

An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution by Charles Beard (summarize on your own paper)

Charles A. Beard, who published his famous *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* in 1913, suggested that the Constitution was nothing more than the work of an economic elite that was seeking to preserve its property.

This elite, according to Beard, consisted of landholders, creditors, merchants, public bondholders, and wealthy lawyers. Beard demonstrated that many of the delegates to the convention fell into one of these categories.

According to Beard's thesis, as the delegates met, the primary concern of most of them was to limit the power of popular majorities and thus protect their own property interests.

Control over money was placed in the hands of the national government, and in Article VI of the Constitution it was provided that the new government was to guarantee all debts that had been incurred by the national government under the Articles of Confederation.

The movement for the Constitution of the United States was originated and carried through principally by four groups of personal interests which had been adversely affected under the Articles of Confederation: money, public securities, manufactures, and trade and shipping:

The first firm steps toward the formation of the Constitution were taken by a small and active group of men immediately interested through their personal possessions in the outcome of their labors.

No popular vote was taken directly or indirectly on the proposition to call the Convention which drafted the Constitution.

A large propertyless mass was, under the prevailing suffrage qualifications, excluded at the outset from participation (through representatives) in the work of framing the Constitution.

The members of the Philadelphia Convention which drafted the Constitution were, with a few exceptions, immediately, directly, and personally interested in, and derived economic advantages from, the establishment of the new system.

The Constitution was essentially an economic document based upon as recognizing the claim of property to a special and defensive position in the Constitution.

In the ratification of the Constitution, about three-fourths of the adult males failed to vote on the question, having abstained from the elections at which delegates to the state conventions were chosen, either on account of their indifference or their disfranchisement by property qualifications.

The Constitution was ratified by a vote of probably not more than one-sixth of the adult males.

The Constitution was not created by “the whole people” as the jurists have said; neither was it created by “the states” as Southern nullifiers long contended; but it was the work of a consolidated group whose interests knew no state boundaries and were truly national in their scope.

How the structure of the federal government supports Beard’s hypothesis

One of the major reasons why Beard thought that the Constitution was created was to protect the interests of the rich is by how it insulated the three branches of government from popular control. This is a similar argument that the Federalist Papers made in that the “tyranny of the majority” would lead to the people voting to take the property away from the “landed minority”. If the poor majority of people had too much power, it could lead to the rich having their property taken away legally and distributed to everyone else. This idea is supported by Locke whose said that all citizens have a right to have their “life, liberty, and property” protected by the government. It is often said that Locke was against the government from taking away the property of a citizen without a good reason, but he also was concerned with the government (which could be viewed as a group of citizens in a democracy) voting to take away a person’s property.

At the time of the adoption of the Constitution, popular control of the government lied only in the House of Representatives, which is the weaker of the two chambers in Congress.

The Senate, at the time of writing of the Constitution was appointed by state legislatures as they were perceived to uphold the interest of the individual state governments, not the people. This was not changed until the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913, which allowed for senators to be elected by the people.

The people did not elect the president for the first few elections. Each state’s electors would nominate and vote for president without any vote by the people. This completely kept the people (the majority of which were not wealthy elites) out of having a say for who would be president. This eventually changed as parties became more powerful and asked for members of the Electoral College to vote in line with how the voters of their states wished. Today, the Electoral College is viewed as a “rubber stamp” meaning that it is just a formality and it reflects the votes of the people in each state.

The people never directly elected the Supreme Court and they still don’t. The members have always been appointed by the president and then approved by a majority of the senate. Today the people have a slight say in who becomes Supreme Court justices because they directly elect senators and the president who then appoint and approve justices, but they don’t have a direct say.