

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION THROUGH BIOGRAPHY

LEVEL:

Middle School

TIMEFRAME:

Approximately 45 to 90 minutes

OBJECTIVES:

Students will research an individual delegate to the Constitutional Convention and portray that individual during a simulation of the representation debate at the Convention.

Students will form groups and present a persuasive argument for their solution to the representation debate at the Constitutional Convention.

Students will vote and explain if and how their vote differed from the delegate they researched.

STANDARDS:

- Constructing and Defending an Argument
 - Analysis of Primary and Secondary Sources
 - Evaluating Sources
 - Developing Research Skills
 - Speaking and Listening
 - Reading Informational Texts
 - Principals of Democracy
 - Foundations of the Political System
 - Role of Government
 - Revolution and the New Nation
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WARM UP: TO BE ASSIGNED AS HOMEWORK OR COMPLETED IN-CLASS THE DAY BEFORE

1. Assign each student a delegate from the Constitutional Convention and supply a short biography for each. Instruct students to read the biography of their delegate prior to the start of the activity.

Biographies are located in the following resources:

- a. Berkin, Carol. *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution*. Harcourt, 2003.
- b. TeachingAmericanHistory.org
- c. The US National Archives and Records Administration (archives.gov)

Note: Ensure you have a delegate representing every state when you distribute names to your students. The following list is a suggestion to ensure diverse delegate

positions. If you assign Alexander Hamilton (NY), remind the student that Hamilton was not in Philadelphia on the day of this debate.

John Langdon (NH)

Elbridge Gerry (MA)

Oliver Ellsworth (CT)

Roger Sherman (CT)

William Patterson (NJ)

Benjamin Franklin (PA)

Gouverneur Morris (PA)

James Wilson (PA)

Gunning Bedford, Jr. (DE)

John Dickinson (DE)

Luther Martin (MD)

James Madison (VA)

Edmund Randolph (VA)

George Washington (VA)

William Richardson Davie (NC)

Charles Pinckney (SC)

Pierce Butler (SC)

Abraham Baldwin (GA)

Additional background information and resources include:

- a. *Timeline of Events from the Constitutional Convention* Handout (included in the ZIP file download)
- b. Day to Day Summary of the Constitutional Convention
www.teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/summary
- c. James Madison's notes of the debates
- d. Summaries of the New Jersey Plan, Virginia Plan, and the Connecticut Compromise
- e. State Representation Quiz
www.mountvernon.org/ConstitutionStatesQuiz
- f. Watch the video *A More Perfect Union*
 - a. Stream on Mount Vernon's Website (through Vimeo)
www.mountvernon.org/constitutionvideo
 - b. Download the video from Vimeo
<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/amoreperfectunion/>
Promotional Code for Free Download: DAR
(Must log-in/create an account first)

PROCEDURE:

2. Present to students the following scenario:

It is July 5, 1787. Just three days ago, on July 2, delegates at the Constitutional Convention voted on Oliver Ellsworth's compromise – but the vote ended in a tie. Three plans dealing with representation in the legislature are up for debate and it is the job of the delegates to decide which plan will be reflected in the Constitution. The

three plans are: the Virginia Plan, the New Jersey Plan, and the Connecticut Compromise.

3. Instruct the class that George Washington will serve as the “President.” As such, he will observe the debate and make sure it runs smoothly.

Note: This role can be filled by either a student, or a teacher or other educator present for the debate.

4. Instruct students to create groups based on their delegate’s interests. Typically three groups will form: small states, large states, and those interested in compromise. Allow for independent voices to form their own groups as well (e.g. Alexander Hamilton).
5. Instruct each group to create a persuasive visual outline (drawing, text, poster, etc.) or a persuasive speech of their plan for representation. When possible, encourage groups to use primary sources to create their outline. Remind students they must continue to represent their delegate, including his interests and arguments, during discussions with their group.
6. Give each group 2-3 minutes to present their plan using their persuasive visual outline or speech. Following each presentation, give delegates from opposing viewpoints an opportunity to ask questions.
7. Once all the groups have presented their arguments, ask George Washington to call a vote of the delegates. Summarize and discuss the students’ votes.
 - a. Was the result a decision to compromise?
 - b. Did anyone decide to quit the convention?
 - c. Which presentation was the most persuasive? Why?
8. Summarize and discuss the students’ votes in comparison to the historic events of 1787.
 - a. A committee, consisting of 1 delegate from each side, and headed by Elbridge Gerry, was formed. On July 5, the Gerry Committee recommended the following models for representation:
 - i. Representation in the First Branch based on population (1:40,000 which was changed on September 17 to 1:30,000).
 - ii. Representation in the Second Branch is one representative per state. The Gerry Committee report was approved on July 16 (5-4-1) but debate over details continued.

- iii. The Constitution in its final form was presented, read aloud, and signed on September 17, 1787. George Mason, Edmund Randolph, and Elbridge Gerry all refused to sign the final document.

9. Instruct students to respond to the following prompts:

- a. What plan did your delegate defend at the beginning of the activity?
- b. Which plan did your delegate ultimately end up backing?
- c. Do you agree with your delegate's final vote in 1787?
- d. How did your delegate's biography affect his choices at the Constitutional Convention in 1787?

TIMELINE OF EVENTS FROM THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Date	Event
May 29	Edmund Randolph submits Virginia Plan, debates begin the following day.
May 30	Debate on Representation – Should it be based on population or the amount of a State’s financial contribution? Representation is not settled.
June 11	Debate Resumes on Representation: 3/5 Clause is introduced & passed. First Branch of national legislature should be based on free population and 3/5 of all other persons. Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth both propose one state = one vote. (Fails.) Vote in representation in Second Branch of government should also be proportional. (Passed.)
June 14	New Jersey requested postponement of vote on amended Virginia Plan to present alternative.
June 15	William Patterson presents New Jersey Plan, which is debated the following day.
June 18	Alexander Hamilton presents his plan outlining a very strong central government.
June 19	The New Jersey Plan defeated.
June 27	Luther Martin delivers a 3-hour speech – “an equal vote in each State was essential to the federal idea, and was founded in justice & freedom, not merely in policy.”
June 29	More debates/discussion on representation: Approves proportional representation in the House. Oliver Ellsworth introduces “Connecticut Compromise Motion” – Equal representation in the Second Branch with proportional representation in the First Branch.
July 2	Ellsworth’s motion goes to a vote, ends in a tie.

Courtesy of TeachingAmericanHistory.org