



The Constitution

Summary

- In the early years of the U.S., the central government could not rule effectively, as most power was left in the hands of individual states.
- Delegates from the states met in Philadelphia to try and come up with a plan to create a stronger central government.
- After weeks of debate, the Constitution was agreed upon.
- Nine states ratified the Constitution, and it became law.
- Ten amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, were later added to the Constitution.

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to discuss the Constitutional Convention and why it was held.
- Students will be able to summarize some of the different opinions of what government should look like.
- Students will be able to describe the ratification process, which made the Constitution law.

Words to Know

Delegates – representatives at a conference

Convened – gathered together

Declined – turned down an offer

Convention – meeting

Levy taxes – collect tax according to the law

Unanimously – with everyone agreeing

Veto – cancel

Debated – argued (usually with two sides, “for” and “against”)

Wary – cautious, suspicious

Proponents – people who want a certain thing to happen

Ratify – approve a law to make it applicable

Teacher’s Notes

- A.** Check In Question: How does the following sentence help the author introduce the Constitution?
The Articles left most power in the hands of the individual states, which meant that the central government was weak and ineffective.
The author explains why the previous central government was weak because the states had too much power. This explains the need for a new system of government based on the Constitution.
- B.** Check In Question: If the Convention had not compromised with the Connecticut Plan, what do you think would have happened?
[Sample Answer:] If the delegates to the Convention had been unable to reach a compromise, the country could have split up, or the states could have continued using the Articles of Confederation.
- C.** Check In Question: Do you think the states were right to ratify the Constitution?
[Sample Answer:] I think the states were right to ratify the Constitution because it gave the country a stronger central government to unite the states and keep them in check.
- D.** The teacher can open a class discussion about the pros and cons of the Constitution by asking the students the following questions: Had you lived back then, how do you think you would have voted? Do you think the Constitution has helped the country?

The Constitution



The Constitution begins with the now famous words
"We the people."

Why it Matters

- The Constitution is the basis for the way America is governed.
- People around the world look to the Constitution as a template for building a successful democratic government.



Can you imagine a country without rules? How do you think that would affect crime rates? Imagine if there were no punishments for stealing or speeding on the roads. What do you think the U.S. would look like if everyone just did as they pleased? Although rules might appear limiting, without them the world would be a scary place because everyone would do whatever they wanted! There would be no punishments to deter people from doing dangerous or harmful things. The laws that make America a pleasant place to live in are based on the Constitution.

The Constitutional Convention

On May 25, 1787, 55 **delegates**¹ from 12 states **convened**² in Philadelphia. (There were only 13 states at the time, and one of them, Rhode Island, **declined**³ to participate.)

- 1 **Delegates** – representatives at a conference
- 2 **Convened** – gathered together
- 3 **Declined** – turned down an offer

This gathering came to be known as the Constitutional **Convention**,⁴ and it was held in secret, to prevent the delegates from being pressured by anyone. Their plan was to try and come up with a replacement for the Articles of Confederation. The Articles of Confederation were written after the revolution, once the British were defeated, establishing the new government of the United States. They left most power in the hands of the individual states, which meant that the central government was weak and ineffective. It could neither **levy taxes**⁵ nor solve quarrels between states. This caused great problems across the country, and the new rulers concluded that a stronger central government was needed. **A**



A painting depicting what the Constitutional Convention might have looked like.

George Washington was **unanimously**⁶ voted in as the leader of the Constitutional Convention. On May 29, Edmond Randolph from Virginia presented the “Virginia Plan.” He and the other delegates from Virginia—most notably James Madison—had been working on this plan before the convention. Their plan called for three central branches of government so that none of the branches would have too much power. Additionally, the central government would have the power to **veto**⁷ individual state decisions. Over the next few days, the delegates hotly **debated**⁸ the Virginia Plan. Some people were **wary**⁹ of it, as they were worried that a strong central government would make unfair rules like those they had experienced under British rule.

They were afraid that their individual state interests would not be considered. Others worried that such a government would be unfair to smaller states, because the plan called for each state to have representatives in the government according to the number of its citizens.

4 **Convention** – meeting

5 **Levy taxes** – collect tax according to the law

6 **Unanimously** – with everyone agreeing

7 **Veto** – cancel

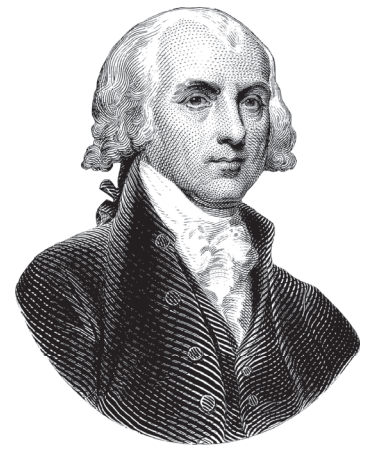
8 **Debated** – argued (usually with two sides, “for” and “against”)

9 **Wary** – cautious, suspicious

They were afraid that they would not get a fair hearing if they had fewer citizens.

