

FRAMING THE NATION

The United States Constitution

Compromise, Debate & Ratification

1787 – 1791

A 30-Minute Presentation

Presentation Roadmap • 30 Minutes

1

Background & Crisis

Articles of Confederation fail — a convention is called

2

The Framers

Who were the 55 delegates at Philadelphia?

3

Key Debates

Representation, slavery, executive power

4

The Great Compromises

Connecticut Compromise, Three-Fifths, Commerce Clause

5

Ratification Battle

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

6

The Bill of Rights

Ten amendments that sealed the deal

7

Legacy

Why it endures 235+ years later

Part 1

Background & Crisis

Why the Articles of Confederation Failed

~3 min

The Articles of Confederation — A Framework That Couldn't Govern

Critical Weaknesses

- Congress could NOT tax — relied on voluntary state contributions
- No national executive or judiciary to enforce laws
- Amendments required unanimous consent of all 13 states
- No power to regulate interstate or foreign commerce
- States printed own currencies — economic chaos
- National debt from Revolution went unpaid

Crisis Flashpoints

1783

Newburgh Conspiracy — army officers nearly mutiny over unpaid wages

1786

Shays' Rebellion — Massachusetts farmers take up arms; Congress helpless

1786

Annapolis Convention — only 5 states attend; calls for broader reform

1787

Constitutional Convention convened — May 25, Philadelphia

Part 2

The Framers

55 Delegates, 4 Months, 1 Document

~3 min

Key Framers at the Constitutional Convention — Philadelphia, 1787

George Washington

Virginia

Presiding Officer. His presence gave the convention legitimacy. Rarely spoke but his support was decisive.

James Madison

Virginia

"Father of the Constitution." Drove the agenda via the Virginia Plan. Crucially, he conceived the Constitution as a living document — one that must adapt through amendments as society evolves, not frozen at 1787.

Benjamin Franklin

Pennsylvania

At 81, the eldest delegate. Offered wisdom and unity. His closing speech secured reluctant signatures.

Alexander Hamilton

New York

Passionately nationalist. His state's delegation left early, but he signed alone and championed ratification.

Roger Sherman

Connecticut

Proposed the Connecticut Compromise — the breakthrough that saved the convention from collapse.

Gouverneur Morris

Pennsylvania

The pen behind the Constitution's final prose, including the celebrated Preamble's "We the People."

Part 3

The Great Debates

Representation, Slavery & Executive Power

~5 min

Debate 1: How Should States Be Represented?

Virginia Plan

Proposed by: James Madison / Edmund Randolph

- Bicameral legislature (two chambers)
- Both chambers proportional to state population
- National legislature could veto state laws
- Favored large states: VA, PA, MA, NY
- Strong national government vision

vs.

New Jersey Plan

Proposed by: William Paterson

- Unicameral legislature (one chamber)
- Equal votes for each state regardless of size
- Preserve state sovereignty
- Favored small states: NJ, DE, CT, MD
- Revision of Articles, not replacement

Debate 2: Slavery — The Constitution's Deepest Contradiction

Three slavery-related disputes threatened Southern participation:

COUNTING ENSLAVED PEOPLE

Should enslaved people count toward representation?

North: No — they are property, not citizens, and cannot vote.

South: Yes — our population and political power depends on it.

Result: Three-Fifths Compromise: each enslaved person counted as 3/5 of a person for representation and direct taxes.

THE SLAVE TRADE

Could Congress ban the international slave trade?

North: Yes — slavery is a moral evil Congress must be able to limit.

South: Abolition of slave trade would be a dealbreaker for SC & GA.

Result: Congress forbidden from banning slave trade before 1808; a \$10/person import tax was permitted.

FUGITIVE SLAVE CLAUSE

What about enslaved people who escaped to free states?

North: Free states should not be required to return escapees.

South: Property rights must be protected across state lines.

Result: Article IV required all states to return 'persons held to service or labour' — no free-state sanctuary.

Debate 3: The Executive — King, Committee, or President?

Delegates feared both tyranny and weakness. They debated for weeks:

One person or a committee of three?

→ Single executive — a committee would be too slow in crisis.

How long should the term last?

→ Four years, with re-election permitted (debated 6 or even 15 years).

Who would elect the president?

→ Electoral College — a compromise between direct popular vote and Congress.

Could the president be removed?

→ Yes — impeachment by the House, trial by the Senate.

How much power over war?

→ Congress declares war; president is commander-in-chief once war begins.

George Mason warned: "We are not indeed constituting a British Government, but a more dangerous monarchy."

Part 4

The Great Compromises

How the Framers Bridged Unbridgeable Gaps

~5 min

The Connecticut (Great) Compromise — July 16, 1787

The Connecticut Compromise Created a Bicameral Congress

THE SENATE

Equal Representation

2 senators per state
regardless of size

→ Favors Small States

6-year terms
Chosen by state legislatures
(until 17th Amendment, 1913)

+

THE HOUSE

Proportional Representation

Members based on population
(counted every 10 years)

→ Favors Large States

2-year terms
Directly elected by voters
All revenue bills originate here

=

Convention Saved

Passed by a single vote on July 16. Without it, the convention would have dissolved.

Additional Compromises That Shaped the Constitution

Three-Fifths Compromise

Article I, Section 2

Each enslaved person counted as 3/5 of a person for both apportionment of Congressional seats and direct taxes. Gave Southern states 20+ extra House seats, boosting their political power for decades.

