

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: After declaring independence in 1776, Americans realized they needed one government to make decisions. A constitution, or written plan of government, was completed in November, 1777. The "Articles of Confederation" called for a "league of friendship" between the 13 states and stressed the independence of each state. It took effect in 1781.

A Congress was set up with each state having one vote. Nine votes were needed to pass a law. All states had to agree to amend, or change, any part of the Articles. The Congress had the power to make war or peace, to coin or borrow money, to settle arguments between states, to admit new states, to establish a post office and to set standards of weights and measures.

The Articles created a weak central, or national, government. The people did not want Congress to have too much power. So Congress did not have the power to tax people directly or to control trade. Congress had no real power to carry out or to enforce its own laws.

When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation became clearer. Congress could do nothing about problems with foreign nations. Great Britain would not remove its soldiers from the Northwest wilderness area. They would not allow American ships to sail the Great Lakes or to enter British ports. Spain began encouraging Indian tribes in Florida to attack Americans in Georgia. Spain also captured New Orleans. This port city on the Mississippi River was within American boundaries.

Congress could also do nothing about problems at home. Many states raised taxes. Some farmers couldn't pay, so their farms were taken away and sold by state courts. A Massachusetts farmer named Daniel Shays led a rebellion of 200 men to the state capitol. The militia put down the rioting, but these problems convinced many people that a stronger national government was needed.

THE PRESENT SITUATION: It is May, 1787. A meeting has begun at the state house in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. Delegates are present from every state except Rhode Island. Forty-five representatives have shown up. George Washington has been elected Chairman of the Convention. The meetings are held in secret, but James Madison is taking careful notes.

The Convention has decided to write a new Constitution that will give more power to the national government. The members disagree on some important issues. These differences of opinion must be settled through compromise.

THE PROBLEM: The delegates must reach a series of compromises on several important issues. If compromises cannot be reached, the national government will remain weak and the future of the United States may be threatened.

YOUR ROLE: You are a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. You have decided to help another delegate suggest compromises on the issues dividing the Convention. Your ideas must not favor either side in each dispute.

YOUR JOB:

- (1) The class will be divided into pairs. Each team will complete the CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION WORKSHEET on pages 14B-14C.
- (2) For each issue, read the two viewpoints. Decide on the best possible compromise. Write your suggestion on the blanks provided. Also write at least one reason you believe the compromise will work.
- (3) Be prepared to present your compromises and arguments in about 20 minutes.
- (4) A list of suggested compromises will be written on the chalkboard for each issue. The class will then pretend that they are members of the Senate. They will vote for the best compromise on each of the four issues.
- (5) The class will then compare their compromises with the actual agreements that were reached as part of the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION WORKSHEET

ISSUE #1: CONGRESS

LARGE STATES' VIEWPOINT

The number of representatives in Congress for each state should be based on the population of the state. The states with the most people should have the most votes in Congress.

SMALL STATES' VIEWPOINT

The number of representatives in Congress for each state should be equal. We suggest 2 representatives from each state. Otherwise, the small states will be outvoted by the large states.

OUR SUGGESTED COMPROMISE: _____

OUR REASONS: _____

ISSUE #2: SLAVERY

SOUTHERN VIEWPOINT

Slaves should be counted in determining the population of a state. The South will then increase its number of representatives in Congress.

NORTHERN VIEWPOINT

Slaves should not be counted in determining the population of a state. The North has no slaves. The North won't gain any more representatives in Congress.

OUR SUGGESTED COMPROMISE: _____

OUR REASONS: _____

ISSUE #3: ELECTIONS

STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT VIEWPOINT

The representatives in Congress should be elected by the citizens of the United States. The people have a right to elect their own leaders.

STATES' RIGHTS VIEWPOINT

The representatives should be elected by each state legislature and not by the people themselves. The people do not know enough about national affairs to choose the right leaders.

OUR SUGGESTED COMPROMISE: _____

OUR REASONS: _____

ISSUE #4: TRADE

STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT VIEWPOINT

The Congress should have complete control over trade between interstate and foreign trade. Congress should be able to pass any necessary trade laws. A simple majority vote should be required to pass trade laws.

STATES' RIGHTS VIEWPOINT

The Congress should have limited control over interstate and foreign trade. Congress should not be able to tax either imported goods (those brought into the country) or exported goods (those sent to other countries). They should also not be able to stop the trading of slaves. A two-thirds vote should be required to pass trade laws.

OUR SUGGESTED COMPROMISE: _____

OUR REASONS: _____

