A Great Compromise:

The Sherman Plan Saves the Constitutional Convention of 1787

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1787, delegates from twelve of the thirteen United States met in a federal Convention to “devise such further provisions as shall appear to them necessary to render the Constitution of the federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union.”\(^1\) Simply stated, there was an urgent need to fix the political system under the existing Articles of Confederation.

However, differences over the structure of the legislative branch quickly led to conflict. Some, particularly delegates from larger-population states, envisioned a strong National legislature with representatives elected by the people (“proportional representation”). Others from smaller states disagreed, fearing a power grab by the larger states, and supported equal representation for each state. This conflict threatened to destroy the Convention.

After large-state efforts to force proportional representation in both legislative houses, small-state delegates stopped cooperating altogether. The two sides became deadlocked. Roger Sherman’s Great Compromise of proportional representation in the lower house and equal representation in the upper broke the stalemate. The delegates resumed the Convention and finished writing a new Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation and corresponding system of government. Ratified two years later, this Constitution has successfully weathered another 230 years of tension, conflict and even turmoil in American history and politics. The Constitution of 1787 continues to serve as the basis of the United States Government today.\(^2\)

A CRISIS OF GOVERNMENT

‘leave them to themselves, and their government will soon dissolve.’
– George Washington, November 1786

George Washington feared that other nations did not respect the newly formed Union. The new government could not meet its debt payments, obtain requisitions from the states, or easily put down insurrections. In particular, Shays’s Rebellion alarmed Washington’s friend Henry Knox so much that he updated Washington almost daily. Why couldn’t the government fulfill these basic duties?

The problem was the Articles of Confederation. America’s “first constitution” resembled a peace treaty among the thirteen states, amounting to “nothing more than a league of friendship, a form of alliance in which each state retains (much of) its own sovereignty.” As a result, each state acted in its own, rather than the national, interest. Historian Jack Rakove summarized the problem: (1) some states were not able to comply, (2) other states chose not to comply for selfish reasons, and (3) the remaining states wished to comply but didn’t trust the others.

Over 220 years before Rakove, James Madison organized similar thoughts in a detailed memorandum that summarized his comprehensive study of ancient and modern confederations. Madison found that confederated systems of government were weak and ultimately doomed to fail. The United States needed a strong national government or it would suffer the same fate as

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5 Shays’s Rebellion correspondence between Henry Knox and George Washington, 1786 – 1787, Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 29, 2017, accessed November 26, 2017; Richard Beeman, Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution (New York: Random House, 2010), 16-18; Catherine Drinker Bowen, Miracle at Philadelphia: the Story of the Constitutional Convention, May to September 1787 (1966; repr., Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), 10; Maier, Ratification, 15-17. Daniel Shays led a large and popular uprising in Massachusetts from late fall 1786 into early 1787 to protest the state’s oppressive taxation of cash-poor farmers. While the Rebellion was a real threat to the peace, the actual number of insurgents probably fell short of estimates. Nevertheless, Washington’s alarm at this news underscored a genuine concern that the existing Union government was weak and ineffective.

6 Beeman, Plain, Honest Men, 8. Parenthetical added.

7 “Why Does America Have the Constitution of 1787?” 00:38:40-39:40.

its confederation predecessors. Madison enumerated these weaknesses: the states didn’t obey requisition demands or national treaties; trespassed on each others’ rights of commerce and credit; differed on national matters but required unanimous agreement to enact any law; lacked a national military to address violence; and permitted a chaotic legal environment by neglecting to implement uniform codes of law. The Articles themselves weren’t even ratified. Finally, voting power rested with the states, not with the people, so citizens had no direct influence in their government.

Madison didn’t want to abolish state governments altogether. Instead, he was “searching for some middle ground, which may at once support a due supremacy of the national authority, and not exclude the local authorities wherever they can be subordinately useful.”

Washington and Alexander Hamilton were also searching for a remedy. Together, the three supported a convention to address these political shortcomings and make the nation’s government more effective. With approval from the Confederation Congress, the Constitutional Convention opened in May 1787, in Philadelphia.

