

Federalist #10 Document Study

Madison begins perhaps the most famous of the Federalist papers by stating that one of the strongest arguments in favor of the Constitution is the fact that it establishes a government capable of controlling the violence and damage caused by factions. Madison defines factions as groups of people who gather together to protect and promote their special economic interests and political opinions. Although these factions are at odds with each other, they frequently work against the public interests, and infringe upon the rights of others.

Both supporters and opponents of the plan are concerned with the political instability produced by rival factions. The state governments have not succeeded in solving this problem; in fact the situation is so problematic that people are disillusioned with all politicians and blame government for their problems. Consequently, a form of popular government that can deal successfully with this problem has many advantages.

Given the nature of man, factions are inevitable. As long as men hold different opinions, have different amounts of wealth, and own different amount of property, they will continue to fraternize with people who are most similar to them. Both serious and trivial reasons account for the formation of factions, but the most important source of faction is the unequal distribution of property. Men of greater ability and talent tend to possess more property than those of lesser ability, and since the first object of government is to protect and encourage ability, it follows that the rights of property owners must be protected. Property is divided unequally, and, in addition, there are many different kinds of property; men have different interests depending upon the kind of property they own. For example, the interests of landowners differ from those who own businesses. Government must not only protect the conflicting interests of property owners, it must, at the same time, successfully regulate the conflicts that result from those who own, and those who do not own, property.

To Madison, there are only two ways to control a faction: one, to remove its causes and the second to control its effects. The first is impossible. There are only two ways to remove the causes of a faction: destroy liberty or give every citizen the same opinions, passions, and interests. Destroying liberty is a "cure worse than the disease itself," and the second is impracticable. The causes of factions are thus part of the nature of man and we must deal with their effects and accept their existence. The government created by the Constitution controls the damage caused by such factions.

The framers established a representative form of government, a government in which the many elect the few who govern. Pure or direct democracies (countries in which all the citizens participate directly in making the laws) cannot possibly control factious conflicts. This is because the strongest and largest faction dominates, and there is no way to protect weak factions against the actions of an obnoxious individual or a strong majority. Direct democracies cannot effectively protect personal and property rights and have always been characterized by conflict.

If the new plan of government is adopted, Madison hopes that the men elected to office will be wise and good men – the best of America. Theoretically, those who govern should be the least likely to sacrifice the public good to temporary condition, but the opposite might happen. Men who are members of particular factions, or who have prejudices or evil motives might manage, by intrigue or corruption, to win elections and then betray the interests of the people. However, the possibility of this happening in a large country, such as ours, is greatly reduced. The likelihood that public office will be held by qualified men is greater in large countries because there will be more representatives chosen by a greater number of citizens. This makes it more difficult for the candidates to deceive the people.

In large republics, factions will be numerous, but they will be weaker than in small, direct democracies where it is easier for factions to consolidate their strength. In this country, leaders of factions may be able to influence state governments to support unsound economic and political policies; however, the multiplicity of economic, social, geographical, religious and sectional interests will check each other and ensure that the public good is maintained.

Though Madison argued for a large and diverse republic, the writers of the Federalist Papers recognized the need for a balance. They wanted a republic diverse enough to prevent factions, but with enough commonality to maintain cohesion among the states. Madison notes that if constituencies are too large, the representatives will be "too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests." He says that this problem is partly solved by federalism. No matter how large the constituencies of federal representatives, local matters will be looked after by state and local officials with naturally smaller constituencies.

Reading Questions:

1. Define: Faction
2. In your own words, explain why Madison considers factions to be dangerous to a republican government.
3. What does Madison say is the most common cause for the development of factions? Explain.
4. According to Madison, what are the two ways in which factions can be cured?
5. According to Madison, why can't pure democracies control the influence of factions?
6. Do you think that our government today effectively guards against factions? Why or why not? Explain.