

## **Federalist No. 10 (1787)**

**James Madison**

### **Historical Background**

Having been commissioned to improve the Articles of Confederation, the Constitutional Convention instead proposed a new and much more powerful government. When it was submitted for ratification by the states, it met with lively opposition from a disparate group of critics who came to be known as “Antifederalists.” Defenders of the new Constitution, who called themselves “Federalists,” set about to respond to their criticisms and to explain to the nation the new principles of political science that had guided the Constitution’s framers. Writing under the pseudonym “Publius,” three of the most prominent Federalists – James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay – composed a series of essays that, collected under the title *The Federalist Papers*, are today seen as an authoritative interpretation of the Constitution and a classic of political thought.

### **Historical Significance**

One common objection to the new constitution was that it was a consolidation – a government that nationalized and centralized power – and not a confederation. Opponents charged that the new governmental plan was insufficiently sensitive to history: no centralized republic as large as the United States had ever been stable and successful. Other republics that had grown too large had frequently suffered the fate of Ancient Rome: degeneration into empire and eventual dissolution and destruction. James Madison turned this objection on its head by arguing in his famous essay, *Federalist No. 10*, that the large extent of the American republic is actually an advantage and not a weakness. The great extent of the country will decrease the change of tyrannous majorities, he maintains, as a greater diversity of interests exist in a large republic than a small one. Moreover, Madison holds that the United States under the Constitution will benefit from the fact that it is a republic and not a direct democracy; this difference allows for the selection of the best leaders from the greatest possible pool of talent and avoids the mob-like mentality that a direct democracy can produce.

### **Key Concepts and Learning Objectives**

Concepts: democracy; direct democracy; republic; extended republic; faction; Federalists; Antifederalists; refinement and enlargement of the public views

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- summarize and describe the positions of the Federalists and the Antifederalists on the Constitution;
- compare and contrast “democracy” and “republic”;
- summarize and evaluate arguments in favor of small republics and of large republics;
- summarize and evaluate the Madisonian critique of democracy;
- define “faction” and explain why the presence of many factions is, according to Madison, a good thing and not a bad thing.

## Questions to Explore

Why are republics superior to either authoritarian states or states with pure democracies according to Madison? To what extent do you agree with him?

How has the threat of faction traditionally been dealt with by republics? Why does Madison say that the cure is worse than the disease? What premises about human nature and about the ability of government to control it underlie this argument?

What are some of the problems faced by direct or pure democracies? Given Madison critiques and solutions, should the United States be more or less democratic than it is today? Independently of what Madison argues, what do you think?

Madison says the most common source of political conflict is economic. Do you agree with this evaluation? If not, what do you think is the most common source? Either way, explain why you think this is.

Madison makes the rather surprising statement the protection of the unequal capabilities and talents for acquiring property is the first object of government. Can you construct an argument supporting this claim? What other objects or aims of government might one argue is most important? Why do you think Madison rejects those alternatives? What do you yourself think is government’s most important purpose, and why?