



What Does It Mean to Be Madisonian?

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March 2026

Key Points

- Today, the word *Madisonian* is automatically paired with the American constitutional order, particularly the nexus of *Federalist* 10 and 51—the popular sovereignty of an extended republic mitigated by institutional mechanisms to temper majority factions.
- While that is arguably a fair characterization of the constitutional system, it misrepresents James Madison’s political position at the time of the Constitution’s drafting. Madison’s *Federalist* 10 defends the Constitution on grounds on which he privately criticized it, and *Federalist* 51 employs classical republican ideas his original theory did not heavily rely on.
- While Madison in retirement praised the Constitution as a whole, a more precise vocabulary would distinguish the “Publian” Madison from the authentically Madisonian position of 1787.
- The constitutional system advances Madisonian commitments like democratic governance, deliberation, and consensus—not through the means Madison preferred in 1787 but through the practical accommodations with classical republicanism that he eventually embraced.

It has been commonplace for generations to refer to the constitutional system as Madisonian—a concept that can be a good aspect or a bad one, depending on one’s perspective. Writing in *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, the political scientist Robert A. Dahl considers the Madisonian system an amalgam of *Federalist* 10 and 51. The structure of a national republic mitigates factional disputes, while checks and balances provide internal guardrails to restrain the democratic impulse. He writes,

What I am going to call the “Madisonian” theory of democracy is an effort to bring off a compromise between the power of majorities and the power of minorities, between the political equality of all adult citizens on the

one side, and the desire to limit their sovereignty on the other.¹

Ultimately, he critiques Madison for situating the safeguards against majoritarian tyranny in government rather than social controls. His alternative theory of polyarchy emphasizes competition among groups in society as the way majoritarian tyranny is checked.

Dahl’s work is a foundational text in the development of the pluralist view of political power, and it contributed significantly to the connection in the 20th century of the Constitution to Madisonian principles, a view critics and advocates of the Constitution have largely accepted. Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule’s book on the obsolescence of checks and balances is called *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic*.²

Sanford Levinson in *Democracy and Dysfunction* writes, “Those who place their faith in the Madisonian system of checks and balances—or the virtues of attending America’s elite institutions—to save us from the ravages of a sociopathic narcissist are deluding themselves. James Madison has truly, and irrevocably, left the building.”³ In a more positive light, Todd Zywicki of George Mason University celebrates the constitutional system in this way:

By dividing power among the three branches, and further subdividing Congress into two houses, the Framers intended to distribute authority and require the cooperation of all those actors in order to act. We can refer to this idea of the separation of powers as a means to the preservation of individual liberty, and particularly the idea that it will be self-enforcing as each branch will have the incentives and ability to protect their authority, as the “Madisonian Constitution.”⁴

Zywicki’s view is one I expounded over the years. In a 2007 essay for *RealClearPolitics*, I identified the failure of immigration reform as an “an archetypical Madisonian moment”:

Mr. Madison thought that a well-designed republic would be one characterized by the separation of power. The majoritarian principle could be relied upon to prevent small factions from acting in their narrow interests, but it would not stop large factions from acting against the general good. Federalism, he thought, would be a way to prevent factions of any size from profiting at the expense of the public good. Separating power makes it more difficult to accomplish any objective, but particularly factional objectives. The reason is that, in a federated system, it is unlikely that a factional coalition—even one of majority size—could acquire all of the dispersed mechanisms of power needed to institute its agenda. Thus, legislative success is achievable only when a majority coalition that represents *the whole nation* supports the proposal.⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

Madisonian constitutionalism has become a textbook understanding of how our government works—literally. The widely used AP United States Government and Politics textbook *Government in America: People, Politics, and Policy*, by George C. Edwards III, Martin P. Wattenberg, and William G. Howell, frames its chapter on the Constitution around the “Madisonian system”:

The Founders reconciled majority rule with minority interests by constraining both the majority and the minority. The Madisonian system did this primarily by dispersing power among separate branches of government, each with a somewhat different constituency, and giving them shared powers so that each branch had a check on the others.⁶

All these uses, positive, negative, and neutral, conceptualize the Madisonian system as one in which the national majority ultimately rules, but only by overcoming substantial institutional checks—designed to prevent outcomes that do not serve the public interest.

