



# The Great Compromise: A Document- based Lesson

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Constitutional Literacy Institute

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# How do we make the Federal Convention of 1787 comprehensible, manageable, palatable, and practical for young people?

- context
  - Annapolis Convention
- people
  - Randolph, Morris, Washington
- debate
  - Quill
- outcomes
  - Article 1
- applications
  - checks and balances



# Teaching History, Learning Citizenship

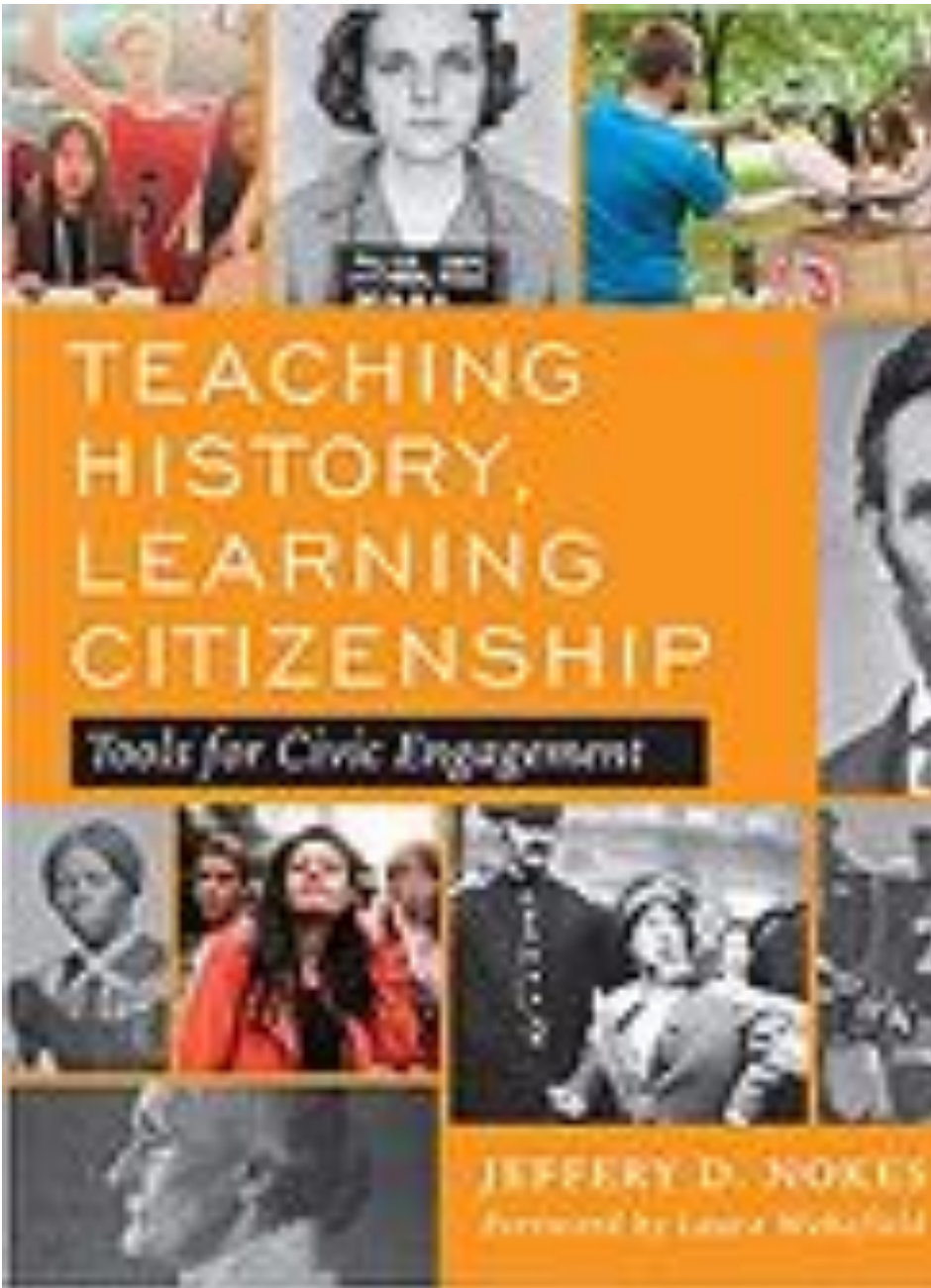


Figure I.1: Knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are the focus of each chapter

