

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO.9: POLITICAL HUMOR DURING THE RATIFICATION DEBATE

Americans have historically used humor in the political arena. The Ratification period is no exception. Students of the ratification debate are prone to associate public discourse with the lofty prose of “Publius” in *The Federalist* or the Antifederalist writings of “Federal Farmer” and “Brutus.” Not all of the discourse was of an elevated nature, however. For many Americans, the issues of ratification were disseminated using the various devices of satire, fictitious letters, dialogues, metaphor, burlesque, parody, allegory, and ridicule. All of these formats had popular appeal.

Dating back to the Revolutionary era, when the British invented the pejorative character of “Yankee Doodle,” Americans were accustomed to seeing themselves as irreverent and uncouth. One could argue that Americans took pride in the caricature and willingly used this image as they engaged in public debate. Joseph Boskin, a historian of American political humor, noted that our system of governance produces “one of those rare societies in which eloquence and experience of humor is an axiomatic byproduct of its devotion to freedom.”

Even after achieving independence, America was a highly deferential society. Only men who did not work with their hands could be considered “gentlemen.” In the ratification debate, class and social standing were issues that provided writers with opportunities to disparage their opponents. Antifederalists accused Federalists for their alleged aristocratic tendencies, which were at odds with the democratic principles of the American Revolution. Federalists defended themselves against charges of elitism and suggested, in turn, that Antifederalists, who exploited the ignorance of the masses, were demagogues. Such stereotypes often appeared in Federalist-Antifederalist satires, two of which comprise this month’s documents.

Federalist “Peter Prejudice,” *Philadelphia Federal Gazette*, 15 April 1788, ridicules his opponents as fools who are unwilling to accept new solutions to centuries-old problems in government. Antifederalist “Honestus,” *New York Journal*, 26 April 1788, mocks his antagonists as elitists who fail to understand that laborers have the capacity to engage in sophisticated political debate.

Authorship of the pieces is uncertain. The June 1788 issue of the *Philadelphia American Museum* revealed that “Peter Prejudice: The New Breeches” was written by “John Mifflin, Esq.,” a graduate of the College of Philadelphia (1775) and a prominent lawyer. But Ebenezer Hazard, then postmaster general of the United States, speculated that the prolific Federalist propagandist Francis Hopkinson was responsible for the piece. On 10 May 1788, in a letter to Jeremy Belknap from New York City, Hazard wrote, “I believe F.H. wrote the Piece about the Breeches.” “Peter Prejudice,” reprinted in thirteen newspapers and the *American Museum*, was widely circulated. The publication occasionally evoked strong reactions among Antifederalists. One such response by “Timothy Takeall” urged readers not to accept the new breeches because the tailor had not yet presented his bill: “Your taylor told you, when he made the old breeches, that they would last fifteen years without repairing; but after half of that time is expired, he informs you that they are past mending, and sends you a new pair, which he says are calculated for your benefit, but will not suffer you to try them on, and in case of their illy fitting you, to return them; but if you put them on, you must wear them, and pay the bill which he will then exhibit.”

The debate over the ratification of the Constitution in New York originally began in the summer of 1787, even before the promulgation of the Constitution. In July 1787, Alexander Hamilton attacked

Governor George Clinton as an opponent of the work of the delegates at the Philadelphia Convention. The early public debate included items by the Antifederalist “Cato” and the Federalist “Cæsar” in September and October 1787. “Cato” I had encouraged all New Yorkers to “Deliberate . . . on this new national government with coolness; analyze it with criticism; and reflect on it with candour.” Referring to George Washington, who signed the Constitution, “Cato” maintained that even “the wisest and best of men may err, and their errors, if adopted, may be fatal to the community.” “Cæsar” II countered by suggesting that the people in general were “very ill qualified to *judge* for themselves what government will best suit their peculiar situations.” As the election of delegates to attend the New York ratifying convention approached in late April, “Honestus” continued the debate. “Honestus” asserted that such a disparaging view of the people failed to take into account the wisdom and virtues of workingmen, inferring that such qualities were essential to the debate over the merits of the Constitution.

PETER PREJUDICE: THE NEW BREECHES
PHILADELPHIA FEDERAL GAZETTE,
15 APRIL 1788

Mr. Editor, I some time since sent a pair of old breeches to a taylor, in order to have them patched; as the breaches, both in front and rear, were very numerous I was obliged to purchase a considerable quantity of cloth wherewith to mend them—Well sir, what do you think the taylor has had the assurance to do? Why, after detaining my breeches upwards of four months,¹ he has presumed to return them unpatched, and has also sent a new pair along with them, and a message, “That upon examining the old pair he had found them so rotten that they were not worth mending, nor could it be easily done, that he had also found that the cloth sent for that purpose was sufficient to make an entire new pair, much better than the old ones had ever been, which he had done accordingly, and hoped for my approbation of his conduct.” He added moreover “that if upon trial they should happen to pinch me in any part, he had left a sufficient space for outlets at every seam.”