The problem with this view, I have come to learn as I’ve studied Madison, is that the phrase is not apt. No doubt it is based on a fair reading of *Federalist* 10, on the extended republic, and *Federalist* 51, on checks and balances. It also relies to a lesser extent on *Federalist* 39, on federalism—an essay of declining importance as the federal government has become more dominant. Madison wrote all of these. However, none of these essays capture his views at the time they were written. *Federalist* 10 is a fair recapitulation of his vision of the extended republic, but it omits his privately held belief that the new Constitution was inconsistent with this vision. *Federalist* 51 is a fair statement of the constitutional provision of checks and balances, but these provisions are closer to classical republican thinking than to Madison’s own philosophical commitments at the time. And *Federalist* 39 defends a federal system he privately opposed in adamant terms.

This report seeks to develop this position by examining *Federalist* 10 and 51 in their historical context. It will conclude with a modified understanding of what it means to be Madisonian—suggesting it is better to say “Publian” when discussing these essays specifically and to say “Madisonian” in the context of his democratic commitments (relative to the time), the broad values

he prioritized that the Constitution seeks to secure in other fashions, and his views in retirement as the practical statesman who had seen the Constitution work well.

Federalist 10 is widely considered one of the most important essays in the Federalist Papers and Madison's finest. But it did not always have that reputation. In the 19th century, *Federalist* 39—with its analysis of the national versus federal qualities of the Constitution—was more commonly cited. It was not until the Progressive Era, and particularly the publication of Charles A. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, that *Federalist* 10 received more notice.

Madison's analysis of factions in the essay anticipated, the progressives contended, the rise of economic stratification. Beard argued that Madison's emphasis on the economic basis of factions was evidence supporting his contention that economics, rather than ideology, was the determining factor in the Constitution's drafting.⁷ *Federalist* 10 received a boost in postwar scholarship thanks to David B. Truman's *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, which conceptualized politics as competition between a vast array of interest groups, to whom citizens have overlapping and crosscutting allegiances. Madison's delineation of factionalism in that essay seemed to comport with the postwar environment, wherein business interests, labor unions, religious groups, and geographical affiliations all competed in the public sphere.⁸

Even though *Federalist* 10 was not emphasized as an essential text until the 20th century, Madison's private correspondence and notes from the Constitutional Convention indicate that it reflected his closely held views at the time. Drawing on David Hume's contention in "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" that a large government would have "room enough to refine the democracy," Madison asserted that an extended republic would preclude any one faction from dominating others.⁹ This would prevent a republic from devolving into majoritarian tyranny, as he believed had happened in the states during the Confederation period, when narrow majorities representing a small number of interests could dominate.

Madison's logic relies heavily on the assumptions that selfishness is an intractable aspect of human nature,

that this drives the differentiation of society into a complicated tangle of factions, and the only way to reconcile interests is to create conditions that force groups to compromise. He writes,

No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause; because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. With equal, nay with greater reason, a body of men, are unfit to be both judges and parties, at the same time; yet, what are many of the most important acts of legislation, but so many judicial determinations, not indeed concerning the rights of single persons, but concerning the rights of large bodies of citizens; and what are the different classes of legislators, but advocates and parties to the causes which they determine? . . . The parties are and must be themselves the judges; and the most numerous party, or, in other words, the most powerful faction must be expected to prevail.¹⁰

Republican theorists since antiquity had confronted this problem, and the classical solution, endorsed and modified again and again throughout the ages, was a combination of virtue cultivation, to make better citizens and leaders, and institution building, to prevent the corruption of the republic should virtues be in short supply. Specific institutional arrangements differed from theorist to thinker, but they usually involved a government balanced among social or economic groups. The few and the many must have their own place, with some kind of magistrate (like a king) to arbitrate disputes. This was a nonstarter in the American context, for the United States did not have such sharp distinctions in class or wealth and was committed to a system in which all power was vested in representatives of the people.

Madison's solution is to forgo the typical distinctions between the few and the many and instead let a robust competition among diverse interests facilitate the balance. He asserts,

Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights

of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. Besides other impediments, it may be remarked, that where there is a consciousness of unjust or dishonourable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust, in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.¹¹

While Madison's ideas come in part from Hume, this is a new vision of republican politics—one fit for an increasingly egalitarian country where western expansion and commercial growth challenged the concept of permanent distinctions between the few and the many. It acknowledges the danger of democratic tyranny, as had theorists dating back to ancient Greece, but locates a solution to “the inconveniencies of democracy consistent with the democratic form of” government.¹² One can appreciate just how innovative Madison's theory was by juxtaposing it with John Adams's *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, the first volume of which was also published in 1787.¹³ Adams praises the separation of power among the one, the few, and the many—the classical solution Madison sought to overcome.