**A NATIONAL PLAN**

“I would propose as the ground-work that a change would be made in the principle of representation.” – James Madison, April 1787

While the Virginia delegation, including Madison and Washington, arrived on time to the Convention, most others were late and, as a consequence, missed an impromptu but crucial
strategy meeting. While awaiting a quorum, both the Virginia and Pennsylvania delegations caucused together and created an organized plan for a National government; this plan, known as the Virginia Plan, would eventually influence many portions of the new Constitution.

Madison was the primary author of the Virginia Plan. He believed that the single-house and equal-state structure of the Confederation Congress were core weaknesses; proportional representation among two houses would allow the citizenry a direct vote, encourage sufficient deliberation, and eliminate state control over national matters. Therefore, this Plan included very radical terms for a new National Legislature: two houses rather than one; proportional, rather than equal-state, representation for each; direct election by the people to at least one house; and the right to nullify state laws contrary to the national interest. Madison calculated that a majority of the delegates would agree to the Virginia Plan and counted on the persuasive effects of a reasonable argument for the cause of strong and effective government.

However, Madison and the caucus also knew that the thirteen states varied significantly by population (see Appendix Three). The larger states of Virginia, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts wanted proportional suffrage in order to have more influence in national affairs; furthermore, they could vote as a large-state block during the Convention to secure this goal. The southern states, growing rapidly, might join in. Small states such as Connecticut, Delaware,
New Hampshire and New Jersey were simply outnumbered in Convention votes as well as population. Maryland was not “small” but its vote wouldn’t matter either way. It is no wonder that Madison believed “the lesser States must in every event yield to the predominant will.”  

Having considered every possible argument against a “Nationalist” agenda, he expected to prevail. However, Madison misjudged how the small states would react.

**THE GREAT COMPROMISE**

“We are now at a full stop . . . nobody meant that we should break up without doing something.” – Roger Sherman, July 1787

The Convention started off reasonably well with discussions of procedural rules and the Virginia Plan. However, this “coolness of temper” began to heat up quickly once the discussion turned to representation.

Despite Nationalist assurances to the contrary, the small states knew they would be disadvantaged in a purely proportional legislative system. While desiring a strong national government, they nevertheless feared domination by their larger neighbors. Furthermore, Madison and other Nationalists stubbornly refused to compromise on proportional representation, despite numerous proposals by small-state “Federalists” and others.

This stubbornness led to a Federalist backlash, which started when William Paterson of New Jersey unexpectedly announced another plan, “purely federal, and contradistinguished from the (Virginia Plan).” This New Jersey Plan was the work of Federalists from Connecticut, New

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19 “Nationalists” supported proportional representation in both houses. Like Madison, the most earnest were from the large states.
20 Madison, Notes, 232.
21 Ibid., 99. The Convention officially opened on May 25, 1787, once a quorum of at least nine states had arrived. Washington was elected to preside. See Appendix Four.
22 Ibid., 84, 98, 99-103, 161, 211. At this point in time, the “Federalists” were delegates wishing for equal representation in at least one of the legislative houses. This is how they termed themselves, and should not be confused with the authors of *The Federalist Papers* written during the ratification process, especially since two of those authors – Madison and Hamilton – were actually promoting a “Nationalist” government during the Convention.
23 Ibid., 117. Parenthetical added.
Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and even New York.\textsuperscript{24} It veered completely from the Virginia Plan by expanding the power of the Confederation Congress, retaining a single-house legislature, and continuing equal representation by state.\textsuperscript{25}

The majority quickly rejected the New Jersey Plan as contrary to the purpose of the Convention; however, it managed to unify the Federalist cause. “You see the consequences of pushing things too far,” said a concerned John Dickinson of Delaware to Madison. “Some of the members from the small States wish for two branches in the general Legislature, and are friends to a good National Government; \textit{but we would sooner submit to a foreign power than submit to be deprived of an equality of suffrage, in both branches of the legislature, and thereby be thrown under the domination of the large States}.”\textsuperscript{26} Gunning Bedford of Delaware was even more blunt in addressing the Nationalists: “\textit{I do not, gentlemen, trust you. If you possess the power, the abuse of it could not be checked; and what then would prevent you from exercising it to our destruction?}”\textsuperscript{27}