A counterplan—the New Jersey Plan—was presented, but after some debate, it was rejected. It looked like the convention would fail to achieve anything. After weeks of debate, the states still could not come to an agreement on what a potential central government should look like.

Eventually, a compromise known as the Connecticut Plan was agreed upon. On July 12, Oliver Ellsworth proposed that a state's representation in the lower house of Congress should be according to the number of free men living there, plus three-fifths of the slave population, while each state would have two representatives in the Senate. Even after this compromise was accepted, a number of issues still had to be agreed upon. It was only on September 8 that the members of the convention were ready to have the Constitution formally written up. On September 15, the delegates voted in favor of the Constitution. **B**



*A sketch of James Madison, one of the main **proponents**¹⁰ of the Constitution.*

Ratifying the Constitution

Although the Constitution had now been written up, it still had to be ratified by the nation. The people had to vote in favor of the Constitution before it could become law. Each state was to hold a ratifying convention where the Constitution would be voted on. If at least nine out of the thirteen states ratified the Constitution, it would become law.

The nation was divided between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. The Federalists supported the Constitution. They tended to be wealthy citizens from smaller states. The Anti-Federalists were against the Constitution.



Independence Hall, where the Constitution was signed.

10 **Proponents** – people who want a certain thing to happen

They were often from larger states and felt they had little to gain and more to lose from the Constitution.

Although there was a lot of fighting and very strong opinions on both sides, eventually, on July 2, 1788, word was received that New Hampshire had become the ninth state to ratify the Constitution.

The Bill of Rights

One of the main reasons why people did not want to **ratify**¹¹ the Constitution was because they worried that it did not protect individual rights. They feared that a new central government would be able to make whatever rules and punishments it wanted. In fact, the state of Massachusetts made its ratification dependent on a Bill of Rights being added to the Constitution. When James Madison was voted to the first Congress as representative of Virginia, he worked very hard to get Congress to approve a number of amendments to the Constitution. By December 15, 1791, three-quarters of the states had ratified the ten amendments which are known today as the Bill of Rights. The ten amendments are rules protecting freedom for individual citizens. **C D**

11 **Ratify** – approve a law to make it applicable

1. Circle the choice that has the same meaning as the following sentences from the lesson:

The Federalists supported the Constitution. They tended to be wealthy citizens from smaller states.

- ☒ A. Most Federalists lived in smaller states and were wealthy people who supported the Constitution.
- B. Anti-Federalists supported the Constitution because they thought it would protect their wealth.
- C. Wealthy Federalists lived in smaller states and did not support the Constitution.
- D. Citizens from larger states supported the Constitution.

2. Circle the vocabulary word that best fits the sentence.

I wanted the chocolate ice cream, but he vetoed ratified my decision because he didn't like chocolate.

3. Place a check mark next to each statement that correctly describes the Constitutional Convention.

- ☐ The convention met after the Civil War.
- ☐ Delegates met in order to replace the Constitutional Convention.
- ☒ George Washington was chosen to lead the convention.
- ☐ The delegates came to an agreement quickly and easily after convening.
- ☐ Oliver Ellsworth proposed the Articles of Confederation as a compromise.
- ☐ After the delegates agreed on the Constitution, it immediately became United States law.
- ☒ The delegates rejected the New Jersey Plan.



Questions

4. Number the following events in the order in which they took place.

- 4 The delegates voted in favor of the new Constitution.
- 5 New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the Constitution.
- 3 The delegates rejected the New Jersey Plan.
- 2 Edmond Randolph presented the Virginia Plan.
- 1 Fifty-five delegates from 12 states convened in Philadelphia.

5. Which of the following statements best summarizes the lesson?

- A. James Madison was chosen to lead the Constitutional Convention.
- B. The Constitution is a system of government similar to the Articles of Confederacy.
- ☒ C. The basis for a more effective system of government, the Constitution, was voted on at the Constitutional Convention and ratified by the states.
- D. The Bill of Rights was voted on by delegates to the Constitutional Convention.

6. Consider the author's statement that some people did not want to ratify the Constitution because they were worried that it didn't protect individual rights. What evidence does the author offer to support this statement?

The author offers evidence for this statement by sharing that the state of

Massachusetts only agreed to ratify the Constitution if a Bill of Rights was added to it.

7. What were some of the causes for concern among delegates at the Constitutional Convention?

Delegates at the Constitutional Convention were concerned about the central government being too strong and becoming like the monarchy they had just rebelled against. Delegates from smaller states were concerned their states wouldn't be represented fairly.

8. What do you think about the multi-step process of creating and ratifying the Constitution? Was it the best method of creating a new form of government?

[Sample Answer:] I think the process was effective. The government system took a long time to finalize, but discussing, compromising, voting, and ratifying ensured that most citizens got a say in the new system of government.