Chapter	Knowledge	Skills	Dispositions
1	Knowledge introduced	Skills introduced	Dispositions introduced
2	Adams, Quincy, and the Boston Massacre trial	Corroboration	Defending the rights of others
3	Harriet Tubman	Historiography	
4	Committees of Correspondence	Contextualization	Uniting with like-minded peers
5	Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor	Historical empathy	
6	The Great Compromise	Historical perspective taking	Compromise
7	The Civil Rights Act of 1964	Change and continuity	
8	Abraham Lincoln's plans for Reconstruction	Ethical judgment	Diplomacy and working with adversaries
9	Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev's friendship	Argumentative writing	
10	Silent Sentinels	Analyzing photographs	Demonstrating disapproval
11	The 1968 Olympic demonstration	Contextualization through analogy	
12	Susan B. Anthony and the election of 1872	Identifying historical significance	Civil disobedience
13	James Farmer and the Freedom Riders	Sourcing	

## COMPROMISE: Sacrificing for the Common Good

On February 16, 1820, the U.S. Senate voted to combine two bills that had been debated for weeks. The first would admit Missouri as a new state. Senators from free states had not been pleased with the idea of an additional slave state, upsetting the perfect balance of senators representing northern and southern states. The second bill would shave off part of Massachusetts to create the state of Maine. Senators from southern states opposed this bill for the same reason. Combining the two bills retained the balance of slave and free states and thus maintained an equal number of senators from each region of the country. This action is known as the Missouri Compromise.

Unlike the Missouri Compromise, most compromises in our nation's history are known by titles that downplay the roll of give-and-take in the legislative process. For example, on January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued a compromise entitled the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the people held in bondage in states that remained in rebellion.

that compromise has been essential since the nation's origins.

The founding fathers learned of the need for compromise during the Constitutional Convention. In what is now called the "Great Compromise," delegates from the large states and the small states established a legislative system with two congressional houses, one with equal representation, pleasing the small states, and one with proportional representation, pleasing the populous states. Chapter 6 provides materials for an investigation of this compromise that saved the Constitutional Convention.

Nearly 200 years later, civil rights proponents reached a compromise with conservative political leaders in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Civil rights legislation proposed by John F. Kennedy was defeated through a Senate filibuster. A year later, Lyndon B. Johnson led a bipartisan Congress that overwhelmingly passed the Civil Rights Act. It mandated fewer changes than civil rights leaders hoped

## The Great Compromise

How could people with different backgrounds, perspectives, passions, and values, and who held different social, political, and economic priorities, collaboratively create a system of government that could achieve general approval? The Constitutional Convention brought together men who represented very different communities. Some relied on the labor of enslaved individuals. Others abhorred slavery. Delegates represented states that imported and exported different products. Some came from cities and others from rural areas. Many had completely different ideas about how government should function. Yet over several months, these men were able to create a government system that has held the United States together for over 230 years. This chapter provides materials for an investigation of the “Great Compromise,” which satisfied the concerns of delegates from populous and small states, and preserved the process of creating the Constitution.

### STUDENTS’ BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Students may or may not be familiar with the United States’ current bicameral legislature. Those who understand the nature of Congress may or may not know the narrative of its origins, a result of the Great Compromise at the Constitutional Convention. The purpose of this section is to

representation in Congress either being debated explicitly or held in the back of delegates’ minds almost every day of the convention. New York’s divided delegation had left Philadelphia a week earlier in frustration. Days before the compromise was reached, an outsider read the despair in George Washington’s eyes, reminiscent of his expression during the desperate months of Valley Forge (Bowen, 1966). Helping students understand this context helps them recognize the importance of the Great Compromise and of the need for compromise generally.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

#### Background of the Constitutional Convention

The colonies declared independence from Great Britain in July 1776. When they did, they got rid of the only government that had united them. The delegates at the Second Continental Congress knew the colonies needed a central government. They wrote the United States’ first federal constitution, called the *Articles of Confederation*. They were afraid of the power of the king and Parliament. So, they set up a weak government that represented the states. Each

duty in writing the Constitution. It then went to the states to be ratified or approved.

### HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Historical perspective taking is a concept similar to historical empathy, explained in Chapter 5. It consists of an imaginative effort to perceive conditions as another person would. Historical perspective taking allows one to understand the actions of historical characters, even when such actions do not seem sensible from a modern perspective. Some have preferred the use of the term *perspective acknowledgment over perspective taking*. *Perspective acknowledgment* suggests an understanding that others perceive things differently. Unlike *perspective taking*, the term implies that no amount of cognitive exertion by an individual will ever allow him/her to assume another's point of view. Though I agree with this assertion, I propose that the cognitive effort required to attempt to engage in perspective taking can better position students of history to understand the actions of others, even if it does not allow them to perceive things precisely as others did.

History educators have listed perspective taking as one of the most basic historical thinking skills (Lee & Ashby, 2001). And students at a young age intuitively understand that two different people who observed the same incident might describe it in distinct ways based upon their background, audience, and purposes (Nokes, 2014). What students of history may not understand is that two disagreeing descriptions of the same event might both be accurate from different points of view. For instance, an individual's perspective influences what he/she pays attention to and what goes unobserved. Perspective influences perception—those things that an individual sees and hears. Perspective impacts

students to deal with discrepancies in accounts in productive ways, rather than in frustration. Such an understanding facilitates, and is facilitated by, the use of other historical thinking strategies, such as sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization.

Why is perspective taking important in civic engagement? Collaboration is necessary for establishing policies and programs that promote the common good. People within a democracy must work civilly with individuals who have different backgrounds, priorities, values, opinions, and needs. Research is lacking in the connection between teaching historical perspective taking and students' ability to engage in civil discourse. However, it seems reasonable that civil collaboration is more likely to take place when individuals appreciate the perspectives of others, viewing others' points of view as assets rather than barriers. It seems that such perspective taking would increase the likelihood of compromise and of individuals sacrificing personal interests for the common good. Just as biased accounts can help historians make interpretations, others' points of view, though biased, might lead to the adoption of mutually acceptable policies.

### LESSON IDEAS

#### Introduction

The following materials could be used during a unit on the American Revolution and early government. If a course is organized thematically, this lesson could instead be taught in connection with other lessons on the role of compromise in civic engagement.

#### Objectives

- An excerpt from a speech given by Pennsylvania delegate Benjamin Franklin on June 30, 1787, as recorded in Madison's notes (Madison, 1787)
- An excerpt from a speech given by Virginia delegate James Madison on July 5, 1787, as recorded in his notes (Madison, 1787)
- Selected statements made by delegates including Roger Sherman (Connecticut), Luther Martin (Maryland), Elbridge Gerry (Massachusetts), and Caleb Strong (Massachusetts) on July 14, 1787, prior to the vote passing the Great Compromise as recorded in Madison's notes (Madison, 1787)
- Part of Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution, the product of the Great Compromise (Constitution of the United States, 1787)

### Simplified Evidence

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#### Document 1: Delaware Resolution

An act choosing delegates from Delaware to the convention which will be held in Philadelphia. The convention is to revise the Federal Constitution [Articles of Confederation]. . . .

The General Assembly of Delaware, chooses George Read, Gunning Bedford, John Dickinson, Richard Bassett and Jacob Broom, Esquires, delegates from this state. They are to meet in the convention of the delegates of other states, to be held in Philadelphia on May 2. . . . They are to join with them in creating, thinking about, and discussing, changes and additions that might be needed to make the Federal Constitution work for the way things are in the Union. . . . These changes must not include that part . . . which declares that "in determining questions in the

*Source:* Part of the first three resolutions of the Virginia Plan, proposed by Virginia delegate Edmund Randolph on May 29, 1787, as recorded in the notes of James Madison. [Changed for easier reading.] Found at <https://www.nhccs.org/dfc-0529.txt>

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#### Document 3: Paterson Speech

He said that Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania were the three large states and the other ten were small ones. He repeated what Mr. Brearly had said about the unequal votes which would happen. And he repeated that the small states would never agree to it [proportional representation]. He said that it did not make sense that a large state that paid a lot should have more votes than a small one that paid a little, any more than it did to give a rich citizen more votes than a poor one.

