the principal one which includes almost all the rest, I discover that, in most of the operations of mind, each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding.

There are pieces of philosophy in the foundations of our governing system, if by philosophy we mean a view of man (generally untrustworthy), an outlook on life (liberty is an essential quality of being human), and a vision of the future (democratic governance is essential for national development), but what American political philosophy has come to mean has more to do with a practical approach to creating a country that would be able to survive in the face of hostile foreign powers and divisive internal forces. This “how to” approach has been an essential element of our national psyche, seen in our support for practicality, bargaining, and compromise. Jefferson’s words in the Declaration of Independence may serve as a valuable classroom memorization exercise, but we are a people molded in the image of those Founders who were interested in making the country work properly, while at the same time feeling uplifted by noble ideas.

### *How Did the Constitution Get Written and Accepted?*

The U.S. Constitution is the longest running governing document in existence. While many democratic countries have torn up their basic rules countless times and started over again, the United States continues to run its public affairs with a system that was fashioned over two hundred years ago. The handiwork of the Founding Fathers is a piece of history that approaches sacredness in this country. When tourists walk past the Constitution in the National Archives Building in Washington, invariably they whisper as if they know they are in the presence of greatness. Although longevity does not mean perfection, the Constitution should be viewed as a model of how to craft a governing structure that can stand the test of time.

The Constitution may be our holy document now, but that outcome would have been hard to predict back in 1787 when the Founding Fathers sat down to write a governing plan. When representatives from twelve of the thirteen colonies (Rhode Island sent no representatives) met in Philadelphia, much divided the delegates, and great uncertainty existed over the prospects for reaching an agreement. All the delegates really knew was that they could not continue to govern an independent nation with bills to pay and powerful enemies under the existing governing structure, the Articles of Confederation. With no executive,

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no taxing power, and no means of linking thirteen colonies into a nation, the Articles of Confederation had outlived its usefulness and had to be replaced with a governing system that offered the United States the means through which it could prosper and protect itself.

But finding a suitable replacement for the Articles of Confederation was a daunting task for the delegates. On a more abstract level, the delegates disagreed over how much democratic governance the new Constitution ought to permit, with some preferring a return to monarchical rule and others urging greater guarantees for citizen rights. Associated with this debate was the issue of whether this new country would accent its ruralness or its urbanness, whether governing power would reside in the state governments, which were tied more closely to the land, or in a central government, which would likely have a more urban and cosmopolitan worldview.

On a practical level, the delegates were also at odds over issues of popular representation in the legislative branch and the distribution of power among the various states. States with larger populations, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, were lined up against smaller states, such as Delaware, New Jersey and Georgia, over who would have the dominant voice in the new government. Big state interests versus small state interests would be a nasty source of division at the Constitutional Convention. After a few weeks of deliberations in the heat of summer, it became clear to the delegates that they might not be able to agree on a Constitution and that their new nation might never attain the unity so vital for economic development and national security.

The constitution-makers in Philadelphia were no amateurs in the drive for independence and national governance. Most of the “best and the brightest” were there—George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton—along with some lesser knowns such as Roger Sherman and William Patterson, who would play key roles in the unfolding drama. The best and the brightest, were men with property, wealth, and national reputation. In many respects, they had the most to lose if they failed to take their young country to the next level of governance.

Before the conclave began, James Madison of Virginia put together a kind of constitutional roadmap laying out his vision of how a na-

tion must be governed. Madison, like many of his colleagues, was no radical interested in shaking up the existing socio-economic relations. Rather Madison wanted to move away from the weakness of the Articles with as little disruption and controversy as possible. But despite the confluence of great minds and great plans, it became obvious from the start that there was more that separated the delegates than unified them. Despite universal agreement that the Articles of Confederation had proved incapable of creating a national system of governance, the formation of a new system brought to the surface a range of fears and concerns that could not be easily dismissed.

Perhaps the key stumbling block at the Constitutional Convention was the issue of how to allocate seats in the legislature. Representation in the legislature was viewed by the delegates as critical, since that is where the policy-making power of the new country would reside. If seats were allocated according to population, then the more populous states would have greater representation than the less populous states. This was an intolerable situation for the smaller states, who were adamant in their opposition to a representation system that created an inequality of voice and power among the states. Nevertheless, the advocates of representation tied to population controlled the Convention. Edmund Randolph of Virginia, in close association with James Madison, introduced a proposal at the start of the Convention which advocated a strong central government based on a single national executive and a two-house legislature (a lower house based on population and an upper house elected by the other house). The Virginia Plan, as it came to be called, dominated the early debate in Philadelphia.