The disagreement continued for several more weeks, with neither side acquiescing. Nationalists, still a vocal majority, would not alter the Virginia Plan; Federalists, while outnumbered, seemed likely to walk out if a formal vote favored proportional suffrage. The remaining delegates became increasingly aware that the Convention could fall apart. Slowly, they began shifting their prior support away from the Nationalist side, perhaps in order to encourage an eventual compromise. On July 2\textsuperscript{nd}, a “compromise” vote for equal suffrage in the second legislative house did, indeed, happen. It resulted in a five-to-five tie; the eleventh state,

\textsuperscript{24} This caucus most likely excluded the one New York delegate who was a Nationalist: Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton had just delivered a six-hours-long “plan for national government” that was so extreme – it called for the abolition of state governments, for example – that no one at the Convention even commented on it (Madison, \textit{Notes}, 129-39; Beeman, \textit{Plain, Honest Men}, 166-70). Hamilton left the Convention before the end of June but returned in time to sign the Constitution (see Appendix Two).

\textsuperscript{25} Farrand, \textit{Records}, 1:242-43. See also Appendix Five for a comparison to the Virginia Plan and the eventual Constitution.

\textsuperscript{26} Madison, \textit{Notes}, 118n. Italics added.

\textsuperscript{27} Farrand, \textit{Records}, 1:500. Italics in the original.
Georgia, was divided. The delegates were deadlocked. It was at this critical moment that the Great Compromise could save the Convention.

Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman had been proposing a reasonable solution all along, even before Paterson’s New Jersey Plan sparked the discord. Perhaps he foresaw the conflict, felt inspired by Dickinson’s astronomical proposal to leave the states “to move freely in their proper orbits,” or figured that with two houses, there was room for more than one method of suffrage. Whatever the motivation, the idea was very simple: allow proportional representation in the first legislative branch, and equal representation in the second. While this proposal had support from his fellow Connecticuters, it wasn’t until the July 4th weekend, in an eleven-member Grand Committee formed to work out a solution to the deadlock, that it appeared to gain overall support.

While Sherman hadn’t originally been elected to the Grand Committee, he was a substitute for another Connecticut delegate conveniently “kept away by indisposition.” There is only slight evidence of his participation; however, a motion by Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Franklin included the Sherman Plan, along with a Nationalist concession allowing the first house control over all monetary bills. As the Committee quickly approved this motion, it was likely that Sherman either convinced Franklin, or Franklin himself saw this as the only workable compromise.

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28 Madison, Notes, 219, 231-32. The twelfth state, New Hampshire, did not arrive until late July (see Appendix Two). A June 30th proposal to contact the delegation was presumed to be an attempt to add another vote against proportional suffrage.
29 Ibid., 98, 161. Sherman’s first recorded proposal was on June 11th. Unlike the Nationalists, he had little confidence in a direct system of democracy, believing that the citizenry was easily manipulated (Beeman, Plain Honest Men, 129; Bowen, Miracle at Philadelphia, 44). While preferring a confederated form of government, Sherman was able to put aside personal concerns to offer a system that included both democratic and state representation.
30 Ibid., 84.
31 Ibid., 211, 231. It also helped that the Committee, consisting of one member from each state, did not include a single Nationalist. Many preferred moderation or compromise, a few were sympathetic to Federalist concerns, and one or two were strongly anti-Nationalist (Madison, Notes, 232-37; Beeman, Plain, Honest Men, 187-89). Madison, in particular, was not elected to the Committee.
32 Ibid., 238n.
33 Farrand, Records, 1:523. See also Appendix Five for a comparison of the Great Compromise to the Virginia and New Jersey Plans.
On July 5th, the Committee proposed the Sherman Plan to the full Convention, and it was passed by one vote on July 16th, after several days of additional debate. Although the Nationalists caucused the next morning to discuss further steps in light of this – to them – disappointing outcome, the “time was wasted in vague conversation on the subject, without any specific proposition or agreement.” Having no organized response to the Great Compromise, the Nationalists dropped all further opposition and agreed to resume the Convention and continue the work of creating a new government.