New Jersey will never agree with the plan before the committee. New Jersey would be swallowed up. He had rather give in to a king, to a tyrant, than to such a fate. He would not only oppose the plan here [in the convention]. But when he returned home he would do everything he could to defeat it there [during ratification].

*Source:* Part of a speech given by New Jersey delegate, William Paterson, June 9, 1787, as recorded in Madison's notes. [Changed for easier reading.] Found at <http://www.nhccs.org/dfc-0609.txt>

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#### Document 4: Wilson Speech

[Wilson] spoke in detail for proportional representation. He argued that all authority came from the people. So equal numbers of people should have an equal number of representatives. Different numbers of people should have different numbers of representatives. This principle was not followed in the [Articles of] Confederation, because of how

# A legacy of compromise...





**Poll:** It is more important for government officials in Washington to:



Compromise to find solutions



Margin of Error:  $\pm 3.3$  percentage points

Stand on principle even if it means gridlock



PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist Poll, National Adults.  
Interviews conducted Feb. 13 through Feb. 16, 2023, n=1,352.

The latest call for compromise...

# A MAP OF PHILADELPHIA, AND PARTS ADJACENT.

PERSPECTIVE VIEW of the STATE-HOUSE.

By N. SCULL and G. HEAR.

Constitutional  
Convention  
Background


— Concerning the Situation of the State House, the  
Site was carefully examined and found to be  
very good. Other Public Buildings are, The Court  
House, the Bank, the Custom House, the Theatre,  
the Exchange, the Church of England, the  
Quaker Meeting House, the Dutch Church, the  
German Church, the Academy, the  
School House, the City Hall, the  
Hospital, the Work House, &c.






Perspective Taking






Write down the most important thing that happened at this school last week?



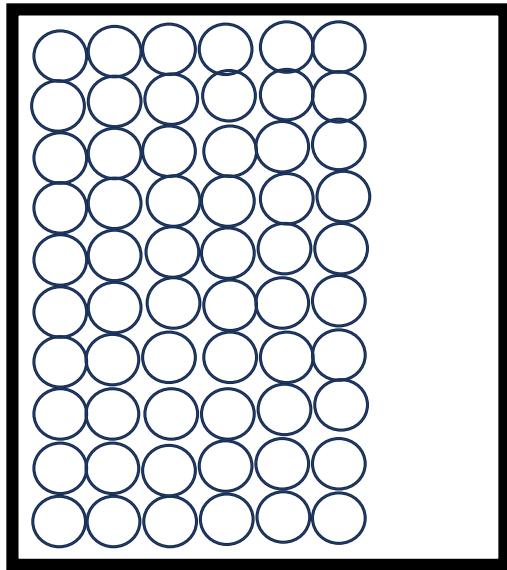
Now write  
what you think  
the person to  
your left  
answered.



What thought process did you go through to try to figure out what they wrote?

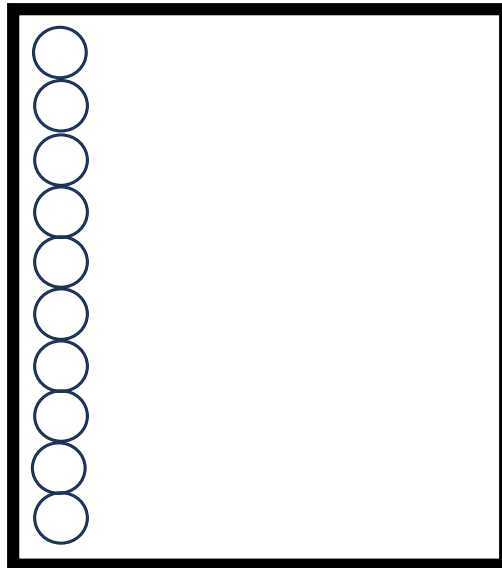
# A federal government that represents states