Yet the extended republic thesis Madison developed in private corresponded only partially with the actual Constitution. The House of Representatives certainly fit the mold, but the Senate did not. If anything, the Senate was consistent with Adams's classical republicanism: With seats apportioned equally, regardless of population, it became the American version of the few. Neither did the president, whose electors were chosen by the state legislators—the main culprits behind the democratic tyranny Madison hoped to solve. Madison originally proposed that both chambers of Congress be proportional to population and that Congress elect the president, rendering all three political branches reflective of the national political community.¹⁴ Moreover, Madison wanted to give Congress a veto over state laws, to make sure the states' parochialism did not undermine the national interest. From Madison's perspective, this was an essential aspect of his theory of the extended republic. A national congress apportioned in both chambers according to population would have sufficient diversity to produce majorities that governed according

to the general welfare. It must have the means, therefore, to defend the national interest against the states, which had behaved irresponsibly. Yet this proposal was roundly defeated, and the convention adopted the supremacy clause instead.

Madison pulled no punches— attacking the Constitution as deficient according to the requirements of his theory of the extended republic.

Madison was very disappointed about the finished product, at least initially. Writing to Thomas Jefferson on September 6, 1787—11 days before the convention wrapped—*Madison predicted*, “The plan should it be adopted will neither effectually answer its national object nor prevent the local mischiefs which every where excite disgusts [against] the state governments. The grounds of this opinion will be the subject of a future letter.”¹⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

He made good on his promise of a future letter on October 24. In a missive spanning more than 6,000 words, Madison pulled no punches—attacking the Constitution as deficient according to the requirements of his theory of the extended republic. He argued that the absence of a congressional veto over state laws was a decisive failure, for two reasons. First, the American system would fall prey to “the evil of imperia in imperio,” or a sovereignty within a sovereignty. The convention, in rejecting the congressional veto, failed to create “a controlling power . . . by which the general authority may be defended against encroachments of the subordinate authorities, and by which the latter may be restrained from encroachments on each other.” This lack of authority, Madison explained, was “mortal to the antient Confederacies” and “the disease of the modern.” Moreover, because the states control the selection of both the president and the Senate, the “danger of encroachments” by the states in national affairs was high.¹⁶

Second, Madison asserted that a congressional veto over state laws was essential to “secure individuals

[against] encroachments on their rights.” It was ironic, Madison suggested, to exclude such a provision considering state violations of individual rights paved the way for the convention in the first place. Yet the delegates omitted a material provision to secure individual rights. Madison wrote,

I am persuaded I do not err in saying that the evils issuing from these sources contributed more to that uneasiness which produced the Convention, and prepared the public mind for a general reform, than those which accrued to our national character and interest from the inadequacy of the Confederation to its immediate objects. A reform therefore which does not make provision for private rights, must be materially defective.¹⁷

Madison also complained about the Senate to Jefferson, although he was circumspect in his specifics:

The little States insisted on retaining their equality in both branches, unless a compleat abolition of the State Governments should take place; and made an equality in the Senate a sine qua non. . . . It ended in the compromise which you will see, but very much to the dissatisfaction of several members from the large States.¹⁸

Madison’s notes from the Constitutional Convention indicate that he was heavily invested in the fight over the apportionment of Congress and was one of those members who felt “dissatisfaction” with the final deal.¹⁹

The timing of this letter to Jefferson is important, for Madison wrote it less than a month before the publication of *Federalist* 10. In the latter essay, Madison defended the Constitution in the same terms and by the same standards by which he had critiqued it to Jefferson. Moreover, Madison’s review of historical confederacies to Jefferson reappears in *Federalist* 18, 19, and 20—with the rhetorical posture flipped.²⁰ In his public statements, he argued the new Constitution compared favorably to these other governments’, while in private he said it suffered from the same defects. Moreover, in *Federalist* 46, Madison turned his criticism that the federal government would be unduly influenced into a rhetorical strength—a way to rebut

the Anti-Federalists’ criticism that the federal government would overrun the states.²¹

Taken together, the actual Madisonian position in 1787 was notably different from that of his rhetorical posture as Publius in the *Federalist* Papers. Whereas Publius defended the Constitution as a proper expression of the extended republic and asserted that power was properly balanced between national and state interests, the private Madison believed the convention had fallen far short of the minimum necessary to check the states.