A NEW GOVERNMENT

“Thus the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable.” — George Washington, September 1787

Two months later, the delegates signed off on a new Constitution that incorporated both the strong national principles advocated by Madison and the Great Compromise proposed by Sherman (see Appendix Five). Not all were entirely happy with the outcome. However, despite personal misgivings or concerns, all signers supported this new, and very different, system of government.

It was a significant departure from the old system. Political power was now divided among three branches, not one, with checks and balances for creating, executing, and upholding national laws. The new bicameral Congress with its unique combination of proportional and equal representation, rather than the states, determined the taxes and regulated commerce.

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34 Madison, Notes, 297. At this time, the Convention also took up the matter of how to count slaves for purposes of apportionment. That debate, with its own significant conflicts and compromises, is beyond the scope of this paper.
35 Ibid., 301.
37 Beeman, Plain, Honest Men, ch. 19; Maier, Ratification, 35-39.
38 The signers are noted in Appendix Two. Three delegates refused to sign: Edmund Randolph and George Mason of Virginia, and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts. Each had his own reasons, including concerns about the power vested in the new national government over the states, the refusal at this time to include a Bill of Rights for the people to protect them against government over-reach, and compromises and provisions encouraging the institution of slavery. See Maier, Ratification, 39-45.
Amendments were passed by a three-fourths majority of states, not unanimous approval. The Constitution – not some vague agreement among states – was the supreme Law of the Land. The new government assumed all Confederation debt. Ratification was now required, via a two-thirds state majority. Finally, it now promised a Republican Form of Government and protection to each state from foreign invasion or domestic insurrections. 39

As Washington explained, the overhaul had been necessary so that general government – the body with the “power of making war, peace and treaties, that of levying money and regulating commerce, and the correspondent executive and judicial authorities” – could work better. 40 A more powerful general government did require the surrender of some individual and state autonomy. However, these sacrifices were necessary to preserve and strengthen the Union. “In all our deliberations on this subject,” wrote Washington, “we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence.” 41 The new Constitution had, hopefully, achieved this purpose.

230 YEARS LATER

“But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting Sun.” – Benjamin Franklin, September 1787 42

Franklin’s metaphorical reference to the design on the back of Washington’s “president’s chair” underscored his hope that the Union was now saved (see Appendix Six). His optimism proved accurate as the new government was ratified in 1789, and unanimously in 1790.

Some historians dislike the Great Compromise. The ambiguous relationship between state and central government sovereignty has led to tension, conflict, open defiance, and even a

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39 Farrand, Records, 2:651-64; Maier, Ratification, 34.
40 Farrand, 2:666. From Washington’s letter to the Confederation Congress.
41 Ibid., 667. From Washington’s letter. Italics added.
42 Ibid., 648.
Civil War. The Compromise weakened the “democratic character” of the United States, allowing small states a disproportionate degree of power in the Senate and Electoral College. This small-state effect has been found to impact nearly every presidential election since 1828.

However, despite rancor, misgivings and even a major concession away from this “democratic character”, the framers still managed to produce a very successful Constitutional Government. Despite internal and external threats or the occasional national crisis, this government has remained in place for 230 years – an unusually long time compared to many other nations. In the entire history of the United States, the citizenry changed the existing government only when they realized it didn’t work; the Great Compromise is notable because it launched a radical new system that worked then and continues to work today.

Furthermore, the Compromise may well have facilitated a much stronger national system than was otherwise possible, given the diverse viewpoints and interests at the Convention. Despite their Federalist concerns, the small states signed on to most of Madison’s ideas in the end. Max Edling has noted that reforming the national debt led to an unprecedented economic and military expansion; as a result, the United States has become not only a Land of Opportunity for hundreds of millions, but also a major world power. This is just one example of how decisive national action, urgently needed at the time, had lasting benefits. The Nationalists required the cooperation of the Federalists to take this kind of action, and the Great Compromise made that cooperation possible.

