

The Great Compromise

Jenna Seidl

Senior Division

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Thesis

After operating for several years under the Articles of Confederation, leaders from the 13 original states of the United States agreed that the Articles needed to be changed to create a stronger national government. State delegates met at the Constitutional Convention to develop a new governmental structure and disagreed about how each state should be represented in the federal government. The conflict among the 13 original states brought forth a compromise recorded in the United States Constitution that led to a more unified nation.¹

Articles of Confederation

The Articles of Confederation was the first constitution of the United States, but it created many problems for the young nation and did not last. After experiencing monarchical rule in Britain, many Americans feared an overpowering central government. Therefore, a strong national government capable of governing the entire nation was not immediately created by the authors of the Articles of Confederation. The Articles of Confederation took several years to pass, and six drafts were written during the Revolutionary War. Congress finally approved the final version on March 1, 1781. The final draft as passed allowed each individual state to remain an independent, sovereign legislative entity.² The federal government, which consisted only of a Congress with one appointed representative per state, would only intervene in appeals if absolutely necessary. With 13 individual states operating independently, the nation was not united by a common government. However, this lack of central government proved to be

¹ Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. "What Was the Great Compromise?" *What Was the Great Compromise?*, World Atlas, 25 Apr. 2017, www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-was-the-great-compromise.html. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

² "A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875." *The Library of Congress*, 25 Apr. 2017, memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=lsl&fileName=001/lsl001.db&recNum=127. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018.

ineffective. Representatives in Congress had little ability to express the opinions of their citizens to the government. The federal government could not draft soldiers or regulate trade. The Articles also could not solve the growing issues of slavery or high national debt. Without reform, the democracy would fall apart and become a tyranny, similar to the government American citizens had recently escaped in Great Britain.³ Conflict was ensuing.

Constitutional Convention of 1787

The country's weak national government was ineffective. Financial struggles due to a high national debt led to fear and political movements. Conflict between the states was common, and with no national leadership, the young nation was on the verge of civil war. In response, in 1786, Alexander Hamilton called for a convention in which delegates from each state would meet to discuss the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. Although delegates from only five states attended, those delegates made a plan to hold another larger convention in 1787 wherein a structure for a more effective national government could be discussed. This convention, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 ("Convention"), convened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at the Pennsylvania State House on May 25, 1787. It lasted until September 17, 1787.⁴ The Convention was a secret meeting. No outsiders, including reporters or curious citizens, were allowed inside to "avoid outside pressures."⁵ It was attended by the nation's most influential and powerful leaders including James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, George

³ "Articles of Confederation." *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2018, www.history.com/topics/articles-of-confederation. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, editor. "Constitutional Convention." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Constitutional-Convention#ref194993. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

⁵ "Constitution." *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2018, www.history.com/topics/constitution. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

Washington, and Alexander Hamilton. All 13 states were invited to send delegates, and all did except Rhode Island. Rhode Island did not want a strong central government to hinder its business and, therefore, chose not to participate. Of the 74 men chosen to attend, only 55 elected to participate in the Convention.⁶ Conflict was already a factor when the Convention was convened.

Virginia Plan

After establishing the rules of order, the delegates began to discuss how to amend the Articles of Confederation to best create a strong national government and unify the nation. On May 29, 1787, Virginia delegates James Madison and Edmund Randolph presented the first proposal known as the Virginia Plan, or the Large State Plan. The Virginia Plan contained 15 resolutions and was primarily written in favor of Virginia, the most populous state at the time, and the other highly populated and wealthy states. It proposed that the national government should consist of three branches to prevent any abuse of power. The three branches would include an executive, legislative, and judicial branch.⁷ The Virginia Plan also proposed a change to the current system of representation in Congress. According to James Madison's Convention notes, on Thursday, May 31, 1787, Resolution Three declared "that the National Legislature ought to consist of two branches."⁸ Specifically, the two legislative branches would consist of a lower house and an upper house. The plan resolved "that the members of the first branch of the

⁶ Lloyd, Gordon. "Day-by-Day Summary of the Convention." *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, Ashbrook Center, 2018, teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

⁷ Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. "What Was the Virginia Plan." *World Atlas*, 19 Sept. 2017, www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-was-the-virginia-plan.html. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.