A key tract in the Madisonian system of contemporary parlance is *Federalist* 51. In it, Madison praises the Constitution as creating a system of checks and balances that provides “auxiliary precautions” to the extended republic he describes in *Federalist* 10. The way to maintain balance between the branches is not, Madison suggests, pure separation but blending powers so that each branch has the ability and incentive to stop incursions of the others:

The provision for defence must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.²²

Madison concludes this essay noting that checks and balances supplements two other features of the Constitution. The first is federalism. “In the compound republic of America,” Madison writes, “the power

surrendered by the people, is first divided between two distinct governments, and then the portion allotted to each, subdivided among distinct and separate departments. Hence a double security arises to the rights of the people.” The second is the extended republic:

It is of great importance in a republic, not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers; but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part. Different interests necessarily exist in different classes of citizens. If a majority be united by a common interest, the rights of the minority will be insecure.²³

The extended republic mitigates the likelihood of such a combination occurring.

In contemporary discourse, *Federalist* 10 is usually paired with *Federalist* 51. The two are typically seen as complementary. Madison himself encouraged this kind of connection because *Federalist* 51 includes a callback to the virtues of the extended republic. Both also rely on the same sort of insights from Hume and the broader Scottish Enlightenment, suggesting that proper institutions can transform private interests into public benefits. And, like *Federalist* 10, *Federalist* 51 is a work of magnificent philosophical insight. Not only does Madison employ the “science of politics” celebrated by the Scots; he also again brings in the ancients. His analysis of checks and balances is a callback to Polybius, the Greek-born historian of the Roman Republic who argued that the regime’s power-sharing institutions had prevented the otherwise inevitable degradation that corrupts all regimes.²⁴ Madison does all this to demonstrate that checks and balances is a refinement of Montesquieu’s idea of the separation of powers, which he discusses in *Federalist* 47 and 48.²⁵ The number of authors and traditions Madison synthesizes for the American context is truly remarkable—all the more so because *Federalist* 51 is a tight, highly readable 1,911 words. One could, if one were so inclined, engage the whole of republican political thought from Aristotle through Montesquieu on how power should be divided, but *Federalist* 51 covers the whole ground satisfactorily for the casual reader.

Yet just how central to Madison’s theory is this argument? Put another way, does the idea of the extended republic, articulated in *Federalist* 10 and established as the central idea in the plan he proposed at the convention, require the elaborate protections discussed in *Federalist* 51? Madison suggests that the checks and balances of the latter essay are “auxiliary” precautions, so it is worth considering that question a little more carefully, from a few angles.

First, we have already established from the previous section that Madison’s arguments as Publius could be highly strategic. His public comparison of the Constitution to his theory of the extended republic was markedly different from his private one. That strategy was carried forward into *Federalist* 51’s discussion of federalism. He privately disliked the “imperium in imperio” of the Constitution but publicly praised it as “a double security.”²⁶ Perhaps Madison was being strategic elsewhere in the essay as well.

Second, the Virginia Plan, which Madison devised for the Constitutional Convention, notably lacked many of the checks and balances suggested by *Federalist* 51. In his original plan, the House was really the decisive branch of government. Chosen by the people, the House selected the Senate, and the two chambers together selected the president. The president combined with select members of the judiciary into “a Council of revision” to reject congressional laws, but those could be overridden.²⁷ The great security for the public interest, at least going by the Virginia Plan, was not a blending of the national republic with checks and balances but the national republic itself. Madison certainly employed the principle of refinement—the popular majority reflected in the House was refined by the Senate, and both were refined by the president. Likewise, he relied on the principle of separating the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, a central idea in political thought at the time. And the council of revision leveraged the executive and the courts against potential legislative excess, an idea justified by the logic of *Federalist* 51. But all this amounts to much less than the elaborate blending between the legislative and executive authority that the Constitution creates and *Federalist* 51 defends.