Commerce & Slave Trade Compromise

Article I, Section 9

Congress gained power to regulate interstate and foreign commerce (North's demand), but could NOT ban slave importation until 1808. Export taxes were also prohibited (protecting Southern tobacco, rice, and indigo).

Fugitive Slave Clause

Article IV, Section 2

States must return enslaved people who escaped across state lines. Made the entire nation complicit in slavery — not just slave states.

Electoral College

Article II, Section 1

Electors (equal to Congressional delegation) choose the president. A compromise between direct democracy, Congressional selection, and state power — amplified Southern influence via Three-Fifths clause.

Part 5

The Ratification Battle

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists

~7 min

Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists – The Ratification Debate

FEDERALISTS

Hamilton · Madison · Jay

- Strong national government ensures stability & defense
- Checks and balances prevent executive tyranny
- Commerce requires unified national regulation
- 85 Federalist Papers made the intellectual case

DEBATES WITHIN FEDERALISTS

Hamilton vs. Madison: Hamilton wanted near-unlimited central power; Madison insisted on enumerated limits. They broke publicly by the 1790s.

Bill of Rights? Hamilton called it unnecessary (Federalist No. 84); Madison reversed course and championed it to secure ratification.

Electoral College: Some Federalists wanted Congress to choose the president; others demanded independent electors to check legislative power.

ANTI-FEDERALISTS

Henry · Mason · Gerry · Clinton

- Constitution lacks a Bill of Rights
- Central power will crush state sovereignty
- Executive resembles an elected monarchy
- Senate is an aristocratic, unaccountable body
- Standing army is a danger to liberty
- Wrote Brutus Papers and Federal Farmer essays

State Ratification — The Road to Nine (1787–1790)

1	Delaware Dec 7, 1787	30–0	8	South Carolina May 23, 1788	149–73
2	Pennsylvania Dec 12, 1787	46–23	9	New Hampshire Jun 21, 1788	57–47 ✓ 9th — Ratified!
3	New Jersey Dec 18, 1787	38–0	10	Virginia Jun 25, 1788	89–79
4	Georgia Jan 2, 1788	26–0	11	New York Jul 26, 1788	30–27
5	Connecticut Jan 9, 1788	128–40	12	North Carolina Nov 21, 1789	194–77
6	Massachusetts Feb 6, 1788	187–168	13	Rhode Island May 29, 1790	34–32
7	Maryland Apr 28, 1788	63–11			

Blue = easier ratification Red = fierce debate Gold = 9th state (triggers Constitution)

Part 6

The Bill of Rights

The Price of Ratification — 1791

~4 min

The Bill of Rights — Ratified December 15, 1791

1st

Religion, Speech, Press, Assembly, Petition

Congress shall make no law... abridging freedom of speech or of the press

3rd

Quartering of Soldiers

No Soldier shall... be quartered in any house without the consent of the Owner

5th

Due Process, Self-Incrimination

No person shall be... deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law

7th

Civil Jury Trials

The right of trial by jury shall be preserved in suits at common law

Rights Retained by the People

2nd

Right to Bear Arms

A well regulated Militia being necessary... the right of the people to keep and bear Arms

4th

Search and Seizure

The right of the people to be secure... against unreasonable searches and seizures

6th

Right to Speedy Trial & Jury

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial

8th

Cruel & Unusual Punishment

Excessive bail shall not be required... nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted

Powers Reserved to States

Part 7

Enduring Legacy

Why the Constitution Still Governs

~3 min

The Constitution's Enduring Legacy

27

Amendments
in 235+ years

**Oldest
Written
National
Constitution**

Flexibility by Design

The amendment process is deliberately difficult — preserving stability while allowing change. Reconstruction (13th–15th), Progressive Era (16th–19th), and Civil Rights amendments expanded the Constitution's promise.

Separation of Powers Endures

Three co-equal branches with checks and balances have weathered presidential crises, wars, and political upheaval. No coup or suspension of government has succeeded.

Influence on World Constitutions

Over 100 nations have used the U.S. Constitution as a template for their own. Federalism, judicial review, and a written bill of rights spread globally.

Unfinished Work

Slavery's compromise required a Civil War and three amendments to begin correcting. Full democratic participation required 19th (women's suffrage, 1920) and 24th (poll tax, 1964) amendments.

Key Takeaways

1

The Constitution was built on compromise

Large vs. small states, North vs. South, national vs. state power — every major provision resolved a conflict.

2

Crisis drove innovation

The failures of the Articles of Confederation created the political will for a radical new framework of government.

3

Ratification was not guaranteed

Several key states ratified by razor-thin margins. Without the promise of a Bill of Rights, it may have failed.

4

Moral compromises had long consequences

The slavery provisions were not minor concessions — they shaped politics for 80 years and required war to begin addressing.

5

The design enabled self-correction

The amendment process, though deliberately hard, allowed the Constitution to grow toward its own stated ideals of justice and liberty.

*"We the People of the United States,
in Order to form a more perfect Union..."*

— *Preamble to the United States Constitution, 1787*

Discussion Questions

1. Were the slavery compromises necessary to achieve union — or a moral failure that could have been avoided?
2. How would the Constitution look different if written today?
3. Is the amendment process too difficult, or does difficulty protect stability?

Questions?

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