



Re-Inventing the Constitutional Convention: A Role Play Activity

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About this Lesson

The purpose of this lesson is for students take on the role of the Framers of the Constitution to discover their motivations for the creation and formation of the Constitution. Students will be divided into six different groups representing each of the grouping of states with similar interests. Students will be required to read the state information page for the constituency that they represent. They will then conduct further research to develop an understanding of the views they are to support. In a subsequent class period, students will conduct a debate on the principle issues included in the Constitution. Finally, students will write an article as a Federalist or anti-Federalist to submit to a newspaper to convince the electorate to support or oppose passage of the new Constitution.

[Link to State-Name Placards](#)

Notes:

I don't have it mentioned in the activity, but I generally have students write a paragraph each on their state's position on the 9 items most important to their state. I don't generally do the follow up activity to have students write a Federalist/Anti-Federalist position.

When I divide kids in groups, I do not make the groups even. I make the groups proportional to the representatives actually at the convention.

What's really cool about the activity is that students always create their constitution almost identical to the real Constitution, even when they come up with an alternative to the suggested options. They learn that we are limited in our decisions and that it's not as easy to criticize historical decisions once the context of the situation is considered.

Grade(s) Level

American History or
Government

Classroom Time

Introduced in one class and debate
is conducted in a subsequent class

Handouts

See attached

Constitution Connections

Articles 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7

Amendments: Bill of Rights

Background

See page titled Constitutional Convention and Key Issues.

Objectives

Students will:

- *Develop an understanding of the Framers' motivations and difficulties of construction a new constitution.
- *Debate vital issues concerning the Constitution.
- *Write a persuasive article citing primary sources.

Standards

NCSS Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Missouri GLE Standards: 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3aK, 3aL, 6K,
7A, 7G

Assessment-Options

Students will write a persuasive Federalist or anti-Federalist article to a newspaper to convince their constituents to support or oppose the passage of the Constitution within their state. Students will be evaluated on their ability to write a persuasive argument citing material from secondary and primary sources.

Further Resources

- *United States Constitution
- *National Constitution Center website: <http://constitutioncenter.org/>
- *Federalist papers
- *1783-1787 state constitutions
- *Library of Congress website: www.loc.gov

Constitutional Convention

Setting:

The Revolutionary War is over. The states are victorious, but four years have passed since the British have left and the confederation is considered by some to be in a state of crisis. Daniel Shays has staged a rebellion, the states are not paying their debts, and foreign nations are not convinced of the longevity of the new country. In fact, the former colonies appear to some as the Disunited State of America.

It is the general consensus that the Articles of Confederation is not working and needs to be amended. Foreign debts are not paid, as not all states are contributing funds to the national treasury. Some states are charging duty fees to other states. In fact, the fees are more costly from state to state than they are from other countries. It is very difficult to raise armies as states voluntarily supply soldiers to the national military. Pirating groups take advantage of this situation by raiding American ships off of the nation's coast with very little recourse. As there was fear of a powerful king, the Articles provided for no executive power. However, without an executive, there is no position to enforce the laws the states develop. Also, every state is required to pass each law separately for any one of them to become law. Therefore, it is difficult to get any law passed. The Articles of Confederation has been acting more as a treaty between separate countries rather than a binding government.

Task:

A national convention has been called requesting representatives from each of the states to meet in Philadelphia to discuss how to change the Articles. You are delegates from each chosen to represent your state at the convention. You understand the need to fix the Articles of Confederation and secretly believe it may be necessary to write an entirely new constitution. You go to the convention with the reformist spirit but it is an absolute necessity to support the principles of your state and defend its liberty.

States:

New Hampshire, New York, Connecticut

Massachusetts

Pennsylvania

New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland

Virginia

North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia

Key Issues

1. Structure of the legislature
2. Composition of legislative representation
3. Structure of the executive
4. Title of the executive
5. Length of terms
6. Requirements to be a representative (for each branch of government)
7. Process of choosing offices
8. Compensation of representatives
9. Structure of the judiciary
10. Role of the judiciary
11. Impeachment powers
12. Status of slavery
13. Foreign debts paid
14. List of rights
15. Preservation of states' rights
16. How to pass amendments
17. Number of states needed to ratify a new constitution

State Delegate Information Sheet

New Hampshire

Nicholas Gilman

John Langdon

Robert Yates

New York

Alexander Hamilton

John Lansing, Jr.

Roger Sherman

Connecticut

Oliver Ellsworth (Elsworth)

William S. Johnson

Primary Concerns:

*You are smaller states at least in the population size in the 18th century. You have large claims to territory, especially New York, but you fear the larger populated states dominating your liberties.