Third, the justification for a national republic in *Federalist* 10 is notably different from the classically

republican understanding of checks and balances that Madison adapts in *Federalist* 51. The Polybian system of checks and balances that Madison defends derives from the classical republican model of mixed estates, in which different factions are given permanent position in power. The premise in classical thought is that the few and the many are potential rivals, and neither can be left to govern without intervention by the other. Polybius's point is that the Romans did not simply juxtapose the consul, the Senate, and the assembly; they blended their powers to ensure that no segment of society would overwhelm the other. Madison, in contrast, held that there were a variety of factions in society beyond the few and the many and that the extended republic would sufficiently muddle and dilute any factional majority, producing determinations in keeping with the public interest. So, why keep the institutional guardrails the classical republicans employed if the underlying framework was being rejected for a new understanding? Why not let this benevolent majority work its will? These questions are especially salient considering the legislative veto discussed above. If Madison trusted the national majority in the congress in the Virginia Plan so much that he would empower it with a national veto, why would he simultaneously hamstring the same institution with an elaborate network of checks against its authority?

By this reckoning, the checks and balances of classical republican thought are not as essential to Madisonian politics as the typical pairing of *Federalist* 10 and 51 suggests.

Fourth, Madison's private correspondence implies a lack of faith in these classical forms. The system of checks and balances he defends in *Federalist* 51 was hardly new. Polybius had defended the Roman intermingling of powers, and that became a common feature of republican government. The Venetian Republic, for

instance, had a highly complicated system to select its doge, designed precisely to stifle the creation of factions in government. Yet, as Madison wrote to George Washington in the spring of 1787, "The great desideratum *which has not yet been found for Republican Governments*, seems to be some disinterested & dispassionate umpire in disputes between different passions & interests in the State."²⁸ (Emphasis added.) In that letter, Madison introduces the extended republic idea, offering it as something new against the old republican strategies of checking and balancing power, a position reflected in the Virginia Plan.

Fifth, his private writings emphasize the cultivation of virtue to control elite behavior, a different tack from checks and balances. *Federalist* 51 hopes to substitute private interest for public virtues among political elites—making ambition counteract ambition for those in government so each branch will defend its prerogatives and thus sustain the entire structure. This is an idea drawn from the Scottish Enlightenment, similar to the principle Madison uses to develop the extended republic in *Federalist* 10, whereby factional passions can be made to check other passions. Yet Madison's personal considerations about political elites emphasized the benefits of refinement in a national republic. His "Vices of the Political System of the United States," a private essay written before the Constitution, suggested an "auxiliary desideratum" to the extended republic not of checks and balances (as one might guess based on the use of the word "auxiliary" introducing the idea in *Federalist* 51) but producing better elites. He wished to instantiate "a process of elections as will most certainly extract from the mass of the Society the purest and noblest characters which it contains."²⁹ In both "Vices" and *Federalist* 10, he identifies this as an advantage of the extended republic—nationalizing politics will produce more fit characters for office as competition for election will be stiffer for Congress than the state legislature. Yet *Federalist* 51 suggests elite behavior can be controlled by organizing government so that elites control themselves.

By this reckoning, the checks and balances of classical republican thought are not as essential to Madisonian politics as the typical pairing of *Federalist* 10 and 51 suggests.³⁰ None of this is to suggest that checks and balances is fundamentally incongruous with the idea of the extended republic. The two principles can hold together

as Madison suggests—checks and balances serving as an “auxiliary” precaution.³¹ The point, rather, is to suggest that Madison’s private thinking emphasized Polybian checks and balances much less than the public nexus of these two essays would lead us to believe. His own system, embodied in the Virginia Plan, intermingled power between the branches to some extent, but not nearly as much as the Constitution. The “great desideratum,” Madison believed, was to be found in the extended republic itself.³²

A great irony is at work here. The private Madison of 1787 was actually much closer to Dahl’s theory of polyarchy than the Madisonian Publius whom Dahl criticizes was. Indeed, the private Madison anticipated much of the modern pluralist theory Dahl helped develop. But this point gets lost under the strategic rhetoric that drove the composition of the *Federalist Papers*—above all Madison’s conviction that the Constitution, though deficient, was an order of magnitude better than the Articles of Confederation.