The Virginia Plan, however, only verified the fears of those delegates from smaller states who viewed strong central government with suspicion. The representation plan of Randolph and Madison served as confirmation that the populous states were intent on creating a governing document that would limit the autonomy of the smaller states and weaken their ability to influence the direction of the new country. As a result, in June of 1787, after the debate bogged down in a storm of charge and countercharge, William Patterson of New Jersey offered a second plan that was in large part a fine tuning of the Articles of Confederation. Patterson's alternative stressed the importance of one

vote—one state and proposed a collective executive who would be hamstrung by a powerful legislature. Despite the fact that the Patterson plan did not gain much support, it was clear that the Convention delegates were confronted with a serious division of interests and vision. As the hot summer dragged on, the delegates began to fear the worst—that they would leave Philadelphia without a constitution.

Thankfully, the opposition between the big states and the small states proved amenable to compromise. Roger Sherman, one of the delegates from Connecticut, was able to cut through the impasse. The so-called Connecticut Compromise created a House of Representatives based on an allocation of seats reflective of population and determined by popular vote (excluding slaves, Indians, women, and men without property) and a Senate, which would have two representatives from each state elected by the state legislature. The Sherman alternative gave something to each side—to the larger states, a legislative body that was democratic in that it represented existing population patterns, and to the smaller states, a legislative body that assured equity for all the states by giving all the same representation.

With the delegates agreeing to this compromise, the Convention adjourned for eleven days. When the delegates returned on August 6, a Committee of Detail had already worked out a number of other compromises. For example, they made the executive and judicial branches subordinate to the legislature (a concession to those concerned over a domineering central authority), and they addressed the slavery and trade issues of the Southern states by agreeing to count only three-fifths of the slave population (thereby lessening the tax burden of the slave states) and prohibiting export taxes (thereby protecting the lucrative export trade in agricultural products). What had seemed a hopeless deadlock in July had produced a working document that was gaining support and momentum.

On September 17, 1787, the delegates produced a constitution. Of the remaining forty-two delegates, thirty-nine approved the document, while three refused, citing objections over what they feared would be excessive central government power. Even though such an achievement must have led to a celebration, the delegates knew that their work really had just begun. Article 7 of the Constitution required that nine of the thirteen states would have to endorse the new

governing system in order to formally establish its legitimacy. The delegates were convinced, however, that in order to ensure that the Constitution would be accepted throughout the country and respected as a lawful document, ratification from all thirteen states would be necessary. Thus began the arduous task of convincing state legislatures and the general citizenry that the new constitution, with its accent on central power, limited democracy, and restrained decision-making institutions, was the best governing system that could be achieved.

For some states the decision about ratifying the Constitution was easy. Delaware took but four months to ratify by a unanimous vote (thus permitting the state to place the logo “The First State” on its automobile license plates) and was joined a few weeks later by Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut. These early victories emboldened the supporters of the Constitution but did not blind them to the opposition in states such as Virginia, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. The arguments against ratification were expressed by individuals known as the Anti-Federalists. The Anti-Federalists (Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and at times Thomas Jefferson) restated their concern over what they believed would be excessive central government power and advocated locating governing control in the states. The Anti-Federalists also criticized the failure of the delegates to provide sufficient individual liberties in the original document.

The state of New York was viewed as critical to the successful completion of the ratification process. The fight for ratification in New York spurred James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay into action. Individually they authored a series of essays under the pseudonym of Publius and published them collectively as the *Federalist Papers*. The *Federalist Papers* were designed to explain the value of strong central government and the need for majoritarian government. The papers attributed to James Madison, *Federalist no. 10*, which addressed the dangers of factional division and majority rule, and *Federalist no. 51*, in which he supported a system of separation of powers, have become classic representations of the arguments in favor of the new constitution.

Although there was no scientific analysis of the motivations behind the final vote in New York, historians view the *Federalist Papers* as