*You are relatively wealthy and fear the lack of knowledge of a common person in choosing representatives. However, you understand the revolution was fought for the defense of liberties and do not want to deny the right to vote to commoners.

*You believe virtuous political leaders should not accept a salary. If no salaries are paid, this would mean only wealthy people could be elected and this would help reserve the government for more educated members. However, you realize the common people need to have their liberties secured as well and salary is probably necessary to preserve a government of the people.

*You do not like slavery and support the abolition of slavery, but believe it will die out in a few years on its own accord as the number of slave owners have been growing smaller in recent years.

*You believe that foreign debts incurred during the Revolutionary War must be paid (especially if you are Alexander Hamilton). If they are not paid, other countries will not extend credit in the future and will not support you in future wars.

*You believe in a strong national government (especially Hamilton), as this experiment in democracy will fail if the country splits into 13 separate territories. You also believe in the stability of the national government and would support consistency in nationally elected officials.

State Delegate Information Sheet

Massachusetts

Elbridge Gerry

Nathaniel Gorham

Rufus King

Caleb Strong

Primary Concerns:

*You are considered a large state. Even though you are physically small, you have large territorial claims and are in the top 3 most populous states.

*You are the birthplace of the American Revolution. You were the first to stand up to Parliament and King George III to fight for your liberties. Therefore, you fear any government that may infringe upon your rights.

*You are relatively wealthy and fear the lack of knowledge of a common person in choosing representatives. However, you understand the revolution was fought for the defense of liberties and do not want to deny the right to vote to commoners.

*You believe virtuous political leaders should not accept a salary. If no salaries are paid, this would mean only wealthy people could be elected and this would help reserve the government for more educated members. However, you realize the common people need to have their liberties secured as well and salary is probably necessary to preserve a government of the people.

*You do not like slavery and support the abolition of slavery, but believe it will die out in a few years on its own accord as the number of slave owners have been growing smaller in recent years.

State Delegate Information Sheet

Pennsylvania

George Clymer

Thomas Fitzsimons

Benjamin Franklin

Jared Ingersoll

Thomas Mifflin

Gouverneur Morris

Robert Morris

James Wilson

Primary Concerns:

*You are a large state, both in size and population. In fact, you even send the largest delegation to the convention. You are also the host state for the convention and silently believe you can dominate the convention, especially with the highly respected Ben Franklin from your state.

*You are the most democratic state in the country. A greater percentage of people can vote in your state than the others and you have a commoner's heritage with your dominant Quaker background. Although your state was founded by Quakers, you are more religiously tolerant than other states and this view carries over politically. In fact in your state, you do not ever have a strong executive leader. Also as a democratic state, you favor shorter terms so the people can frequently reevaluate their elected officials.

*You are relatively wealthy and fear the lack of knowledge of a common person in choosing representatives. However, you understand the revolution was fought for the defense of liberties and do not want to deny the right to vote to commoners.

*You believe virtuous political leaders should not accept a salary. If no salaries are paid, this would mean only wealthy people could be elected and this would help reserve the government for more educated members. However, you realize the common people need to have their liberties secured as well and salary is probably necessary to preserve a government of the people.

*You strongly oppose slavery as you consider it immoral and contrary to your Quaker views. However, you do not want it to become a stumbling block for creation of the constitution.

[Title]

National Constitution Center
Classroom Ready Resources

State Delegate Information Sheet

New Jersey

David Brearly (Brearley)
Jonathan Dayton
William C. Houston
William Livingston
William Paterson (Patterson)

Delaware

Richard Bassett (Basset)
Gunning Bedford, Jr.
Jacob Broom
John Dickinson
George Read

Maryland

Daniel Carroll
Daniel Jenifer
Luther Martin
James McHenry
John F. Mercer

Primary Concerns:

*Your major concern is your state's representation. You are a smaller state and are concerned the larger states will dominate you. It is possible that 3 states could dominate the other 10 if those 3 allied together. You cannot afford to let those 3 make decisions for you. In addition, you have enjoyed an equal standing with the other states under the Articles of Confederation.

*You are relatively wealthy and fear the lack of knowledge of a common person in choosing representatives. However, you understand the revolution was fought for the defense of liberties and do not want to deny the right to vote to commoners.

*You believe virtuous political leaders should not accept a salary. If no salaries are paid, this would mean only wealthy people could be elected and this would help reserve the government for more educated members. However, you realize the common people need to have their liberties secured as well and salary is probably necessary to preserve a government of the people.

*You have a few slave owners in your state, but it would not be an economic strain if slavery were abolished.