And so it is that Madison is the author of the three essays, *Federalist* 10, 39, and 51, that detail the essential aspects of the constitutional system at its most basic level—yet none accurately capture his private views about the Constitution. *Federalist* 10 reflects authentic Madisonian commitments about republican government, but Madison privately thought the Constitution was deeply deficient on this front. *Federalist* 39 is a careful explanation of the mixture of federal and national elements of the Constitution that totally obscures his deeply held objections to the Constitution’s federalism. *Federalist* 51 articulates a coherent integration of classical republicanism for the American experience, but its classical mechanisms were hardly essential to the extended republic Madison had hoped to secure at the convention.

Thus, to return to the title question—what does it mean to be Madisonian?—an understanding of the Constitution that hinges on *Federalist* 10, 39, and 51 is not so much Madisonian as it is “Publian”—or reflecting Madison’s work in his role as Publius, interpreting and defending the Constitution in light of his own views as well as classical republican thought. In that sense, they might be paired with Hamilton’s most influential essays,

Federalist 9, on the science of politics; 70, on energy in the executive; and 78, on judicial review. Crediting the Constitution as Madisonian, based on privileging *Federalist* 10, 39, and 51, elides their strategic posture and slights the lasting significance that Hamilton’s entries have had.

From a broader perspective, while the Constitution does not embody the democratic republic to nearly the extent that Madison had hoped, it likely does so much more than it would have had Madison not been involved. His Virginia Plan set the agenda for the early portion of the convention and oriented the delegates to a national plan of government. His insistence on a democratically elected House of Representatives rebutted many delegates who thought states should appoint House members. His staunch defense of proportional representation in both chambers of Congress limited the power of the small states in only the Senate. For instance, William Paterson’s New Jersey Plan would have retained the unicameral Congress of the Articles of Confederation, with votes apportioned equally among the states.³³ Madison also opposed demands by delegates sympathetic to commercial interests to entrench representation based on property and many of the demands from his fellow Southerners on protection for the slaveholding interest. He may have failed to create a constitution that reflected his aspirations of a national, democratic republic, but the finished product does reflect that view in part, thanks to his aspirations. In that sense, the Constitution is Madisonian.

Likewise, the word *Madisonian* captures values of the constitutional system that correspond to views Madison himself held—especially deliberation, compromise, and consensus building. The extended republic, in Madison’s view, would prevent factional hegemons and encourage compromise around shared values and mutual concessions. Even though it reflects only a portion of the government, the House still—at least in theory—embodies this view. And more generally, the system of checks and balances supports these principles by creating veto points where minorities can prevent the enactment of a policy that harms their interest, encouraging the development of a consensus that considers a multiplicity of views.³⁴

And while *Federalist* 10 accurately explains only a fraction of the constitutional logic, it nevertheless

created a republican justification for the democratic logic that was already transforming the nation in 1787—and would continue to. The classical view was that democratic politics would inevitably result in democratic tyranny. This was why thinkers since Aristotle insisted on leavening the rule of the people with the rule of the wealthy. Adams had defended precisely this in the *Defence*. But Madison’s argument was that the new science of politics suggested conditions in which the people could rule themselves. The key was diversity of interests and extent of territory—two assets that the United States had.

As the United States embraced this democratization—lowering property restrictions to the ballot box, opening more offices up to democratic election, allowing women and racial minorities to vote—it did so with a confidence that this would not threaten the republican vision of government, in part because Madison made such a persuasive case that the United States’ unique nature made it possible to ameliorate “the inconveniencies of democracy consistent with the democratic form.”³⁵

About the Author

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Notes

1. Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1956), 4.
2. Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule, *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
3. Sanford Levinson and Jack M. Balkin, *Democracy and Dysfunction* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 50.
4. Todd Zywicki, *Appropriations, Ambition, and the Madisonian Constitution: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau v. Community Financial Services Association of America*, American Institute for Economic Research, August 26, 2025, <https://aier.org/article/appropriations-ambition-and-the-madisonian-constitution/>.
5. Jay Cost, “Mr. Madison Votes Nay,” *RealClearPolitics*, June 8, 2007, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/horseraceblog/2007/06/mr_madison_votes_nay_1.html.
6. George C. Edwards III et al., *Government in America: People, Politics, and Policy*, 2016 presidential election edition (Pearson, 2017), 57.
7. See Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (Macmillan, 1913).
8. See David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).
9. David Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” 1752, Online Library of Liberty, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/oll-reader-70>.
10. *Federalist*, no. 10 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0178>.
11. *Federalist*, no. 10 (Madison).
12. James Madison, “Popular Election of the First Branch of the Legislature,” June 6, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0021>.
13. John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* [. . .], vol. 1, in *The Works of John Adams* [. . .], ed. Charles Francis Adams, vol. 4 (Little, Brown, 1851), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/adams-the-works-of-john-adams-vol-4>.