43 Beeman, Plain, Honest Men, 224.
44 Ibid., 474n53.
45 Todd Estes, “The Connecticut Effect: the Great Compromise of 1787 and the History of Small State Impact on Electoral College Outcomes,” Historian 73, no. 2 (June 2011): 255-83, accessed January 31, 2018, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.2011.00291.x. As specified in the Constitution, the number of electors for each state is equal to the total number of representatives (first house) and senators (second house). As the number of senators is equal by state, small states have a bigger “share” of electoral votes relative to their size than do large states. The “Connecticut Effect”, named after Sherman and the Connecticut delegation, is a measure of a small state’s relative power in terms of influencing a presidential election.
In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison came to promote the new system as a composition of National and Federal, a “compound republican” government to suit the political realities of the time, and a compromise to prevent a “more objectionable” form of government from being proposed. Madison may have been referring to the conflicts and compromises of his time; however, these words also apply today. The “compound republic” works for the American citizenry and has been copied, in various ways, by citizens of other nations wishing to prevent – or even replace – more objectionable forms of government. Perhaps Madison would now recognize that this compromise turned out to be a Great Compromise.

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48 Ibid., 302-03, no. 62.
APPENDIX ONE


The United States, 1787 – 1788.
# APPENDIX TWO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONNECTICUT</th>
<th>NEW YORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Ellsworth *</td>
<td>Alex. Hamilton * (Jun 29 – Aug 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Samuel Johnson *</td>
<td>Lohn Lansing, Jr. (Jul 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger Sherman *</td>
<td>Robert Yates (Jul 10)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DELAWARE</th>
<th>NORTH CAROLINA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard Bassett *</td>
<td>William Blount *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Broom *</td>
<td>Alexander Martin (Aug)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Dickinson **</td>
<td>Richard Dobbs Spaight *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Read *</td>
<td>Hugh Williamson *</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>GEORGIA</th>
<th>PENNSYLVANIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abraham Baldwin *</td>
<td>George Clymer *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Few *</td>
<td>Thomas Fitzsimmons *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Houston (Jul 26)</td>
<td>Benjamin Franklin *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Pierce (Jul 1)</td>
<td>Jared Ingersoll *</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MARYLAND</th>
<th>RHODE ISLAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Carroll * (?-Jul 7)</td>
<td>Sent No Delegates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luther Martin (Sep 4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James McHenry * (Jun 1-Aug 6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Mercer (Aug 17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer *</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MASSACHUSETTS</th>
<th>SOUTH CAROLINA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elbridge Gerry</td>
<td>Pierce Butler *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathaniel Gorham *</td>
<td>Charles Pinckney *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rufus King *</td>
<td>Charles Cotesworth Pinckney *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb Strong (Aug 27)</td>
<td>John Rutledge *</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEW HAMPSHIRE</th>
<th>VIRGINIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas Gilman * (- Jul 23)</td>
<td>John Blair *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Langdon* (- Jul 23)</td>
<td>James Madison *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>George Mason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James McClurg (Aug 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edmund Randolph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>George Washington *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>George Wythe (Jun 4)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEW JERSEY</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Brearley *</td>
<td>* Signed the Constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Dayton *</td>
<td>** Instructed George Read to sign the Constitution in his absence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Churchill Houston (Jun 6)</td>
<td>Date ranges represent periods of absence from Convention. Single date indicates that delegate left the Convention and did not return.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Livingston *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Paterson * (Jul 23-)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This is a full list of delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention of 1787.
APPENDIX THREE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>59,096</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>68,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>82,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>141,855</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>184,139</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>237,946</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>249,073</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>319,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>425,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>429,442</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>434,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>475,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>821,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3,929,214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

State populations in the United States, according to the 1790 Census.