⁸ Madison, James. "Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787." *Teaching American History*, Ashbrook Center, 2018, teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/debates/0531-2/. Accessed 23 Feb. 2018.

national Legislature ought to be elected by the People of the several States for the term of Three years.” The other branch would be “composed of older leaders elected by the state legislatures for seven year terms.”⁹ Under the Virginia Plan, the amount of representation each state would receive in Congress would be based on state population and wealth. Under this system called proportional representation, a larger state population resulted in a greater number of representatives in the national government. This plan was strongly supported by the larger states, whose citizens wanted a powerful voice in government.

New Jersey Plan

Conflict further emerged as delegates from the less populated states felt that states with a smaller population would not be fairly represented under the Virginia Plan. In response, an alternative called the New Jersey Plan, or the Small State Plan, was proposed by delegates from the small states of New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Delaware. It included 11 resolutions that were written by New Jersey delegate William Patterson. Patterson presented the New Jersey Plan to the Convention delegates on June 15, 1787. This plan provided for a one-chambered Congress wherein each state would have the same number of representatives. Through this system, each state would receive one vote in Congress, preventing more populous states from having a stronger influence in government. The New Jersey Plan also provided for checks and balances in power through the creation of legislative, executive, and judicial branches. In describing the role of the executive branch, the fourth resolution of the New Jersey Plan resolved

⁹“Transcript of the Virginia Plan (1787).” *Our Documents*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=7&page=transcript. Accessed 18 Feb. 2018.

that “that the U. States in Congs. be authorized to elect a federal Executive...”¹⁰ who would appoint other officials and direct the military. Delegates from the small states were strongly opposed to the Virginia Plan because their states would have a very insignificant effect on government. They wished for an equal distribution of power and money among the states.¹¹ With two very different points of view of what constitutes fair representation, conflict grew.

Conflict Intensifies

Fair representation in Congress was widely debated. Delegates from all states wished to avoid tyrannical rule like they had experienced in Britain and agreed to do this by allowing the people to elect representatives from their states to vote for them in Congress. However, the Convention delegates could not agree on how many votes would be allotted to each state. In addition to the conflict over whether votes should be proportional to population or whether all states should have an equal number of votes, thus equal influence, the question of how to count the population also created divisions. Some northern states briefly advocated freeing the slaves. After this proposal failed, these states then argued that only free individuals should be included in the count that determined representation. In response, many southern states threatened to leave the Convention because they wished to uphold slavery and include the slaves in the count. After much debate, a compromise was put forth wherein three fifths of the slave population would be included in this count.¹² Yet, the Three-Fifths Compromise was not enough to resolve the greater

¹⁰ Madison, James. "Collection: Constitutional Convention Records." *James Madison's Notes of the Constitutional Convention*, ConSource, 2018, consource.org/library/?q=constitutional+convention. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

¹¹ "The New Jersey Plan: Explanation and Supporters." *Study.com*, 2018, study.com/academy/lesson/the-new-jersey-plan-explanation-supporters-quiz.html. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.

¹² "Constitution." *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2018, www.history.com/topics/constitution. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

conflict of how many votes each state should have in the federal government. Delegates at the Convention were nowhere near agreement on the best form of national government.

Great Compromise of 1787

The highly populated states held firm to the Virginia Plan. Less populated states demanded the New Jersey Plan. Neither side would budge. Finally, both sides agreed to negotiate to see if a compromise could be reached. As a result, Connecticut delegates Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth proposed a solution that combined ideas from both the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan.¹³ This proposal came to be known as the Great Compromise. It is also sometimes referred to as the Connecticut Compromise in honor of its authors. Like the Virginia Plan, the Great Compromise called for a two-chambered Congress that was comprised of a lower house and an upper house. Representation in the lower house, now known as the House of Representatives, would be based on population. However, to facilitate agreement and compromise, representation in the upper house, known as the Senate, would be equal among all of the states. Under this system, each state would be equally represented by two Senators in the upper house regardless of population.¹⁴ In addition, because of routine conflicts among the states that each operated as a sovereign legislative entity, another priority of the Great Compromise was to increase the power of Congress. A growing nation such as the United States could not function well and keep authority over its people without a strong national government. The

¹³ Alchin, Linda. "The Great Compromise." *The Great Compromise*, SiteSeen, June 2015, www.government-and-constitution.org/us-constitution/great-compromise.htm. Accessed 29 Jan. 2018.