Finally, Madison in retirement was extremely confident in the American project—unlike Hamilton, Jefferson, and Washington, all of whom were relatively pessimistic about the country’s future.³⁶ The Madison of 1787 might have been disappointed, thinking the principles of the extended republic had been too adulterated. But Madison in retirement was much more sanguine.³⁷ Madison at his core was a pragmatist who rejected treating politics as a matter of philosophical deduction. The science of politics he and Hamilton had celebrated in the *Federalist Papers* was empirical, relying on history. And for Madison, history had demonstrated the success of the Constitution, with its blending of new and old views of republican politics. Madison in retirement could embrace federalism mixed with nationalism—checks and balances integrated with democratic accountability—and believed that in practice, the system worked. Madison’s mature views correspond to the Constitution not because the original document was altered but because his opinions on it changed. So in that broader sense, it may be considered Madisonian.

14. See James Madison, “The Virginia Plan,” May 29, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0005>.
15. James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, September 6, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0115>.
16. James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, October 24, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0151>.
17. Madison to Jefferson, October 24, 1787.
18. Madison to Jefferson, October 24, 1787.
19. James Madison, “Rule of Representation in the First Branch of the Legislature,” June 29, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0049>.
20. *Federalist*, no. 18 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0193>; *Federalist*, no. 19 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0194>; and *Federalist*, no. 20 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0201>.
21. *Federalist*, no. 46 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0261>.
22. *Federalist*, no. 51 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0279>.
23. *Federalist*, no. 51 (Madison).
24. See *The Histories of Polybius*, trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London, 1889), 468, <https://thelatinlibrary.com/law/polybius.html>.
25. See *Federalist*, no. 47 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0266>; and *Federalist*, no. 48 (James Madison), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0269>.
26. Madison to Jefferson, October 24, 1787; and *Federalist*, no. 51 (Madison).
27. Founders Online, “The Virginia Plan,” May 29, 1787, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0005>.
28. James Madison to George Washington, April 16, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-05-02-0139>.
29. James Madison, “Vices of the Political System of the United States,” Founders Online, April 1787, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-09-02-0187>.
30. For more on Madison’s strategic positioning, see John Patrick Coby, “The Long Road Toward a More Perfect Union: Majority Rule and Minority Rights at the Constitutional Convention,” *American Political Thought* 5, no. 1 (2016): 26–54, https://scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=gov_facpubs; Samuel Kernell, “‘The True Principles of Republican Government’: Reassessing James Madison’s Political Science,” in *James Madison: The Theory and Practice of Republican Government*, ed. Samuel Kernell (Stanford University Press, 2003), 92–125; David Brian Robertson, “Who Governs? Constituting Policy Agency,” chap. 5 in *The Constitution and America’s Destiny* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); and David Brian Robertson, *The Original Compromise: What the Constitution’s Framers Were Really Thinking* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
31. *Federalist*, no. 51 (Madison).
32. Madison to Washington, April 16, 1787.
33. See William Paterson, “Variant Texts of the Plan Presented by William Patterson—Text A,” Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patexta.asp.
34. See Colleen A. Sheehan, *James Madison and the Spirit of Republican Self-Government* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Greg Weiner, *Madison’s Metronome: The Constitution, Majority Rule, and the Tempo of American Politics* (University Press of Kansas, 2012); and Jay Cost, *Democracy or Republic? The People and the Constitution* (AEI Press, 2023).
35. Madison, “Popular Election of the First Branch of the Legislature.”
36. See Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Fears of a Setting Sun: The Disillusionment of America’s Founders* (Princeton University Press, 2021).
37. For instance, in 1830, Madison wrote Edward Everett a letter denouncing John C. Calhoun’s nullification doctrine and praising the Constitution’s practical success: “How far this structure of the Government of the United States be adequate and safe for its objects, time alone can absolutely determine. Experience seems to have shewn that whatever may grow out of future stages of our national career, there is, as yet a sufficient controul, in the popular will, over the Executive and Legislative Departments of the Government.” James Madison to Edward Everett, August 28, 1830, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-2138>.

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