

# Constitutional Convention: The Great Compromise



Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow.

## Heated Conflict

Thick, sweltering heat hangs in the elegant room in the heart of Philadelphia. Fifty-five men in wool suits have gathered for the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787. It is just ten years after the founding of the United States of America. Despite the record summer heat, the delegates keep the windows shut tight to protect their words from passers-by. There are two competing proposals on the table. The two sides are at a stalemate, and neither side wants to give in to the other. What they do next will shape American democracy into the one we know today.

## Two Proposals

The delegates had one goal in mind: to improve or replace the Articles of Confederation. The Articles of Confederation, established in 1777, had set up a government that was a league of independent states. In the Confederation, states sometimes acted more like independent countries than a unified nation.

Two competing plans emerged to improve upon the groundwork laid by the Articles of Confederation in 1777: the Virginia Plan, written by James Madison and Edmund Randolph, and the New Jersey Plan, written by William Paterson.

### The Virginia Plan

- Proposed replacing the Articles of Confederation with a new government structure
- Proposed a powerful central government
- Proposed three branches of that government: executive, legislative, and judicial
- Proposed that the new legislature, or Congress, would be **bicameral**, or made up of two houses
- Proposed that the population of each state would determine the number of legislators, **giving more power to larger states**
- Proposed an executive branch with one leader
- **Main criticism:** gave too much power to more-populated states

### The New Jersey Plan

- Proposed modifying the Articles of Confederation rather than replacing them
- Proposed establishing a stronger central government but keeping many state powers in place
- Proposed a **unicameral** legislature with only one house
- Proposed that each state in the unicameral legislature would get one vote, **giving small and large states equal power**
- Proposed an executive office led by a council rather than a single leader
- **Main criticism:** gave too much power to less-populated states

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Continue reading. Then, answer the questions that follow.

## A Compromise Is Reached

By the middle of the summer of 1787, supporters of the two plans were deadlocked. The convention appointed a committee to find a resolution. Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth, delegates from Connecticut, drafted the compromise. **A compromise is a solution where each side gives up some of its wishes for a greater goal.** The Connecticut Compromise became known as “The Great Compromise.” It proposed changes that combined elements from both the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan:

- A legislative branch with two elected houses:
  - » The Senate as an upper house, with two senators from each state, regardless of its population
  - » The House of Representatives as a lower house, with the number of representatives based on the state’s population
- An executive branch led by a president
- A judicial branch to oversee federal laws and establish a Supreme Court

The existence of three separate branches of government ensured that no one branch could become too powerful. This compromise satisfied both sides. Finally, in the cooler days of September 1787, the delegates approved the new Constitution, and the current system of government in the United States was born.

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Answer the questions.

**1 Write whether each statement describes the New Jersey Plan or the Virginia Plan.**

- a. This plan gave more power to states with larger populations. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. This plan proposed an executive office led by a council. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. This plan called for a bicameral legislature. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. This plan called for each state to get one vote in legislative decisions. \_\_\_\_\_

**2 Summarize the plan known as the Great Compromise. Which elements came from the Virginia Plan? Which elements came from the New Jersey Plan?**

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**3 Why is the ability to compromise important in a democratic society?**

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