Oh height of insult! said I on receiving this arrogant message, what has this fellow done! A conspiracy! A conspiracy! As sure as I’m alive the traitor, his journeymen, and apprentices have *meditated* the ruin of my old breeches, and *conspired* against the liberty of my thighs, knees, and loins, which they have insidiously attempted to confine and cramp by palming this “*gilded trap*” the new breeches on me, “*Curse on the villains!*” they have conspired to lay restraints upon my *free-born* members, which are utterly incompatible with our republican form of government! Here indignation choked my utterance—My dearly beloved spouse and my little children were all gather’d about me by this time, to know the cause of my anger. It was, however, a considerable while before the boiling

madness of my rage was sufficiently calmed for me to give them the information they desired; but my heat being somewhat allayed, I at length deigned to answer their interrogatories.

Well my dear (said my sweet partner) I think you are under many obligations to our good neighbour the taylor,² who has rendered you very important services on former occasions; and has certainly consulted your interest in this business; for my part, I highly approve of his conduct, and am well pleased that he has made you these pretty new *small clothes*, (for she does not like to say *breeches*) to hide your nakedness, and defend you from the inclemency of the weather. Sure you know how you have been laughed at, wherever you went, this long time past on account of your old pair, which the neighbours all say, are no better than an Indian’s breech-clout; I protest my own modesty has been often put to the blush by the holes in that plaguy old pair—My lovely tormentor was about to proceed in her condemnation of the old pair, and her praises of the new—Hold! hold! said I, let us reason the matter fairly. In the first place, he has disobeyed my orders, which were only that he should repair the old breeches. But has he not made a new pair much preferable to the old? By no means, I replied, these cursed new breeches would utterly ruin me; they are calculated to enslave my thighs, to confine my waist, and totally to destroy the liberty of my knees, by buttoning tightly around them, they will also render a considerable part of my hose totally useless by buckling below my knees; nor is this all, they will imprison my femoral parts nor suffer them to enjoy fresh air as the old ones do; to be brief, they are *too long* and *too short*, *too strait* and *too wide*, they would *pinch me in all parts*, and *fit me in none*.

Methinks you reason very strangely, my love (replied my solicitous advocate for the new breeches, who was now joined by all the children,) your argument, against being

under the restraint and confinement of clothes, is only calculated for a circle of savages, and can never have any weight among civilized and social beings; your objection to the want of breaches in the new pair, for admission of fresh air, is an excellent argument in their favour, and shews that they are well calculated to skreen you from the inclemency of the seasons; your concluding objections are so inconsistent and contradictory, that they fall to the ground without any comment. Further, continued she, if they have faults you know the taylor says they can be easily amended; would not you do well therefore to put them on, in order to ascertain their faults truly, and I shall have no objection to the necessary alterations being made in them.

No, no, said I, “*don’t think to catch old birds with chaff.*” I’m determined never to draw them on, unless the amendments shall have been first made. Here again I was replied to—How in the name of goodness, said she, can you undertake to have amendments made, before you know that the parts you would wish to have amended are indeed faulty! By such preposterous doings you might spoil their best parts; but would have no tolerable chance of amending even one fault; therefore, I beg you may first try them on, that you may be enabled to discover their faults with precision. Do papa, do try on your new breeches, exclaimed the children with one voice.

Hush! hush! said I once more, I believe the woman and the children are all crazy! Do you think I am fool enough to be gulled thus! If I should put them on, how shall I be able to get them off again? I have no security that they will not cling to my skin, tear away my flesh, break my bones, and boil my marrow, like Hercules’s poisoned shirt, which insidiously destroyed him. And all this must be born, without the liberty of even remonstrating against the tyranny of these accursed “*consolidating*” breeches. I say *consolidating*; for they are evidently calculated to supersede the use of every other garment; or at least to “melt them all down into one” general garment; and the taylor certainly intended this to be the case. Do they not already exhibit a specimen of their despotism, by being framed so as to “lord it over” a considerable part of my stockings and shirt? And is it not more than probable, that they would, very speedily, encroach upon the prerogative of *all* my clothes; nay, that they would even extend their sway to my head, and, by closing my mouth, prevent me from expostulating against my “cruel taskmasters?” With these over my face, for a mask, I should appear no less ridiculous, than a modern

fine lady with her head in a calash, or in a fashionable bonnet.