State Delegate Information Sheet

Virginia

John Blair

James Madison

George Mason

James McClurg

Edmund J. Randolph

George Washington

George Wythe

Primary Concerns:

*You are the largest state. You have more territory and the largest claims to additional territory. You also have the greatest number of people. You strongly believe you should be the dominant state in a new country. You do not see how small states with a much smaller population should have an equal voice and vote as your state. You see smaller states having equal votes as infringing on your liberties. This measure is so important, James Madison and Edmund Randolph propose an entirely new constitution based on this principle.

*You are second only to Massachusetts in leading the American Revolution. Many leaders had come from your state, including Patrick Henry, George Mason, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and of course, George Washington.

*You are relatively wealthy and fear the lack of knowledge of a common person in choosing representatives. However, you understand the revolution was fought for the defense of liberties and do not want to deny the right to vote to commoners.

*You believe virtuous political leaders should not accept a salary. If no salaries are paid, this would mean only wealthy people could be elected and this would help reserve the government for more educated members. However, you realize the common people need to have their liberties secured as well and salary is probably necessary to preserve a government of the people.

*Your state is a slave state, but several of your delegates are known for freeing their personal slaves and will free the remaining ones they have in their wills.

*You are generally in support of paying foreign debts.

[Title]

National Constitution Center
Classroom Ready Resources

State Delegate Information Sheet

North Carolina

William Blount

William R. Davie

Alexander Martin

Richard D. Spaight

Hugh Williamson

South Carolina

Piece Butler

Charles Pinckney

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney

John Rutledge

Georgia

Abraham Baldwin

William Few

William Houstoun

William L. Pierce

Primary Concerns:

*You are small states and are deeply concerned with states' rights. You do not want the larger states dominating your ways of life. This is one of your primary concerns.

*You are wealthy landowners and fear control among common people.

*You believe virtuous political leaders should not accept a salary. If no salaries are paid, this would mean only wealthy people could be elected and this would help reserve the government for more educated members. However, you realize the common people need to have their liberties secured as well and salary is probably necessary to preserve a government of the people.

*You tend to support a stronger executive.

*Your primary concern is the continuation of slavery. You consider it a way of life and the destruction of the economy of your state if threatened. This issue is so important, you will walk out of the convention if slavery is abolished.

Constitutional Convention

Negotiation Sheet

| Issue # | Key Issue | Option 1 | Option 2 | Option 3 | Option 4: (alternate) |
|---------|---|---|--|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | Structure of the legislature | Unicameral | Bicameral | Tricameral | |
| 2 | Composition of legislative representation | Proportional based on population | One vote per state | One vote for smaller states and two votes for larger states | |
| 3 | Structure of the executive | One leader of the executive | Committee of 3 executives | No executive | |
| 4 | Title of the executive | King | President | Supreme Executive | |
| 5 | Length of terms | All representatives 1 year | 6 years for the Upper Legislative House, 2 years for the Lower Legislative House, 4 years for the Executive | 4 years for Senate, 4 years for House of Representatives, Life for the Executive | |
| 6 | Requirements to be a representative (for each branch of government) | Must be a natural citizen and live in the United States for the past 14 years | Does not have to be a natural citizen but must live in the United States for the past 10 years | Does not have to be a natural citizen but must live in the United States for the past year | |
| 7 | Process of choosing offices | Direct election of all officials | Direct election of the lower house of the legislature and indirect election of the upper house and executive | Direct election of officials with a limited amount of eligible voters | |

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|----|---------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| 8 | Compensation of representatives | Pay representatives a sizeable salary | Pay representatives a meager salary | Pay representatives no salary | |
| 9 | Structure of the judiciary | Consists of 1 justice | Consists of 7 justices | Consists of 9 justices | |
| 10 | Role of the judiciary | Hears all levels of court cases from criminal to civil cases | Hears all levels of court cases but only at the discretion of what it desires to hear | Hears only appeals of cases that requires interpretation of laws and the constitution | |
| 11 | Impeachment powers | Elected officials are not impeachable | Elected officials can be impeached at any time for any reason | Elected officials can be impeached only for violating felonies | |
| 12 | Status of slavery | No slavery in new country | Slavery allowed in all states | Slavery allowed only in certain states | |
| 13 | Foreign debts paid | Cancel all debts | Pay all debts | Pay debts to France only | |
| 14 | List of rights | Do not list any rights | List all rights possibly found in state constitutions | Do not list rights but leave the possibility to add them later | |
| 15 | Preservation of states' rights | Everything not directly written in the constitution is reserved to the power of the states | The national government is supreme and can overrule any state law | The states' constitutions must be preserved and the national government cannot write any law that infringes on state constitutions | |
| 16 | How to pass amendments | Requires passage in the national government only | Requires passage by the states only | Requires passage by the national government and | |

[Title]

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|----|--|-----|-----|-------------------|--|
| | | | | state governments | |
| 17 | Number of states needed to ratify a new constitution | All | 3/4 | Majority | |