Patriot, Loyalist, or Neutral?

During the American Revolution, the American colonists had to decide to support the War for Independence or remain loyal to the British and King George III. Some Americans could not decide which side to choose and remained neutral during the war. Most American colonists, however, did choose sides. Those who supported independence from Britain were known as Patriots and colonists who opposed independence from Britain were known as Loyalists. Most Patriots supported independence because they felt that recent British laws on the American Colonies violated their rights as British citizens (e.g. taxing without consent, quartering soldiers in citizens’ homes, and denying colonists the right to a trial). Many Patriots live in the New England Colonies, especially Massachusetts. Most Loyalists who opposed independence tended to be wealthy landowners, Anglican clergymen, or people with close business or political ties to Britain. There was a high concentration of Loyalists in New York City and in the Southern Colonies. Many Loyalists agreed that the American colonists had suffered at the hands of the British but the Loyalist hoped that a peaceful reconciliation with British government was possible. During the Revolution taking a Loyalists stance was dangerous, especially in the Southern Colonies. Many Loyalists were brutally attacked and killed. Their property was destroyed or confiscated. Loyalists by thousands fled the American Colonies for their own safety. Some Loyalists moved to England and many more moved to nearby Canada.

Those living in the American colonies had various reasons for choosing their side. The Iroquois Confederation, except the Seneca Tribe, had a working relationship with British officials and was angered by colonists encroaching into their territory, sided with British. Tenant farmers often choose their position on the Revolution based on which side their landowner supported. For example, if a Patriot landowner was cruel and always raised the rent, the tenant would be a Loyalist, but if the Patriot landowner was kind and collected a fair rent, the tenant would be a Patriot. Non-English speaking colonists, especially those living in the frontier, often kept to themselves and viewed the conflict between the British government and the Patriots as family quarrel among the English. They wanted to stay out of it and be left alone. Colonists who were in debt with British creditors often became Patriots since they hoped winning the Revolution could get them out of paying back their debt.

The Loyalists

We know that Patriots fought for independence from Great Britain. They are mostly the people we hear about in school; we don't normally hear about the Loyalist side of the war. A Loyalist is someone who is loyal to King George III. A Tory is a British soldier; that’s what the Patriots called them, at least.

Some Loyalists didn't fight because they were not dissatisfied. They may have been wealthy or simply believed that Great Britain was justified in its actions. Patriots would insult Loyalists and mistrusted them because they did not believe in the Patriots' cause.
Another group of people who did not wish to fight during the American Revolution were *Quakers*, or *Friends*. A Quaker was someone who just wanted peace, or wouldn't fight because it was against their religion. They were often mistakenly referred to as Loyalists because they wouldn't fight.

Neutralists were those who either didn't want to fight, lived too far away to fight, or believed in both Loyalist and Patriot principles. German hired soldiers called Hessians were paid by the British government or Parliament to go and fight on the British side. When they were first sent over to the colonies, there were 25,000 German Hessian troops and 5,000 American Casualties.

After the war, many of the Loyalists and Quakers moved up to Canada and made their own community. The Hessians returned to Germany. The Patriots started their own government, called a Confederation.

**Patriots**

One of the difficulties in studying any time period is the inherent lack of contemporary perspective. In today's America, the choice to separate ourselves from England and form our own country seems like an obvious one. However, for many residents of the colonies, the decision between being a patriot or a loyalist was not at all obvious or easy.

Despite mounting grievances, it is important to note that many Patriots considered themselves subjects of the King until the brink of war, and were often proud of being British. Britain had won the French and Indian War just a decade previously, and colonists were still experiencing national pride as a result of the important victory. In addition, Britain was widely perceived as one of the more progressive governments in the world. Interestingly, the emphasis on individual liberty that colonists so cherished as Britons added fuel to Patriot rhetoric – how could a government that proclaimed individual rights and due process for their mainland citizens ignore the will of their colonists?

**Loyalists, Fence-sitters, and Patriots**

It is impossible to know the exact number of American colonists who favored or opposed independence. For years it was widely believed that one third favored the Revolution, one third opposed it, and one third were undecided. This stems from an estimate made by John Adams in his personal writings in 1815. Historians have since concluded that Adams was referring to American attitudes toward the French Revolution, not ours. The current thought is that about 20 percent of the colonists were Loyalists — those whose remained loyal to England and King George. Another small group in terms of percentage were the dedicated Patriots, for whom there was no alternative but independence.

Often overlooked are the fence-sitters who made up the largest group. With so many Americans undecided, the war became in great measure a battle to win popular support. If the patriots could succeed in selling their ideas of revolution to the public, then popular support might follow and the British would be doomed.
Even with military victory, it would have been impossible for the Crown to regain the allegiance of the people. Revolution would merely flare up at a later date.

The British understood the need to attract American popular support for the parent country, as well. Some colonists who were not persuaded by the political struggle joined the British for personal gain or military glory. Some joined out of sheer loyalty to the Crown — they still believed themselves loyal British citizens. There were also many American farmers willing to sell their goods to the British for profit.

In the long run, however, the patriots were much more successful attracting support. American patriots won the war of propaganda. Committees of Correspondence persuaded many fence-sitters to join the patriot cause. Writings such as Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" stirred newfound American nationalism.

**Excerpt of “Common Sense”**

*The Sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. ’Tis not the affair of a City, a County, a Province, or a Kingdom; but of a Continent — of at least one-eighth part of the habitable Globe. ’Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed-time of Continental union, faith and honour. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound would enlarge with the tree, and posterity read in it full grown characters.*

— Thomas Paine, "Common Sense" (1776)

Patriots subjected Loyalists to public humiliation and violence. Many Loyalists found their property vandalized, looted, and burned. The patriots controlled public discourse. Woe to the citizen who publicly proclaimed sympathy to Britain.

Families were sometimes divided over the revolution. Benjamin Franklin's son, William, a Loyalist governor of New Jersey, supported the British effort during the war.

**What Happened to the Loyalists?**

In the end, many Loyalists simply left America. About 80,000 of them fled to Canada or Britain during or just after the war. Because Loyalists were often wealthy, educated, older, and Anglican, the American social fabric was altered by their departure. American history brands them as traitors. But most were just trying to maintain the lifestyles to which they had become accustomed. After all, history is always written by the winners.