¹⁴ Cohen, Bryan. "Effects of the Great Compromise." *Classroom*, Leaf Group, 2018, classroom.synonym.com/effects-great-compromise-6585727.html. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018

Convention delegates agreed to the system of government as proposed in the Great Compromise and began to draft the terms.

A New Constitution

Delegates at the Convention ultimately agreed that amending the Articles of Confederation would not be sufficient. Rather, the leaders decided that a new constitution was needed to best create a strong national government that could resolve conflicts among the states and unify the nation. In developing this new constitution, the delegates agreed that separation of power was crucial. Therefore, in addition to adopting the two-chambered Congress put forth in the Great Compromise which provided for a House of Representatives and Senate, the new United States Constitution also created an executive and judicial branch.¹⁵ The executive branch, comprised of an elected federal executive, would enforce the laws. The judicial branch was established to interpret the laws.¹⁶ As both the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan proposed a governmental system with three balanced branches, this new system of checks and balances was agreed upon and adopted at the Convention and became the cornerstone of the new United States Constitution.

Lasting Effects of the Great Compromise

The United States Constitution became law on June 21, 1788 when New Jersey became the ninth and final state to ratify its terms. By February 2, 1790, the government created by the

¹⁵ Madison, James, et al. "U.S. Constitution." *U.S. Constitution*, U.S. Constitution.net, 16 Aug. 2010, www.usconstitution.net/xconst_A1Sec2.html. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

¹⁶ Madison, James, et al. "U.S. Constitution." *U.S. Constitution*, U.S. Constitution.net, 16 Aug. 2010, www.usconstitution.net/xconst_A1Sec2.html. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

United States Constitution as a result of the Great Compromise was fully functional when the United States Supreme Court held its first session.¹⁷ Due to the compromise that was reached at the Convention, the United States was now unified and operating under a stronger national government that could better resolve potential conflicts among the states. The nation was no longer on the verge of a civil war.

The Great Compromise of 1787 exemplifies how a willingness to compromise can produce long-lasting positive results. Over two hundred years later, the United States continues to operate under the system that was created at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Balanced representation in the legislature and a three-branch system of government ensuring proper checks and balances is still the cornerstone of our United States democracy. This democratic form of government works because no branch has too much power. Were it not for the compromise that was agreed upon at the Constitutional Convention, the nation would have remained divided without a stable national government, and the United States Constitution that outlines a government by the people and for the people would never have been developed. The Great Compromise of 1787 shows that compromise is the key to success.

¹⁷ "Constitution." *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2018, www.history.com/topics/constitution. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

"A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875." *The Library of Congress*, 25 Apr. 2017, memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=001/llsl001.db&recNum=127. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018.

This source, the Articles of Confederation, was written by the original authors of the Articles. They include some of the nation's top leaders at the time including John Adams, Samuel Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. This source helped me understand what the Articles of Confederation were and helped me put them into context.

Madison, James. "Collection: Constitutional Convention Records." *James Madison's Notes of the Constitutional Convention*, ConSource, 2018, consource.org/library/?q=constitutional+convention. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

The author of these documents is James Madison. He was one of the founding fathers of the United States and helped form the government. This website collected Madison's notes from the Constitutional Convention. He recorded what happened each day. This helped me better understand the purpose of the Convention and what happened there.

Madison, James. "Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787." *Teaching American History*, Ashbrook Center, 2018, teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/debates/0531-2/. Accessed 23 Feb. 2018.

The author of this source is James Madison. He attended the Convention and provided input. This source helped me understand the resolutions of the Great Compromise. It also expressed the actions of the delegates at the Constitutional Convention.

Madison, James, et al. "U.S. Constitution." *U.S. Constitution*, U.S. Constitution.net, 16 Aug. 2010, www.usconstitution.net/xconst_A1Sec2.html. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

The Constitution was written by delegates at the Constitutional Convention. The men who wrote this document were present at the Convention and helped reach the compromise by putting the terms in writing. Usconstitution.net made the text of the Constitution available to me, which was very helpful. This website helped me understand how the government worked after the changes from the Great Compromise.

“Transcript of the Virginia Plan (1787).” *Our Documents*,
www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=7&page=transcript.
 Accessed 18 Feb. 2018.

