Constitutional Convention: Debates and Compromise

The creation of the U.S. Constitution was a product of fierce debate and delicate compromise among some of the most distinguished men of post–Revolutionary War America. This reading will briefly offer a background of the Constitutional Convention and the debates that led to compromise. Ultimately, the constitutional framers drafted a document that created one of the most revered and enduring constitutional democracies in political history.

In the hot spring and summer of 1787, fifty-five delegates assembled in Philadelphia, where they utilized their experiences and their comprehensive understanding of political philosophy and world history to create a new government. General George Washington represented Virginia and agreed to serve as the convention’s presiding officer. Other notable delegates included Alexander Hamilton from New York and Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania.

The most pressing problem faced by the constitutional framers was to find a way of overcoming the deep economic recession that had hit the U.S. Britain had successfully isolated the U.S. from continental Europe. This meant that it was difficult to market American products abroad. The isolation was devastating to the American economy, especially in the South, where the export of agricultural products to Europe had become an important part of the economy.

Additionally, the decline in international trade was accompanied by falling interstate trade. A number of states prohibited importation of goods from other states. The decline in both international and interstate trade left manufacturers and farmers with a diminished market for their goods. As a result, financial institutions were going under because manufacturers and farmers were not able to make payments on their loans. It was Shay’s Rebellion in 1787 in Massachusetts that finally helped to convince the states to convene a Constitutional Convention. Reforming the Articles of Confederation, so that a national government could deal with many of the problems that led to the miserable economy and impending chaos, was very much on the minds of the framers as they came together.

It is important to note that against the backdrop of these desperate economic circumstances, the framers of the Constitution readily agreed on several features that the new governing document must embody.

- That the national government should be empowered to confront the problems that the framers viewed as unsolvable under the Articles of Confederation.
- That the national government had to be given the right to both raise a navy, in order to defend itself from external threats, and to devise means to support a national economy.
- That the national government should have the (limited) power to impose duties and tariffs and to raise taxes so that it could have its own source of funding.

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However, the delegates in Philadelphia faced a dilemma in that they had two goals that seemed incompatible. On the one hand, they sought to reduce popular influence on government. Incidents like Shay’s Rebellion led to a widespread desire among political and economic elites to insulate the government from what many perceived as irrational shifts in public opinion. On the other hand, many of the delegates were key participants in the American Revolution, and as such had inherited a deep skepticism of a powerful national government. Widespread agreement at the convention on the principle of republicanism was part of their solution to the dilemma. The United States would be a republic – a government in which representatives act on behalf of those who elect them. This, the delegates believed, ensured that they would not be replacing the king of England with a potential tyrant of their own.

Other debates and dilemmas arose as well, and the creation of a new government was not easily accomplished. One dispute, in particular, almost ended the convention without a constitutional document. In particular, delegates from the larger and more populous states strongly disagreed with those from the small states about representation in the national legislature. The larger states favored the Virginia Plan. Devised by James Madison, the plan decreed that population would determine the number of representatives a state could send to the legislature. This, many delegates from the smaller states argued, would greatly disadvantage their representation in the national legislature. Thus, delegates from smaller states supported the New Jersey Plan, which proposed that all states would have an equal number of representatives. Delegates from the larger states argued that this would give an unfair advantage to smaller states, which shouldn’t have an equal number of representatives given their relatively smaller populations. It was the Connecticut delegates who suggested a compromise that settled the problem. Their plan provided for equal representation in the Senate, along with representation in proportion to population in the House of Representatives, which is the system that survives today. This proposal became known as the Great Compromise, and prevented the delegates from going home in 1787 at an impasse in their efforts to create the constitution.

Additionally, compromises also settled conflicts over slavery. Delegates from the Northern states wanted to empower the national legislature (Congress) to forbid the foreign slave trade and eventually to abolish slavery. Most Southern delegates argued against giving Congress such powers. A compromise was reached determining that Congress would not be allowed to regulate the foreign slave trade until 1808. A related compromise involved the issue of how to count slaves in determining the number of congressmen a state could have. Slaves, at the time, were not considered citizens, and so the convention agreed that only three-fifths of them could be counted. Finally, the delegates agreed that each state should hold a special convention to discuss and vote on ratification of the Constitution. They also decided that as soon as nine states had approved the Constitution, the governing document would take effect and they could begin to organize the new government. Eleven states ratified the constitution and it went into effect in March of 1789.

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