State A



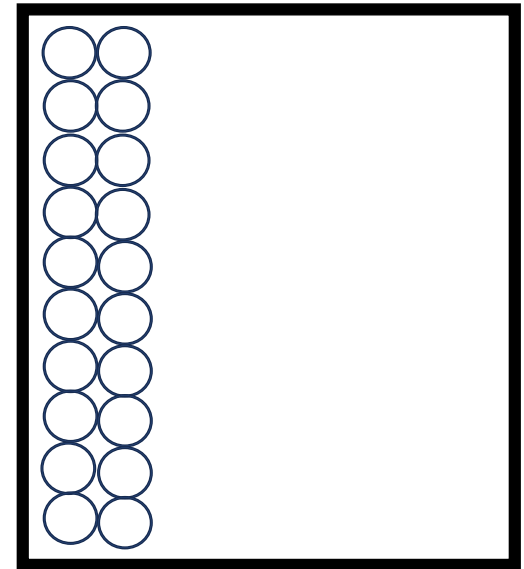
2 Representatives

State B



2 Representatives

State C



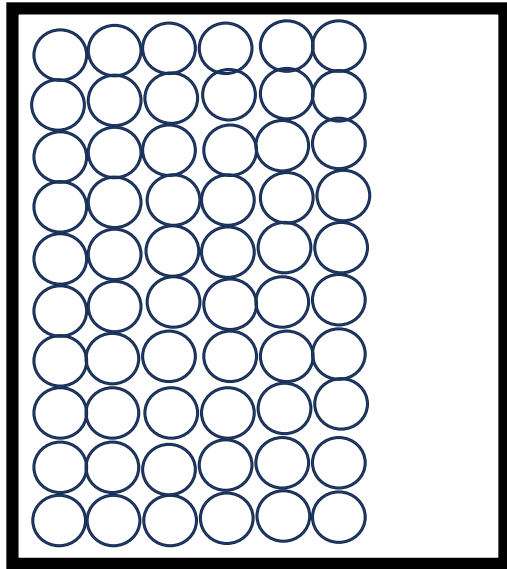
2 Representatives

2 representatives for every state.

Different representation of the people ( $1/30$ ,  $1/5$ ,  $1/10$ ).

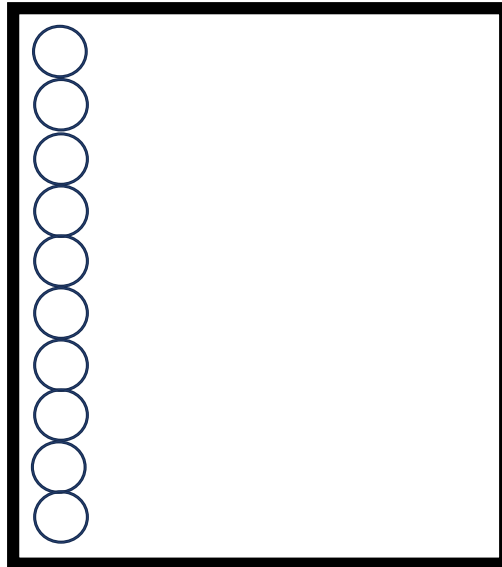
# A national government that represents people

