

# The Federalist offers important lessons in how to cope with the current gridlock in American government

The recent government shutdown and political gridlock that has gripped Washington DC has led to many calls for Republicans and Democrats to move beyond politics. **David Brian Robertson** looks back to *The Federalist*, which he argues offer us lessons in how to break that gridlock. He writes that *The Federalist* shows us that we need to embrace politics because it is the force that drives government through negotiation and compromise.



In *The Federalist*, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay offer us urgent lessons for coping with the kind of gridlock that grips American government today. They were defending a plan intended to replace a failing national government. The proposed Constitution aimed to break a government stalemate that threatened the survival of the infant American republic. Politics could wreck the nation. They insist that politics had to save it.

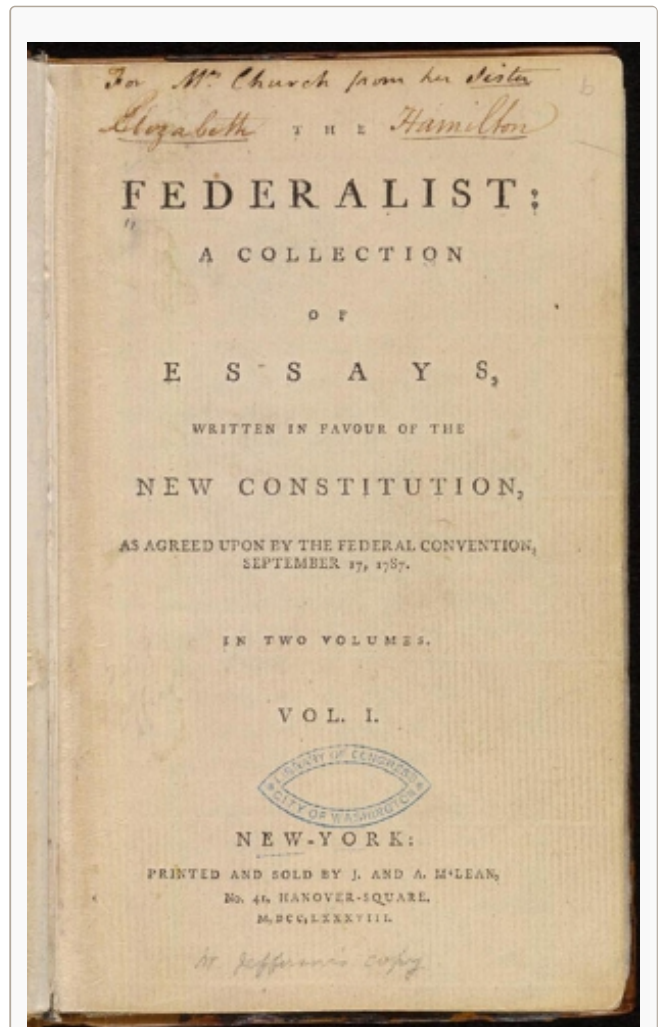
**(1) Politics inevitably drives government.** *The Federalist* argues that politics had to be accepted as inherent in any republican government.

Madison's *Federalist* 10 cautions that political factions are fixed in human nature. His *Federalist* 49 insists that legislatures always demonstrate the "enterprising ambition" for power. In *Federalist* 51, Madison emphasizes that government is "greatest of all reflections on human nature" — a stunning declaration in an Enlightenment world filling with splendid art, music, literature, and invention.

Madison, Hamilton, and Jay knew that no Constitution could eliminate politics, because they were politicians too — not in today's derogatory sense, but in an older sense of people who saw government was a vocation and a civic opportunity. The *Federalist* authors were intimately familiar with the kind of politician disdained today: those who try to manipulate government for wealth, power, or other malevolent goals. Madison and Hamilton, though both in their thirties, already were experienced national political leaders. These ambitious young men considered the construction of a new national government the chance of a political lifetime. The framers were not angels, philosophers, or professors. They were politicians who wrote a Constitution for a variety of politicians to use.

**(2) The Constitution aimed to control politics by deliberately making it hard to use the government.** Because politics are inherent in human nature, their governments must make a virtue of necessity.

The mere "parchment barriers" of a written constitution do not enforce themselves against inevitable maelstroms caused by political ambition. The Constitution accepts and nurtures ambitions by forcing ambitions to collide so that republican government can endure. As Madison puts it in *Federalist* 51, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." This strategy "of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives, might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public." The separation of powers is



Title page of the first printing of the Federalist Papers, 1788. By Hamilton, Madison & Jay [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

not a philosophical principle, but a contrivance, one of the preeminent “inventions of prudence.” The *Federalist* encourages even more political ambition by arguing that the national government should extend broadly, to embrace even more conflicting political interests to make it even more difficult for them to coalesce.

The Constitutional Convention had itself reinforced the necessity of using politics. Ingeniously, the Convention delegates used their political skills of compromise, deal-making, invention, and evasion to negotiate the Constitution. They settled difficult disputes simply by splitting the difference (Congress), delaying action (the slave trade), and deliberately papering over conflicts with ambiguous wording (“general welfare,” “necessary and proper,” “direct taxes”).

**(3) Only negotiation and compromise can make the government work.** The framers built a government that constantly puts such political skills to the test. Negotiation and compromise are required by the Constitution; they are its central nervous system. Majorities would rule, but it would be hard to construct majorities without negotiation. In this government, writes Madison in *Federalist* 62, “No law. . . can now be passed without the concurrence, first, of a majority of the people” as represented in the House of Representatives, “and then, of a majority of the States” as represented in the Senate. In *Federalist* 72, Hamilton points out that the president’s veto power did not prevent a bill from becoming law, but it did require a law to enjoy a broader consensus among an extraordinarily large majority of the people’s representatives.

**(4) The breakdown of this political compromise threatens republican government.** The *Federalist* authors condemned the moribund Confederation government because it made compromise and negotiation too difficult. Hamilton recognizes in *Federalist* 22 that “upon some occasions things will not admit of accommodation; and then the measures of government must be injuriously suspended, or fatally defeated. It is often, by the impracticability of obtaining the concurrence of the necessary number of votes, kept in a state of inaction. Its situation must always savor of weakness, sometimes border upon anarchy.” Madison concedes that, even in the new government, the separation of legislative power “may in some instances be injurious as well as beneficial . . .” (*Federalist* 62).

In 1787, it was urgent to fix the deteriorating Confederation government. Today, it is urgent for Americans to prevent the same fate from befalling the government that replaced it. Like the framers and *Federalist* authors, Americans must understand that it is necessary to embrace politics, because politics must break the gridlock that threatens their future.

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