The Federal Convention was in session throughout the very hot summer of 1787. Unlike the above depiction, and despite the heat, the delegates probably did not open the windows or curtains. A rule of secrecy had been imposed for the proceedings in order to allow all delegates to speak freely, change their minds as necessary, and remain protected from spectators or outside viewpoints that might have manipulated the debate.
APPENDIX FIVE

THE VIRGINIA PLAN

- Articles of Confederation are replaced
- Three separate branches of Government (executive, legislative, judiciary)
- Two houses of Congress
- Lower house directly elected by the people; upper house nominated by state legislatures and elected by lower house
- Representation by state population - both houses; larger states have more votes
- National laws can nullify state laws

THE NEW JERSEY PLAN

- Articles of Confederation are revised
- One branch of Government (legislative oversees executive and judiciary)
- One house of Congress
- House continues to be chosen by the state legislatures; no change from the Articles of Confederation
- Representation equally by state; no voting advantage due to size
- States work together to determine national laws

THE GREAT COMPROMISE

- Two houses of Congress
- Lower house directly elected by the people; upper house chosen by the state legislatures
- Representation by state population - lower house; representation equally by state – upper house
- All revenue bills originate in lower house

THE CONSTITUTION

- Articles of Confederation are replaced
- Three separate branches of Government (executive, legislative, judiciary)
- Two houses of Congress establish national laws, regulate commerce and determine taxes
- Lower house (House of Representatives) directly elected by the people; upper house (Senate) chosen by the state legislatures
- Representation by state population for House of Representatives; Equal representation for Senate - two Senators for each state
- All revenue bills originate in House of Representatives
- Constitution is the supreme Law of the Land so may supersede state law; All states guaranteed protection from foreign invasion or domestic uprisings

Farrand, Records, 1:20-21, 242-43, 2:651-64.

The Constitution evolved from the Virginia Plan and the Great Compromise.
George Washington used this chair while presiding over the Convention.

Whilst the last members were signing (the Constitution) Doctr. Franklin looking towards the Presidents Chair, at the back of which a rising sun happened to be painted, observed to a few members near him, that Painters had found it difficult to distinguish in their art a rising from a setting sun. I have said he, often and often in the course of the Session, and the vicissitudes of my hopes and fears as to its issue, looked at that behind the President without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting: But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting Sun.49

49 Madison, Notes, 659. Parenthetical added.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This is a digital version of Farrand’s three-volume set of Constitutional Convention records. Professor Farrand was the first scholar to compile and publish these records in entirety, so he was an authoritative source of information concerning the Convention. It includes, among other information, detailed notes by James Madison and the other delegates, the Virginia and New Jersey Plans, and the Constitution. It is a primary source as these records were taken from the original sources attending the Convention.


This is an image of the chair used by George Washington while he was presiding over the Constitutional Convention. It includes a decoration of a rising sun, and Benjamin Franklin referred to it while signing the Constitution. The quote is in Appendix Six. This is a primary source because it is an image of the original chair, not a replica.


This is a letter from Alexander Hamilton, one of the Constitutional Convention’s Nationalists, to James Duane, seven years before the Convention. In this letter Hamilton laid out the imperfections of the Confederation government, particularly the one-house legislature. It was helpful in showing that the problems with the Confederation had been going on for at least several years. It is a primary source because Hamilton himself wrote the letter.

This book contains writings by Hamilton and Madison during the ratification of the Constitution. It was useful to know what they thought of the Great Compromise once the Constitution was completed and signed. This is a primary source because two of the authors were at the Convention.


This book contains writings from some of the Anti-Federalists who protested the Constitution, including Article I, which includes the Great Compromise. It was useful because some of this criticism was similar to Paterson’s at the Constitutional Convention. This is a primary source because the authors lived at the time of the writing and ratification of the Constitution and also participated in the ratification debates.


This is a letter from James Madison to George Washington in which Madison shared his thoughts about a new national government and proportional representation, as well as how these ideas might be received at the Convention. It was helpful because it showed me Madison’s thinking on the subject and even how over-confident he might have been about convincing other delegates to agree. It is a primary source because Madison himself wrote the letter.