State A



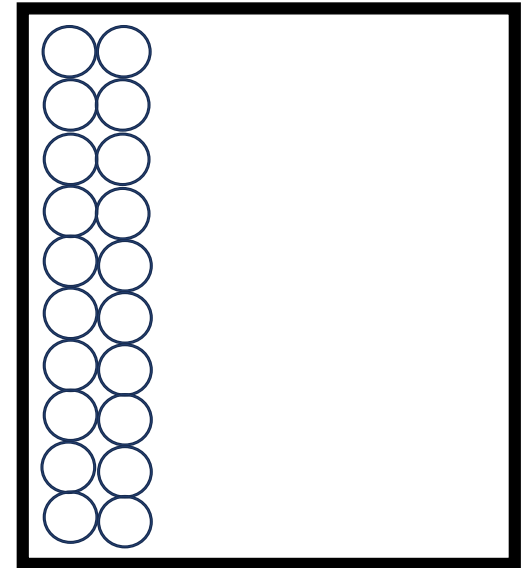
6 Representatives

State B



1 Representative

State C



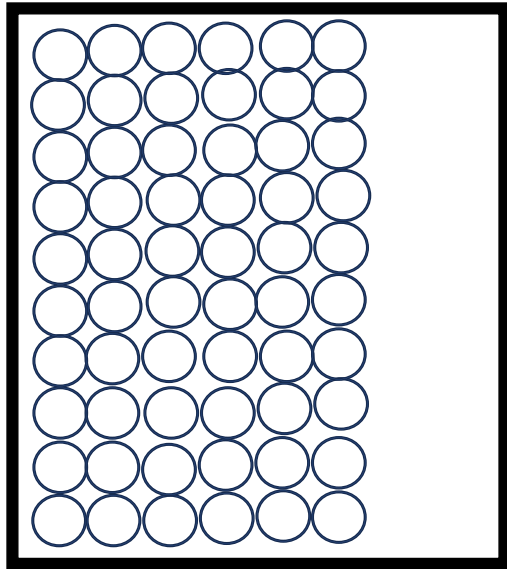
2 Representatives

1 representative for every 10 people.  
Different representation of the states.



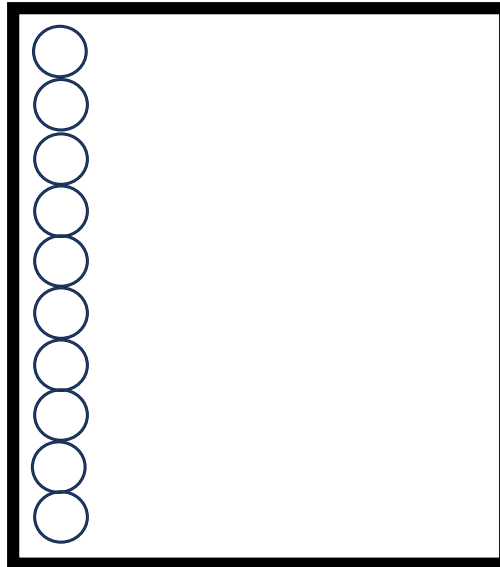
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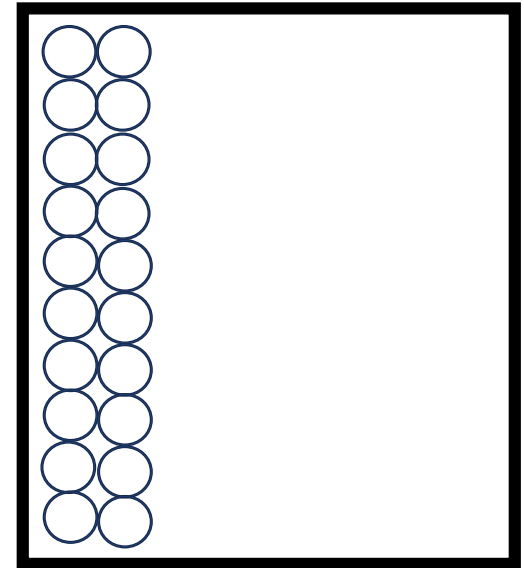
6 Representatives

State B



1 Representative

State C

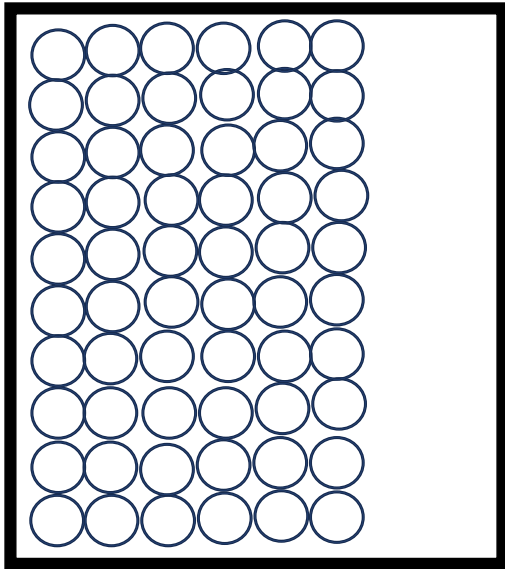


2 Representatives

Who prefers this system?

