



UNLOCKING  
THE  
FEDERALIST PAPERS

Discussion Guide



- **Explore the Essay**
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# 8 Political Freedom in the *Federalist Papers*

*If Men Were Angels,  
No Government  
Would Be Necessary*

## STUDENT DISCUSSION GUIDE

### VIEW THE VIDEO

Thoughtfully view the video which can be found at <http://www.RootsofLiberty.org/videos>.

### ANALYZE THE SOURCE

Closely read the following excerpt from *Federalist No. 51* (written by James Madison) and be prepared to discuss the questions that follow:

*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. A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.*

1. How and why does government reflect human nature? Does government reflect our better natures? our worst selves? both?
2. Madison knows that men are not angels. He knows that angels do not govern men. What is he talking about here?
3. Which is more difficult: for the government to control the people or for the government to control itself? Which poses the greater threat to political freedom: the people or the government?
4. Madison says this issue (#3 above) is the greatest challenge when creating a new government? Do you agree? Why or why not? If you disagree, what do you think is the greatest challenge in creating government?

5. To what extent do the people actually control government? To what extent *should* the people control government? To what extent does the government control the people? How has the balance between the people’s control of government and the government’s control of people shifted throughout American history?
6. Does Madison consider the Constitution an “auxiliary precaution” for the control of government? Do you? Is it a sufficient precaution?

## EXPLORE THE ESSAY

Thoughtfully read the essay, *If Men Were Angels, No Government Would Be Necessary: Political Freedom in the Federalist Papers* and be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. According to the *Federalist Papers*, what is the purpose of politics? How does our understanding of politics differ from that of the Founders?
2. How and why does a large republic reduce the threat of faction and increase political freedom?
3. Do you agree with Madison that “human beings are rather selfish”? Why/why not? Give an example (from your personal life or from our political life) of how “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”
4. How can government best secure the rights of property?
5. How does the Constitution restrain government officials in their exercise of power?
6. What is the tension between the concepts of “majority rule” and “minority rights”? What examples in American history or contemporary society illustrate that tension?
7. Why did Hamilton believe that the absence of a bill of rights in the original Constitution was a good idea? Do you agree/disagree with his observation? Why/why not?
8. Do you agree/disagree that the most important political right of all is self-government? Why/why not?

## CONNECT TO CURRENT ISSUES

Research one of these current controversial issues to determine to what degree, if any, the various proposals increase or decrease political freedom.

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| ▶ Affordable Health Care Act   | ▶ restrictions/liberalization of voting requirements |
| ▶ immigration reform proposals | ▶ right to bear arms                                 |
| ▶ campaign finance laws        |  |



## SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW

Write a thoughtful, analytical essay answering any one of the questions from **Analyze the Source** or **Explore the Essay**.

Write a thoughtful, analytical essay answering this question:

*In modern America, what are the greatest threats to political liberty? How should political institutions respond to these threats? How should individuals respond to these threats?*



## LEARN MORE

The *Federalist Papers* referenced in this article are also discussed by these other authors in *Roots of Liberty*:

- No. 10 Miller, Koster, Franck
- No. 44 Pilon, Shu (Federalism), Koster
- No. 51 Shu (Separation), Miller, Franck
- No. 84 Franck

On-Line Versions of the *Federalist Papers*

- ▶ The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy  
<http://avalon.law.yale.edu>
- ▶ On Line Library of Liberty  
<http://oll.libertyfund.org>

Teaching American History: The Federalist-Anti-Federalists Debates

- ▶ <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/fed-antifed>