This book of Madison’s notes is one of the most detailed sets available (other than the records edited by Max Farrand mentioned earlier). It was Madison’s day-by-day account of the debates, discussions and conflicts and compromises of the Convention. It was interesting to observe the change in delegate votes for the issue of proportional representation and to watch Madison and the Nationalists lose power on that issue. It is a primary source because Madison himself kept these notes.
This letter was written after the Constitutional Convention had finished and after Madison had some time to reflect on the compromises that occurred. It included information on the Sherman Compromise and other compromises, and summarized some of the struggles. Madison also wrote in an old-fashioned way and used words that no one really uses the same way nowadays, so this letter was very good training for reading through his notes on the Convention itself. This is a primary source because James Madison himself wrote it.

In this memorandum, Madison listed all the problems that he had with the United States as a confederation. He also provided an explanation of why he saw each problem as a real problem. It helped me to understand why Madison debated so strongly for a national government during the Constitutional Convention. This is a primary source because Madison himself wrote it; however, it also includes a secondary source in the form of an editorial note from the National Archives.


“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 23 October 1786.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 17 December 1786.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 21 December 1786.”

“From George Washington to Henry Knox, 26 December 1786.”
“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 14 January 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 21 January 1787.”


“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 29 January 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 30 January 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 31 January 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 1 February 1787.”

“From George Washington to Henry Knox, 3 February 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 8 February 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 12 February 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 15 February 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 22 February 1787.”


“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 27 February 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 5 March 1787.”

“From George Washington to Henry Knox, 8 March 1787.”

“To George Washington from Henry Knox, 19 March 1787.”

This series of letters describes Shays’s Rebellion from the perspective of Henry Knox, who was a good friend of George Washington. Knox was alarmed because the uprising seemed very serious and continued for several months. Shays’s Rebellion was one of the
primary reasons that Washington and others determined that the existing Articles of Confederation were too weak and needed to be changed. This is a primary source because it is correspondence between two individuals who were alive at the time of the event.


In this letter from George Washington to Madison, Washington shared his concerns about the image of the Union in the eyes of other nations. At the time, the Union was unable to pay its foreign debt. This letter helped me understand the money problems of the early United States from the perspective of George Washington. It is a primary source because Washington himself wrote the letter.

Secondary Sources


This history book contains detailed information about the Federal Convention. It helped me understand the Convention a little bit better. Similar to Bowen’s Miracle at Philadelphia cited below, this source helped me understand the dynamics of the Constitutional Convention and how different delegates could debate and even switch sides. It is a secondary source because it was written long after the Convention took place and Professor Beeman lived in recent times.


This book is another historical account of the Constitutional Convention. It was really useful to know all about the debates and the people and problems they had. This source was one of the first detailed historical accounts of the Federal Convention. It is secondary because Bowen wrote about the Convention nearly 200 years after it happened.

This study from 2011 measures the amount of advantage that small states have in the Electoral College as a result of equal-state representation in the Senate. It was helpful to read what other historians were thinking about the Great Compromise. It is a secondary source because the study was done recently.


This website, authored and compiled by Prof. Linder, contains information about why the Constitutional Convention happened in the first place. It was useful because it provided helpful background. It is a secondary source because it was created recently.


This book is a detailed description of the ratification process for the Constitution. The prologue and first couple of chapters are around the time of the Constitutional Convention and gave me some understanding of events leading up to, and immediately following, the Convention. It is a secondary source because Maier wrote the book only a few years ago.


This is a painting of the Convention delegates at the Pennsylvania Statehouse. It is a secondary source as the artist did not attend the Convention but painted a representation many years later.


This report contains the results of the first census done in the United States, in 1790. I used this information in Appendix Three to show how population differences among the thirteen states led to conflict over representation. This source contains the oldest data I could find from the time of the Convention. Even though it includes original information, the report is secondary because it was prepared over 200 years later.

This website includes an overview of the Constitutional Convention. It was useful because it discussed what the convention was like and provided background for the Great Compromise. It is a secondary source because it was compiled long after the Convention happened.


This is a YouTube video of a conference at Dartmouth College about the formation of the Constitution. The discussants included several well-known historians. It contained many interesting economic and political perspectives about why the Constitutional Convention even happened. It helped me understand the many problems with the Articles of Confederation and how selfish a lot of the states were about not respecting the Articles. It also led me to start reading some of Madison’s and Washington’s letters at the National Archives website. This is a secondary source because the conference was recent.