

Understanding *Federalist 10*

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Learning Objectives

- Identify the significance of the *Federalist Papers* to an understanding of the American Constitution.
- Describe the causes and consequences of faction.
- Explain why Madison believed that a republican government was superior to a direct democracy.
- Describe Madison's solution to the problem of faction.
- Identify some provisions of the U.S. Constitution that reflect the political philosophy contained in *Federalist 10*.

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Key Terms

- *The Federalist Papers*
- Factions
- Pure Democracy
- Republic

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The Federalist Papers

- They were essays written in 1787 by James Madison, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton under the penname of Publius
- Their purpose was to advocate the ratification of the new constitution by the states
- They are an authoritative but unofficial explanation of American government by those who created it

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Federalist 10

- Madison wrote *Federalist 10* to counter the argument that democracies inevitably dissolve into turmoil and disorder caused by factions which ignore the national interest in favor of their own interests.
- The consensus of late 19th century political thought was that a monarchy was needed to restrain the destructive tendency of faction.
- Today, the opponents of democracy make similar arguments in behalf of undemocratic forms of government.

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What is a faction?

A number of citizens, either a minority or a majority that are united by a common impulse or passion adverse to the rights of other citizens or the best interests of the community.

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What causes faction?

- Madison says they are “sown in the nature of man”
- People have different opinions about religion, government, political leaders . . .
- The most common cause of faction is the “various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.”

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Why are factions a problem?

The most powerful faction will control the government and make decisions based not on the common good but to benefit itself. Both other groups and the common good will suffer.

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The dilemma of pure democracy

- In a pure democracy, the people assemble and administer the government in person.
- Pure democracy can only exist in a small geographical area.
- Pure democracies inevitably fall victim to the mischief of faction.
- Pure democracies fail because they are unable to protect individual liberty and the rights of property.

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Would removing the causes of faction solve the problem?

- No. Destroying the liberty that allows faction to develop is a cure worse than the disease.
- Giving everyone the same opinion is impractical.

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Controlling the effects of faction

- If a faction is less than a majority, then rely on majority rule to control it.
- If a faction is in the majority, then rely on the type of political system to control it.
- The cure to the problem of factions is a large republic.

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A republic is different from a pure democracy

- In a republic, the citizens elect representatives to make policy decisions and administer the government on their behalf.
- A republic can be established in a larger country than can a pure democracy because of its representative nature.

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What are the advantages of a large republic?

- A large republic provides a bigger candidate pool from which to select fit leaders.
- A large electorate is less likely to select undesirable leaders than is a small electorate.
- A larger territory will include a greater diversity of interests than will a smaller territory.
- A majority faction is therefore unlikely to emerge in a large territory.

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The dilemma of district size

- In a large electoral district, the representative may be too little acquainted with local interests and circumstances to represent them effectively.
- In a small electoral district, the representative may be too attached to local issues and unconcerned or unable to comprehend national concerns.

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The federal solution

The federal system provides a “happy combination,” as Madison put it. The national government deals with national issues while the state governments address local issues.

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Summary

- Madison wrote Federalist 10 to defend the Constitution against the charge that a faction would soon gain control, substituting its own interest for the national interest.
- The antidote to the problem of faction, Madison declared, is a large republic with a multiplicity of interests, making it unlikely that a majority faction will form.

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Review question

Does Madison consider factions to be good or bad?

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Answer

Both. Madison defined a faction as a number of citizens, either a minority or a majority, that are united by a common impulse or passion adverse to the rights of other citizens or the best interests of the community. From the perspective of the common good, which was Madison's goal, factions are a problem.

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Answer (cont.)

Nonetheless, multiple factions play a positive role by counterbalancing one another. Madison's solution to the problem of faction is a large republic with a multiplicity of factions that keep one another from becoming too powerful. Factions, then, are also the solution.

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Discussion question

Does Madison have an idealistic or realistic view of human nature? What's the basis for your answer?

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Discussion question

What are the causes of faction in today's society?
Is the "various and unequal distribution of property" still a major source of division?

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Discussion question

How do each of the following constitutional provisions reflect the founders' bias against pure democracy?

- The electoral college
- The original process for choosing U.S. senators
- The procedure for amending the Constitution
- The presidential veto

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Discussion question

Would you expect that a republican government would be less likely to succeed in an under-developed society with few interest groups than it would in a modern industrial society with a large number of organized interests? Why or why not?