The author is James Madison. He attended the Constitutional Convention and was one of America’s founding fathers. He was the fourth president of the United States. This source is a transcript of the Virginia Plan. It helped me understand exactly what the plan proposed so I could understand how it led to conflict.

Secondary Sources

Alchin, Linda. “The Great Compromise.” *The Great Compromise*, SiteSeen, June 2015,
www.government-and-constitution.org/us-constitution/great-compromise.htm.
 Accessed 29 Jan. 2018.

The author of this source is Linda Alchin. She is the Director of Education at SiteSeen Ltd. and has written several history books. This website provided a summary, facts, and significance of the Great Compromise of 1787. It taught me about the two plans that eventually led to the Great Compromise.

“Articles of Confederation.” *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2018,
www.history.com/topics/articles-of-confederation. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.

This source was written by the History.com staff, who are historians knowledgeable in their topics. This source explained the Articles of Confederation, which was the previous constitution that the Constitutional Convention and Great Compromise of 1787 changed. This source helped me understand the government prior to the Constitution.

Cohen, Bryan. “Effects of the Great Compromise.” *Classroom*, Leaf Group, 2018,
classroom.synonym.com/effects-great-compromise-6585727.html.
 Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

The author of this source is Bryan Cohen. He graduated from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has written several books. This source explained the impact of the Great Compromise of 1787 on the Senate and House of Representatives, the signing of the Constitution, and the formation of the branches of government. This source helped me understand the Great Compromise of 1787 on a broader scale.

“Constitution.” *History*, A&E Television Networks, 2018, www.history.com/topics/constitution. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

The authors of this source are the staff of History.com. They are historians who are knowledgeable in their topics. This website provided information on the origin of the Constitution and of the nation’s first constitution. It also gave information on the Constitutional Convention, controversial parts of the Constitution, and the ratification of the Constitution. This source helped provide an understanding of the Constitution.

"The Constitutional Compromise: The Great Compromise." *Study.com*, 2018, study.com/academy/lesson/the-constitutional-convention-the-great-compromise.html. Accessed 25 Feb.2018.

The authors of this source are all high school, Advanced Placement, or college Social Studies instructors who are well educated in their respective fields of study. This source gave me information about the Great Compromise, who was involved, and how it originated.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, editor. “Constitutional Convention.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Constitutional-Convention#ref194993. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

The authors of this source are the editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. They are all experts in their topics. This source provided information on the Constitutional Convention where the Great Compromise was developed. It helped me understand the background behind the Convention and led me to other sources.

Lloyd, Gordon. “Day-by-Day Summary of the Convention.” *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, Ashbrook Center, 2018, teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

The author is Professor Gordon Lloyd. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from McGill University, Master of Arts and PhD in government from Claremont Graduate School. He has written several books, articles, and websites. He is currently serving on the National Advisory Council for the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Presidential Learning Center through the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation. I learned about what was discussed at the Constitutional Convention and the significance of the convention. This website also included primary sources including the Constitution, letters from founding fathers, and accounts of the Constitutional Convention.

“The New Jersey Plan: Explanation and Supporters.” *Study.com*, 2018, [study.com/academy/lesson/the-new-jersey-plan-explanation-supporters-quiz.html](https://www.study.com/academy/lesson/the-new-jersey-plan-explanation-supporters-quiz.html). Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.

The authors of this source are all high school, college, or Advanced Placement social studies instructors. They have been educated and are knowledgeable in this field. This source helped me understand the New Jersey Plan and what it proposed. It helped me learn how these states wanted to distribute power.

Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. “What Was the Great Compromise?” *What Was the Great Compromise?*, World Atlas, 25 Apr. 2017, www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-was-the-great-compromise.html. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

The author of this source is Benjamin Elisha Sawe. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Statistics and an MBA specializing in strategic management. This source taught the background and results of the Great Compromise and explained what caused it to be written. This source helped me understand the effects of the Great Compromise.

Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. “What Was the Virginia Plan.” *World Atlas*, 19 Sept. 2017, www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-was-the-virginia-plan.html. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018. The author of this source is Benjamin Elisha Sawe. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics and Statistics and an MBA specializing in strategic management. This source helped me better understand the Virginia Plan. It also provided information on the New Jersey Plan and the Great Compromise of 1787.