

STATION 1: Reasons for a New Constitution

The Articles of Confederation, America's first system of government, created a weak national government with limited powers. Under the Articles, Congress couldn't collect taxes, regulate interstate trade, or enforce laws, leaving the country struggling to manage its finances and defend itself. States acted almost like independent countries, often refusing to cooperate with one another. This lack of unity made it difficult to address national issues, such as foreign threats or economic instability.

One of the most glaring examples of the Articles' weaknesses was **Shays' Rebellion** in 1786. Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary War veteran, led a group of farmers in western Massachusetts who were angry over high taxes, mounting debts, and the threat of losing their farms. The federal government, under the Articles, had no power to raise an army or provide financial assistance to Massachusetts to put down the rebellion. The state struggled to respond on its own, and the rebellion highlighted how powerless the national government was in maintaining order. This scared many leaders and pushed them to call for a stronger federal government.

In addition to internal unrest, the Articles failed to create a strong presence internationally. Without the ability to regulate trade or enforce treaties, the U.S. struggled to negotiate with foreign powers like Britain and Spain. British troops remained stationed in forts along the Great Lakes, violating the Treaty of Paris, but the U.S. lacked the military and diplomatic strength to force them out. Meanwhile, Spain controlled the Mississippi River, a crucial trade route, and restricted American access, causing further economic hardship.

These issues made it clear to many leaders that the Articles of Confederation were not working. By 1787, it was clear that only a new framework—a stronger national government with the power to tax, regulate trade, and maintain order—could address the problems facing the young nation. This realization led to the Constitutional Convention, where the decision was made to abandon the Articles and create the U.S. Constitution.

STATION 2: The People and the Process

The Constitutional Convention took place in Philadelphia from May to September 1787. There were 55 delegates from 12 of the 13 states (Rhode Island chose not to attend). The delegates were a mix of experienced politicians, military leaders, and legal experts. Key participants included **George Washington**, who was elected president of the convention, **James Madison**, often called the "**Father of the Constitution**" for his crucial role in drafting and promoting the document, and **Benjamin Franklin**, whose wisdom and diplomacy helped ease tensions between delegates.

Alexander Hamilton, another important figure, strongly advocated for a powerful central government. **Gouverneur Morris** was responsible for much of the actual wording of the Constitution. Many of the delegates were wealthy landowners or businessmen, and nearly all were well-educated for the time. Their backgrounds influenced their views on the role of government and the need for a stronger federal system.

The meetings were held in secret, with closed doors and shuttered windows, to encourage open debate without public pressure. Philadelphia's hot and humid summer weather made the long sessions uncomfortable. Despite the challenging conditions, the delegates worked intensely, often meeting six days a week for hours at a time, debating and compromising on fundamental issues that would shape the nation.

The delegates disagreed on many points, but they shared a common goal of creating a government that could protect liberty, order, and prevent tyranny. The Constitution was a result of debates, negotiations, and compromises that showed the different views and needs of states.

STATION 3: Debate Between Small and Large States

One of the biggest debates at the Constitutional Convention was over how states should be represented in Congress. Large states, like Virginia, wanted representation based on population, meaning states with more people would have more influence. This idea was proposed by Edmund Randolph, who introduced the **Virginia Plan**, largely written by James Madison. The Virginia Plan called for a strong national government with a **bicameral** (two-house) legislature, where representation in both houses would be based on population. Large states supported this because it would give them more power in Congress.

In contrast, small states feared they would be dominated by the larger states under this system. William Paterson of New Jersey introduced the **New Jersey Plan** as an alternative. The New Jersey Plan favored small states by proposing a **unicameral** (one-house) legislature where each state would have equal representation, regardless of size or population. Small states argued that equal representation was necessary to protect their interests and prevent them from being overshadowed by more populous states.

The debate was settled by the **Great Compromise** (also called the Connecticut Compromise), proposed by Roger Sherman of Connecticut. It created a bicameral Congress: in the Senate, each state would have two representatives, ensuring equal representation, while in the House of Representatives, representation would be based on population. This compromise balanced the needs of both large and small states and became one of the key foundations of the new Constitution.

STATION 4: Representation in Congress

One of the toughest challenges at the Constitutional Convention was determining how states would be represented in Congress. The **Great Compromise**, proposed by Roger Sherman of Connecticut, established a bicameral (two-house) legislature. In the **Senate**, each state would have equal representation, with two senators per state. In the **House of Representatives**, representation would be based on population, giving larger states more representatives. This system balanced the interests of both small and large states, ensuring that neither would dominate the government.

However, the issue of how to count enslaved people for representation created further division between Northern and Southern states. Southern states wanted enslaved people to be fully counted to increase their population numbers and gain more seats in the House. Northern states, where slavery was less prevalent, argued that enslaved people shouldn't be counted for representation since they had no political rights.

The delegates reached the **Three-Fifths Compromise**, proposed by James Wilson and Charles Pinckney. Under this agreement, three out of every five enslaved individuals would be counted for both representation and taxation. This gave Southern states greater political power in the House of Representatives, despite the fact that enslaved people were denied basic rights and freedoms.

The Three-Fifths Compromise was a deeply flawed and morally troubling solution, as it reinforced the institution of slavery by giving Southern states greater influence in the federal government without recognizing the humanity of the enslaved. Though it allowed the framers to move forward with the Constitution, it exposed the stark injustice of slavery and set the stage for further conflict over the issue in the future.

STATION 5: How to Choose a President

At the Constitutional Convention, there was a lot of disagreement about how to choose the president, with each proposal having clear advantages and disadvantages.

One proposal was to have **Congress elect the president**. The main **advantage** of this idea was that Congress members were seen as knowledgeable and capable of making an informed decision. This would ensure that a qualified and experienced person would be chosen. However, the **disadvantage** was that it could give Congress too much control over the executive branch, weakening the separation of powers. It also risked making the president too dependent on Congress, potentially limiting their independence.

Another proposal was to have a **direct popular vote**, where citizens would elect the president. The **advantage** here was that it would ensure the president was directly accountable to the people and would reflect the public's will. It promoted democratic values and made the government more responsive to citizens. However, the **disadvantage** was that many delegates worried that ordinary citizens might not have enough information or be easily influenced by charismatic but unqualified leaders, which could result in the election of a demagogue (a political leader who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument).

A third proposal was for **state legislatures to select the president**. The **advantage** of this approach was that it would preserve state authority, allowing states to have a strong role in national decisions and helping to prevent the federal government from becoming too powerful. However, the **disadvantage** was that it could give too much control to the states, potentially leading to conflicts between state and national interests. It could also make the president less accountable to the people.

To resolve these conflicting ideas, the delegates created the **Electoral College** as a compromise. In this system, states would choose electors, who would then vote for the president. The number of electors a state gets is equal to its total number of senators and representatives in Congress, which gives smaller states a voice while still giving larger states more influence. The **advantage** of the Electoral College is that it balances the interests of both large and small states, ensuring that the president must have support from across the country, not just from the most populated areas. It also prevents the potential chaos of a direct election, addressing the fear that citizens might be swayed by unqualified candidates. However, a **disadvantage** of the Electoral College is that it doesn't always align with the popular vote. A candidate can win the presidency without winning the most votes nationally, which has led to ongoing debates about whether the system truly represents the will of the people.