Ratifying the Constitution

Several states refused to ratify until a bill of rights was agreed upon.

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By J.W. Peltason

Less than three months after the Constitution was signed, Delaware became the first state to ratify it, on December 7, 1787. New Hampshire was the ninth state, putting the Constitution into effect on June 21, 1788. But the Founding Fathers could not be sure that the Constitution would be generally accepted until the important states of New York and Virginia had ratified it. Powerful organized opposition to the Constitution had developed in these two states and in others. Such men as Elbridge Gerry, Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and George Mason spoke out against ratification.
Critics objected that a bill of rights had not been included, that the President had too much independence, and that the Senate was too aristocratic. They also thought Congress had too many powers and the national government had too much authority. Friends of the Constitution rallied support for ratification. They became known as Federalists. Their opponents were called Antifederalists. The two groups promoted their causes in newspapers, in pamphlets, and in debates in the ratifying conventions. The groups developed into the first American political parties.

Virginia ratified the Constitution on June 25, 1788, and New York did so on July 26. Early in January 1789, all the ratifying states except New York (which failed to appoint electors by the deadline) selected presidential electors in their legislatures or by a direct vote of the people. On February 4, the electors named George Washington as the first President of the United States. The first Congress under the Constitution met in New York City on March 4. Washington was inaugurated on April 30. But North Carolina and Rhode Island refused to approve the Constitution and take part in the new government until Congress agreed to add a bill of rights.

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