Here the whole family burst into laughter, and the dispute ended for that time. I have reason to expect another attack on the same score shortly; for my wife is exceedingly fond of the new breeches, and is supported by all my neighbours in her controversies with me on this subject. As I am nearly exhausted, I will be much obliged to any of your correspondents who will be so condescending as to favour me with a fresh supply of arguments, sufficient to repel those of my spouse in our next rencountre.

¹ The Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia from 25 May to 17 September 1787.

² George Washington.

HONESTUS

NEW YORK JOURNAL, 26 APRIL 1788

Mr. Greenleaf, I was led to the following reflections, by accidentally falling in company, some evenings since, with a number of characters (chiefly mechanics) at an ale-house, who were making absurd comments on the constitution proposed by the general convention; which convention was composed of the greatest and most enlightened characters in this country. It must be considered, that government is a very abstruse science, and political disquisition a very arduous task, far beyond the reach of common capacities; and that no men, but those who have had a liberal education, and have time to study, can possibly be competent to such an important matter, as the framing a government for such an extensive country, as is comprehended within the United States. Whenever men of neither abilities or education, presume to meddle, with such matters as are above the reach of their knowledge or abilities, they will find themselves out of their proper sphere.

The blacksmith will find that he had better attend to his hammer and anvil, and hammer out hob-nails, for country hoof, than concern himself with affairs of state, should he be weak enough to suppose that he has abilities equal to such an undertaking; he will find, that there is a material difference, between welding together two pieces of steel or iron, and that of uniting heterogeneous and jarring interests, so as to make them productive of the public good.

The mariner may very well understand, how to take an observation, and navigate his ship; but he cannot possi-

bly be acquainted with every point of the political compass, or so to steer the ship of state, as to avoid the hidden and dangerous rocks, and shelves, that may lay in the way—and whenever he makes the attempt, he will undoubtedly find himself out of his latitude.

The distiller, brewer and baker, may be perfectly well acquainted with the principles of fermentation, and how to regulate and check the same, so as to answer their particular purposes; but they must be entirely ignorant of the laws and means that will be necessary to prevent a dangerous fermentation in the community, or what steps it may be necessary to take, to check such fermentation, when excited.

The farmer may have a sufficiency of knowledge to guide and govern the plough, and team; and understand the best method to thrash his grain—but he must be incompetent to the great purpose of guiding the machinery of the state, or to suggest the best and most effectual method, to thrash the enemies of his country.

The carpenter may be a perfect master of his trade, and understand the rules of architecture; he may frame an edifice, complete in all its parts, and sufficiently strong to secure the proprietor from the attempts of the midnight robber; but he will be totally ignorant, how to frame laws for the security of society, so as to prevent the artful and designing from preying upon the ignorant and innocent.

The miller may be a complete artist in his profession, and know how to regulate every thing appertaining to his mill; he may understand extremely well, how to separate the flour from the bran; but he cannot possibly be master of the address, that will be necessary, to distinguish the wheat from the chaff; in the choice of officers, to fill the different departments in the state.

The clock and watch-maker may know very well how to regulate the wheels, and other movements of a clock or watch; but he will be ignorant of the necessary art, how to regulate the complex machinery of government, so as

to dispose the different wheels, as will prevent their interfering with, and bearing too hard on each other.

The mason may be an excellent workman, and understand how to lay the foundation of an house or a wall properly—but he will be at a loss how to determine what base will be necessary on which such a superstructure as government should be erected.

The sadler may be a proficient in his business, and may know what kind of curb is proper to restrain an unruly and restive horse—but he cannot possibly be a judge what laws or curbs will be proper and necessary to restrain the unruly passions of men, so as to prevent their injuring one another.

The turner may be a very expert artizan, but he cannot possibly be acquainted with all the turns and windings, that are used by bad men to evade the laws, and escape the punishment which they justly deserve.

The cooper may know extremely well, how to stop the flaws and worm holes in a cask, and make it so tight as to hold water, rum, or any other liquor; but he will be much puzzled to stop the flaws, and worm-holes in a law; so as to prevent its operating, either to the injury of individuals, or the government.

The barber may know very well how to make a wig, to suit either the priest, phisician or gentleman of the long-robe [i.e., lawyers], or how to shave his customer with dexterity,—but whenever he attempts to meddle with affairs of state, he will find that his razors have lost their edge, and that he is himself compleatly in the suds.

If this production should operate in such a manner, as to prevent people's neglecting their business and meddling with public matters, beyond their capacities, it will be a sufficient compensation to the writer, who has no other object in view, than that of confining every man within his proper sphere. ■



TEACHING TOOLS

Discussion Questions

- What are the main arguments proposed by “Peter Prejudice” against the Constitution? To what extent are these arguments valid?
- In your opinion, why might the family unit be used as an allegory in “Peter Prejudice”?
- How effective is the breeches metaphor in describing the new Constitution? Is there another analogy that might be better?
- Why might “Honestus” have used specific occupations as a way to convey his view that Federalists were elitist? What does this suggest about the nature of political discourse at this time? Do any of these still hold true in political discourse today?
- What other occupations could have been used by “Honestus”?
- In your opinion, is ridicule an effective form of political discussion?

