Pinwheel Discussion: Ratification of the Constitution
In Partnership with Teaching American History

Duration: 90 Minutes **| Overview:** Facilitate a "pinwheel discussion" about the ratification of the Constitution with the Bill of Rights.

Steps:

1. Assign perspectives: divide students into groups representing three different perspectives on the ratification of the Constitution with the Bill of Rights: pro-Bill of Rights Federalists, anti-Bill of Rights Federalists, and Antifederalists. Assign one group to be a fourth "provocateur" group that prepares questions to push the conversation forward.
2. Prepare: Perspective teams collaborate to build evidence and craft arguments using both the provided Teaching American History primary sources (and graphic organizer) along with additional research (if you choose). Provocateurs develop their challenging questions.
3. If your class has not done a Pinwheel discussion before, we suggest showing our lilyPD video that explains the process before you begin!
4. Arrange the pinwheel: One representative from each perspective sits in the center as the first speakers. The rest of each team sits behind them for support.
5. Discuss and rotate: Students in the center discuss the issue while their teams listen and prepare. Students cycle through the center seat so everyone participates.

Why this works: The Pinwheel Discussion gives students the time and structure they need to think before they speak. Instead of asking students to jump into a conversation unprepared—or rewarding the loudest voices in the room—this strategy builds collaboration and reflection into the process. In practice, the structure slows conversations down just enough to make space for nuance, helping students engage with complex ideas while practicing the habits of respectful, evidence-based civil discourse.

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