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Ratification of the Constitution:
Benjamin Franklin and George Mason

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Ratification of the Constitution: Benjamin Franklin and George Mason

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The ratification of the United States Constitution was a widely debated topic in 1787

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through 1790. There were two camps in the debate over ratification: Federalists, who supported the ideas of the new Constitution, and anti-Federalists, who were against the ideas of the Constitution (Shi 2018, 205). The ratification proposed new ideas including giving more power to the federal government which Benjamin Franklin, a Federalist, supported (Franklin [1787] 2000). However, George Mason, an anti-Federalist, vehemently disagreed with the prospect of empowering the federal government (Tindall and Shi 2011). Although Franklin and Mason agreed that special interests influenced the making of the Constitution and that it was not perfect, their views differed in terms of federal government power, the ability of one government to govern the nation, and whether the Constitution could be improved or not.

One comparison that can be drawn from the views of Franklin and Mason on the ratification of the Constitution is that they both believed that it was imperfect. Mason was a hard critic of the ratification, so it comes as no surprise that he wanted it to be better. However, although Franklin supported it, he admitted that it was not perfect (Franklin [1787] 2000). In a speech he gave defending the Constitution, he stated, "I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them" (Franklin [1787] 2000). Franklin believed parts of the Constitution could have been better, but also did not expect it to get any better (Franklin [1787] 2000). Another similarity between the views of Franklin and Mason is their concern for the lack of integrity among

members of the government. Both men expressed that the self-interests of the men in charge may have influenced the process of ratifying the Constitution (Tindall and Shi 2011; Franklin [1787] 2000). Franklin conveyed this belief by discussing how unlikely it was to get a perfect Constitution from an assembly of men with their own “selfish views” and other self-interests (Franklin 2000). Similarly, Mason expressed his fear that, with the federal government’s newfound strength, the “thirst of power” would consume some members of the government (Tindall and Shi 2011). Despite their differences, Franklin and Mason agreed that the Constitution was not perfect and that the self-interests of the men who created it may have been the cause of the problems with the document.

Many of Franklin and Mason’s views on the Constitution directly oppose one another. For example, Franklin believed that the United States needed a powerful federal government, whereas Mason was against this idea (Tindall and Shi 2011; Franklin 2000). While Franklin did not explicitly state why he believed the federal government was necessary for the country, Mason was sure to express his reasoning for his beliefs. He believed that a dominant federal government would destroy the state governments and would be detrimental to the future of America (Tindall and Shi 2011). The two men also disagreed on the ability of the government to control a nation the size of the United States. Mason was highly concerned with the amount of power the Constitution gave to the national government; he once stated that “there never was a government over a very extensive country without destroying the liberties of the people” (Tindall and Shi 2011). He explained that there was no way that the citizens would get

sufficient representation in government and that governments such as this would not last in a

country as large as America (Tindall and Shi 2011). Although Franklin did not express any thoughts on if he believed the government presiding over such a large country would be problematic, it is safe to assume that he did not agree with Mason because of Franklin's statement that "a general Government [is] necessary for [the United States]" (Franklin [1787] 2000). One more factor that Franklin and Mason did not agree on was whether the Constitution could be improved or not. Franklin believed that it could not be improved because it was as good as it was going to get, and that no one could make a better version of it (Franklin [1787] 2000). On the other hand, Mason was in the opposite camp; he believed that the Constitution could be improved, gave an example of how to improve it, and stated that he would support the document if the right changes were made (Tindall and Shi 2011). While both men had valid points in their arguments, Franklin and the Federalists had the upper hand in the debate over the ratification of the Constitution for three reasons: they had an actual proposal while the anti-Federalists only offered complaints, many of the leaders were former members of the Constitutional Convention, and they were unified while the anti-Federalists were not unified (Shi 2018, 206). The dissimilarities in the beliefs of Franklin and Mason, as well as Federalists and anti-Federalists, largely out-numbered the similarities.

Benjamin Franklin and George Mason agreed on a couple of issues regarding the ratification of the Constitution, such as the lack of integrity of government officials and that the Constitution was imperfect. However, they disagreed on some of the most widely debated topics of the time, including how much power should have been given to the federal

government, if that government could preside over a country the size of the United States, and if the Constitution could be improved. The similarities that could be found in the two men's beliefs were few and far between. In contrast, the differences in Franklin and Mason's opinions were plentiful. The disagreements between the two leaders were representative of the disagreements between their respective groups: the Federalists and anti-Federalists. The contrast of opinions shows how different the Constitution and the United States would be if the debate went in the favor of Mason and the anti-Federalists.

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"References," and
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References



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Tindall, George and David Shi. 2011. "Shaping a Federal Union." In *America a Narrative History*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
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