Lesson Suggestions

These lessons would probably be best if done after a lesson on the Federalist-Antifederalist debates over the Constitution.

I. “Peter Prejudice”: A Reader’s Theater

1. [Click here to link to script. <goo.gl/29uvf2 >](http://goo.gl/29uvf2)
2. Select six students and assign each of them a character. You may want to select students prior to using this lesson. Have them look over the script beforehand to gain familiarity with it.
3. Have the six students present the reader’s theater for the entire class.
4. As students listen to the presentation, you can have them use the chart below to organize their thoughts for the discussion portion of the lesson.

References in Script

The Taylor
 Peter Prejudice
 The Prejudice Family
 The New Breeches
 The Old Breeches

Symbolization

George Washington or the Philadelphia Convention

5. At the conclusion of the reading, you may want to have a discussion using some of the following questions.

- a) In this piece, what do the following items symbolize: The New Breeches, The Old Breeches, Peter Prejudice, Mrs. Prejudice, The Children, The Taylor
- b) What are the arguments proposed by “Peter Prejudice” against accepting the new breeches?
- c) What are the main arguments proposed by the family in favor of accepting the new breeches?
- d) In this piece, who are the Federalists? The Antifederalists?
- e) Would you consider ridicule an appropriate device in the ratification debates? Is it effective in this case?
6. An extension activity could be to have students select another metaphor and have them rewrite the script using the new metaphor.

II. “Honestus”: A Reader’s Theater

1. [Click here to link to script. <goo.gl/5xHQJ6>](http://goo.gl/5xHQJ6)
2. Select 25 students to read a part in the reader’s theater script. If you have smaller classes you may want to assign multiple parts to each student.
3. Have the cast present the reader’s theater for the entire class.
4. As the cast reads the script, you may want to have the class complete the T-chart below.

Occupation	Essential Skill	Why is skill not sufficient to the task?
blacksmith	welding iron and steel	combining the various interests of a nation
Mariner		is harder
distiller		
farmer		
carpenter		
miller		
watch-maker		
mason		
sadler		
turner		
cooper		
barber		

5. After the class has listened to the reading, you may want to lead a discussion using the following questions.

a) Is this item written by a Federalist or an Antifederalist? What would you reference in the script that would lead you to your conclusion? (“Honestus” is Antifederalist attempting to rile opposition to the Constitution among the trades-

men. By creating these “conversations” he hopes that the insults to their intelligence will unite them in their opposition to the Constitution.)

- b) What similarities do you see among the occupations highlighted in the piece?
- c) Why would the author select occupations in the skilled trades to express an opinion about the Constitution?
- d) In your opinion, can “Honestus” be accused of creating conflicts between the various classes of society?

6. An extension activity could be to have students add other occupations to the T-chart. Students could then identify the skill(s) used in that occupation and write as “Honestus” to explain why that skill is insufficient to the task of a political/constitutional debate. Modern occupations that could be used might be doctors, engineers, computer programmers, waste collectors, librarians, plumbers, teachers, etc.

Vocabulary

“Peter Prejudice”

1. *breeches*: knee-high pants, trousers
2. *approbation*: approval
3. *meditated*: intended
4. *insidiously*: treacherously, subtly
5. *deigned*: stooped
6. *interrogatories*: questions
7. *inclemency*: harshness
8. *plaguy*: troublesome
9. *femoral*: thigh
10. *solicitous*: considerate, caring
11. *skreen*: shield
12. *preposterous*: outrageous, ridiculous
13. *gulled*: fooled, deceived
14. *remonstrating*: protesting, complaining
15. *consolidating*: uniting, merging
16. *prerogative*: privilege
17. *expostulating*: expressing strong disagreement
18. *calash*: hood
19. *rencountre*: skirmish, encounter

“Honestus”

1. *mechanics*: skilled tradesmen
2. *abstruse*: hard to understand
3. *disquisition*: formal discussion
4. *arduous*: difficult
5. *liberal education*: a broad education in arts and sciences; not vocational training
6. *heterogeneous*: diverse, varied
7. *latitude*: right position, area of comfort or competence
8. *thrash*: beat
9. *edifice*: structure
10. *chaff*: worthless material
11. *sadler*: saddle maker
12. *restive*: agitated, stubborn
13. *turner*: lathe operator
14. *cooper*: barrel maker