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Constitutional Convention: Can we fix it?

(Yes we can!)

**Problems in the New Nation**

In 1787, 55 delegates from each state, except Rhode Island, gathered again in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to discuss and revise the Articles of Confederation. Since its passing in 1776, the Articles had caused numerous problems within the young nation. Economic problems eventually led to an economic depression in 1786. This depression pushed impoverished Massachusetts farmers, led by Daniel Shays, to rebel in what is known as Shays’ Rebellion. Problems with foreign affairs pushed American farmers to transport their goods along the Appalachian Mountains, a more costly route. Under the Articles, the United States was weak, and teetering on disaster.

**The Convention Begins**

These problems, among others, were on the minds of the delegates in the summer of 1787. While their official assignment was to simply revise the Articles, the delegates took a step further and created an entirely new constitution, or plan of government. Early on, delegates decided to keep their debates silent, so each delegate would feel free to speak his mind.

Madison, proposed the Virginia Plan, which outlined a very different government than the Articles had created. His plan included a three branch government, including a strong executive branch. Many people believed a strong executive was the answer to many of the problems created by the Articles. Opposing the Virginia Plan was the New Jersey Plan, proposed by William Patterson.

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| --- | --- |
| The Virginia Plan   * Proposed three branches of government   + The Legislative,   + The Executive, and   + The Judicial Branch. * A bicameral, or two-house, Legislature. * Representation in the Legislature would be based on population. | The New Jersey Plan   * Created in response to the Virginia Plan’s population-based legislatures. * Called for a single-house legislature, with equal representation for each state. * Expanded the power of Congress to create taxes and regulate commerce. |

**Problems at the Convention**

How the three branches of government proposed by the Virginia Plan would be executed was an issue for many debates at the Convention. The first problem came about with just how many people should make up the Executive Branch. Many delegates supported the idea of three individuals, still fearful of the idea of another king, but it was eventually decided that a single individual would be best in case there ever arose a situation in which quick, decisive action needed to be taken. The executive would be given the title of President.

How the President would be elected became the next problem at the debate. Some delegates believed it was too important of a position for the general voting population to select, and pushed for the legislatures to elect an individual for the position. Others felt the people needed to be apart of the decision. Eventually, the Electoral Collegewas created to vote for the President. Each state was given the same number of electors as they had representatives. In later years the Electoral college promised to vote based upon the what the majority of each state wanted.

Delegates were also very concerned with maintaining individual rights in the states. This new Constitution needed to protect these rights. The Federal System, or Federalism, was developed to divide power between the state governments and federal government. Then, a system of checks and balances was put into place in the branches to ensure no branch became more powerful than another.

**Compromises at the Convention**

The first compromise at the Constitutional Convention, known as the Great Compromise, found middle ground between the Virginia Plan’s legislature, and the New Jersey Plan’s. Roger Sherman, of Connecticut, negotiated the compromise between the two sides. Sherman proposed a bicameral legislature, like the one proposed by Madison in the Virginia Plan, but with one major change. The lower house, or the House of Representatives, would decide each States’ number of representatives by population. In the upper house, the Senate, however, each state would be given two representatives.

The second compromise, known as the 3/5 Compromise, settled the dispute over how slaves would be counted in States’ populations. Southern States pushed for enslaved peoples to count in the overall population of the state, therefore giving these states more representatives in the House of Representatives. Northern States, however, argued that if enslaved individuals could not vote, then they could not be counted in the overall population, and therefore towards the total amount of representatives. Eventually, Congress reached a compromise. It was decided that enslaved individuals would count as 3/5 of one free person.

The final compromise considered the issue of the slave trade. Some northern delegates wanted to ban the buying and selling of people all together, but some southern delegates argued that banning the slave trade would ruin the southern economy. It was decided that ships would be allowed to bring enslaved people into the country for a period of 20 years. After 1808, Congress could bar the importation of enslaved people. However, it is important to note that the ban on importation would not affect the buying and selling of slaves within the United States.

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Using the article, complete the following graphic organizer on the problems faced during the Constitutional Convention, and the solutions found by the 55 delegates. For each box, write at least three sentences.

Problem Solution

The Constitutional Convention was held in 1787 to address these issues. While the 55 delegates were tasked with simply revising the Articles of Confederation, they instead created an entirely new system of government for the United States.

The Articles created strong state governments and a weak federal government.

The Great Compromise was reached.

After it was determined that one person would hold the Presidency, debate ensued over how this individual would be elected.

The 3/5 Compromise was reached.