

Ponderosa High School
American Government

THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF JAMES MADISON
Condensed from *Political Ideologies*, by Leon Baradat

James Madison (1751-1836) is known as the “father of the Constitution” because of his important contributions at the Constitutional Convention. He is one of our best sources of information on the political intent of the drafters of the Constitution. He shared authorship with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton for a collection of essays known as the *Federalist Papers*. These essays explained the theory upon which the Constitution is based. They also helped with the ratification of the Constitution. He is also given credit for writing the Bill of Rights.

Madison’s political philosophy is considered conservative. He was convinced that democracy was a failure. He feared that a popularly controlled governments turned into “mob rule” when faced with a crisis. In short, he and the other delegates to the Constitutional Convention had little regard for democracy.

Madison believed that individual liberty was the main goal of a political system. But, he did not believe that an individual had the ability to achieve and maintain liberty in a democratic society. People ought to govern themselves in some way, but popular governments soon turned into dictatorships. He was convinced government was necessary, but when left unchecked became oppressive and cruel. Because people were aggressive and selfish by nature he wanted to build a system that would play the government against the people. The result would be a system of good government with individual liberty.

The heart of Madison’s theory is based on groups of individuals called *factions*. People will group themselves together to form these political factions to express their political power. Each faction would compete with other factions with the goal of becoming the majority. As the majority faction they could express their political will at the expense of the other minority factions, thus becoming oppressive. Madison believed that the Constitution should protect minority factions so they could divide and frustrate the majority. In that way no one faction or group of similar factions could take tyrannical control of the government. Madison extended this belief into economics by suggesting a diverse and competitive system led to capitalism which is perfectly suited to his system of factions. Competition in economics and politics is basic to his system.

Remember, he was skeptical of democracy, but he thought people should somehow rule themselves. The system he devised is called a republic (or what we would call a representative democracy). The United States would be governed by enlightened and good leaders or representatives that would protect the interests of the people and protect the people from themselves.

How Madison Applied His Theory to the Constitution

Madison's ideas resulted in a complex system of governmental and popular restraints imposed by separating the powers of government through checks and balances. The government would be divided into three branches, the executive, the legislative and the judicial. Each would have specific, well defined powers that *checked* or balanced the powers of the other branches.

Another way Madison diffused power was by creating *federalism*. The powers of government were also divided between the state and national governments. In this way, both levels of government are prevented from gaining too much power. The people of each state would comprise factions through their statehood, and factions would develop within each state. So, the national and state governments divide power, the power of states are divided among the several states, and power within the state is divided among its many factions.

The people's check on government or the practice of popular sovereignty is exercised through the election process. But even this process is complicated so that an elaborate scheme of the selection of governmental officials divides representation. Government officials are designed to be selected by different constituencies (groups with different interests and responsibilities). Some examples are listed below:

- Members of the House are elected directly by the people.
- Senators were originally elected by state legislatures (this was changed by the 17th Amendment).
- The President and Vice President are chosen by the electoral college.
- Judges (at the national level) are appointed for life removing them from any direct popular control.

Our system was designed to be a republic, where the interests of the people are represented by officials chosen by different constituencies. The people are protected from the tyranny of government through an elaborate system of divided powers. James Madison's impact on our government is extremely important. We should also remember that he did not act alone. Many of his ideas came from earlier theorists like Locke, Harrington, and Montesquieu. Also, the other Founding Fathers who wrote the Constitution also made their own significant contributions . It was Madison, however, who is credited with leading the way to apply the political theories of the 17th century into a practical governmental system which created the United States of America.