

A Historical Perspective on Constitution Day

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Grade Level: 9-12 (Adaptable for younger grades)

Subject: U.S. History, Civics, Government

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Explain the historical context and challenges that led to the Constitutional Convention of 1787.
 - Identify key compromises made during the convention and their significance.
 - Analyze the core principles of the U.S. Constitution, including separation of powers and federalism.
 - Articulate the ongoing importance of the Constitution as a "living document."
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Materials:

- Whiteboard or projector
 - Markers or pens
 - Handout: "Key Figures and Issues of the Constitutional Convention" (see appendix)
 - Optional: Excerpts from the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution (Preamble, Article I, Section 8)
 - Optional: Short video clip on the Constitutional Convention (e.g., from a documentary like Ken Burns' "The Roosevelts" or a historical reenactment)
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Lesson Plan:

1. Introduction (5-7 minutes)

- **Hook:** Begin by asking students: "What does the word 'Constitution' mean to you? What is its purpose?"
- **Define Constitution Day:** Explain that Constitution Day is celebrated on September 17th to commemorate the signing of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. Frame the lesson not just as a day to remember a document, but a day to understand a pivotal moment in American history—the messy, difficult, and ultimately transformative process of creating a new government.
- **Roadmap:** Briefly outline the lesson: We will travel back in time to understand why the Constitution was needed, who was involved, and what major issues they had to solve.

2. The Problem: Life Under the Articles of Confederation (10-12 minutes)

- **Review:** Briefly review the aftermath of the American Revolution. The newly independent states were wary of a strong central government, so they created a loose alliance under the **Articles of Confederation**.
- **Discussion:** Lead a discussion on the weaknesses of the Articles. Prompt students with questions like:
 - What were some of the powers the central government lacked? (e.g., the power to tax, raise a military, regulate interstate commerce).
 - What were some of the problems that arose because of this weak government? (e.g., economic disputes between states, Shay's Rebellion, inability to pay off war debts).
- **Connect to Reality:** Use an analogy. "Imagine a group project where no one has to listen to the team leader, and there's no way to enforce deadlines. That's essentially what the Articles of Confederation were like for the states."

3. The Solution: The Constitutional Convention (15-20 minutes)

- **Setting the Scene:** Introduce the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia. Emphasize that the original goal was simply to *amend* the Articles, not to create a whole new government. The decision to scrap the old system was a radical and revolutionary one.
- **The Big Debates & Compromises:** This is the core of the historical narrative. Use the whiteboard to create two columns: "The Issue" and "The Compromise." Present the following key conflicts and their resolutions:
 - **Issue #1: Representation in Congress.** (Large states vs. Small states)
 - **The Players:** James Madison (Virginia Plan - bicameral legislature with proportional representation) and William Paterson (New Jersey Plan - unicameral legislature with equal representation).
 - **The Compromise:** The **Great Compromise** (or Connecticut Compromise), which created a bicameral Congress with the House of Representatives (proportional) and the Senate (equal).
 - **Issue #2: Slavery and Population.** (Southern states vs. Northern states)
 - **The Issue:** Should slaves be counted for representation in Congress? Southern states wanted them to count; Northern states argued against it.
 - **The Compromise:** The **Three-Fifths Compromise**. Explain that this was a morally fraught decision, and it highlights the difficult compromises necessary to form the union. *Note: Be sure to discuss the historical and moral implications of this decision, not just the math.*
 - **Issue #3: Presidential Power.** (How to elect the President?)
 - **The Issue:** Should the President be elected by popular vote, Congress, or state legislatures?
 - **The Compromise:** The **Electoral College**. Briefly explain the system and the historical rationale behind it (a compromise between direct democracy and legislative selection).

4. The Principles of the Constitution (5-7 minutes)

- **Beyond the Debates:** Transition from the *how* to the *what* of the Constitution. Explain that the framers didn't just solve problems; they built a new framework for government based on core principles.
- **Define and Discuss:** Briefly explain the following concepts in simple terms, providing examples:
 - **Separation of Powers:** Dividing government into three branches (legislative, executive, judicial) to prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful. (Analogy: three different jobs in a company).
 - **Checks and Balances:** Giving each branch some power over the others to keep them in line. (Example: Congress can pass a law, but the President can veto it; the Supreme Court can declare it unconstitutional).
 - **Federalism:** Dividing power between the federal government and the state governments. (Example: The federal government prints money, but states run their own public school systems).

5. Conclusion & Reflection (5 minutes)

- **The "Living Document":** End the lesson by emphasizing that the Constitution is not a static document from 1787.
 - Mention the amendment process (Article V) as a key feature that allows the Constitution to adapt to changing times and values.
 - Highlight major amendments that have shaped the nation since 1787 (e.g., the Bill of Rights, the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, the 19th Amendment granting women's suffrage).
 - **Final Question:** "Looking at the problems the framers faced and the solutions they found, what do you think is the greatest legacy of the U.S. Constitution?"
 - **Closing:** Thank the students and reiterate the importance of understanding this historical moment on Constitution Day.
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Appendix: Handout for Students

Key Figures and Issues of the Constitutional Convention

Key Figures:

- **George Washington:** President of the Convention, his presence gave the meeting legitimacy.
- **James Madison:** Often called the "Father of the Constitution" for his pivotal role in drafting the Virginia Plan and his detailed notes of the proceedings.
- **Benjamin Franklin:** The elder statesman whose wisdom and wit helped keep the convention from falling apart.
- **Alexander Hamilton:** A strong advocate for a powerful central government.

Key Issues and Compromises:

The Issue	The Debate	The Compromise
Representation in Congress	Virginia Plan (proportional to population) vs. New Jersey Plan (equal representation for each state)	The Great Compromise: A bicameral legislature with a House of Representatives (based on population) and a Senate (two members per state).
Slavery & Population	Should slaves be counted when determining a state's population for representation in Congress?	The Three-Fifths Compromise: Three-fifths of the enslaved population would be counted for both representation and taxation.
Trade Regulation	Should the federal government have the power to regulate commerce, including the slave trade?	The Commerce and Slave Trade Compromise: Congress was given the power to regulate trade, but it was forbidden from banning the slave trade for 20 years (until 1808).
Presidential Election	How should the President be elected? By popular vote, by Congress, or by state legislatures?	The Electoral College: A system where each state's electors (equal to their number of representatives and senators) would cast votes for the president.