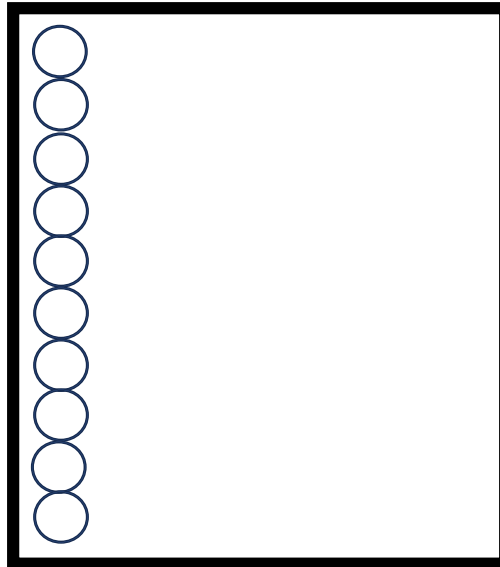
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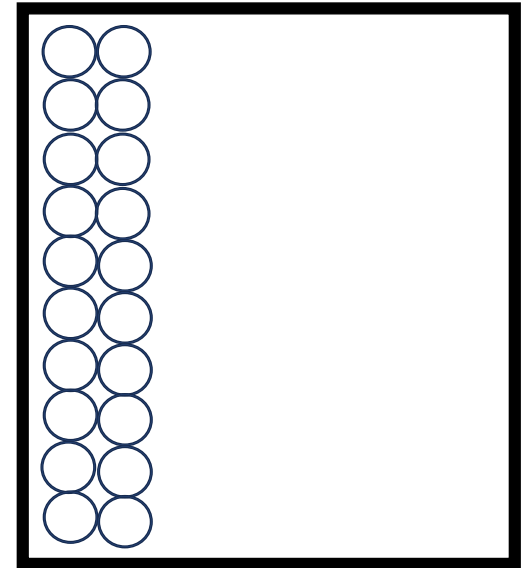
2 Representatives

State B



2 Representatives

State C



2 Representatives

Who prefers this system?

How did the delegates at the Constitutional Convention work through their disagreements to reach a compromise?

- How did the differing perspectives of delegates from the populous states and the small states lead to disagreements at the Constitutional Convention?
- What type of dialogue was likely to lead to compromise?
- What types of dialogue decreased the likelihood of compromise?

## The Great Compromise

Most of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention represented the perspective and interests of the states that sent them. Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania were populous states. The others had smaller populations. Use the following graphic organizer to outline the position of the small states and the large states. Trace their discussion of the Great Compromise and use the material you have gathered on this worksheet to answer the questions on the back.

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# Sourcing

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# Close Reading

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# Perspective Taking

## The Great Compromise

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### Document 3: Patterson Speech

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He said that Virginia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania were the three large states and the other ten were small ones. He repeated what Mr. Brearly had said about the unequal votes which would happen. And he repeated that the small states would never agree to it [proportional representation]. He said that it did not make sense that a large state that paid a lot should have more votes than a small one that paid a little, any more than it did to give a rich citizen more votes than a poor one.

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*Source:* Part of a speech given by New Jersey delegate, William Paterson, June 9, 1787, as recorded in Madison's notes. [Changed for easier reading.] Found at <http://www.nhccs.org/dfc-0609.txt>

Sourcing

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Perspective  
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## Document 6: Franklin Speech

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Doctor Franklin: The difference of opinions [about representation in Congress] come from two points. If proportional representation is used, the small states say that their liberties will be in danger. If equal votes are used instead, the large states say their money will be in danger. When a wide table is being built, and the edges of boards do not fit together, the carpenter trims a little off of both boards. This makes a good joint. In the same way here, both sides need to give up some of their demands. That way they may join in some cooperating plan.

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*Source:* Part of a speech given by **Pennsylvania** delegate Benjamin **Franklin** at the Constitutional Convention on **June 30, 1787**, as **recorded by Madison.** [*Changed for easier reading.*] Found at <https://www.nhccs.org/dfc-0630.txt>

Sourcing

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Close  
Reading

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# Activity Debriefing

- What were some of the main arguments for equal representation in Congress? For proportional representation?
- How did the perspectives of the delegates change as the convention continued, allowing them to reach the Great Compromise?
- What are some of the main barriers to compromise? How can these barriers be overcome?

# Teaching Debriefing

- How would you adapt this for your classroom?

# Connections to current events

- What factors contributed to or hindered the recent compromise on the debt ceiling?
- How did your Congressional representatives participate in the debate and vote on the debt ceiling?

**Poll:** It is more important for government officials in Washington to:



Compromise to find solutions



Margin of Error:  $\pm 3.3$  percentage points

Stand on principle even if it means gridlock

