

# KEY CONCEPTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

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**LEVEL:**

Middle School

**TIMEFRAME:**

Approximately 90 minutes

**OBJECTIVES:**

Students will watch a video and identify important aspects of the making of the U.S. Constitution using a note-taking aide.

Students will work in groups to create an argument or thesis statement about the Constitution based on evidence from the video, concept cards, and handout.

Students will write an argumentative essay in response to a prompt.

**STANDARDS:**

- Reading and Writing Literacy in History/Social Studies
- Principals of Democracy
- Creating and defending an argument with evidence
- Revolution and the New Nation
- Speaking and Listening
- Reading Informational Texts

*Note: This lesson plan is designed to be used after completing the lesson “Vocabulary of the Constitution” as many of the concepts presented rely on knowledge of the words and definitions explored in the vocabulary lesson <http://www.mountvernon.org/education/lesson-plans/lesson/vocabulary-of-the-constitution/>*

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**WARM UP ACTIVITY:**

1. Share the handout or image *Empty Scales* (included in ZIP file download). As a class, discuss the role of scales in finding balance and being able to compromise.
2. Repeat the discussion, but include a prompt that the *Empty Scales* image is about the creation of the Constitution. The Framers of the Constitution were seeking balance when they created the new government. Compromise and finding balance between opposing views was instrumental at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The image of the scales in this picture, and its use in the video, symbolize compromise.

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Watch the video *A More Perfect Union: George Washington and the Making of the Constitution*. Use the *Video Transcript with Key Concepts* (included in the ZIP file download) to help cue students to upcoming concepts in the video. Instruct students to complete the *Watch and Note (P.P.D.E.V.)* worksheet (included in the ZIP file download) as they view the video. Students will note the compromises, as well as the people, places, dates, events, and vocabulary from the video on their worksheet.
  - a. Stream the video on Mount Vernon’s website (through Vimeo)  
[www.mountvernon.org/constitutionvideo](http://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)
2. Distribute one of the twenty *Concept Cards* (included in the ZIP file download) to each student. Ask students to form groups based on the image on the front and description on the back of the card they have. Provide prompts below to support group organization if needed.
  - a. Compromises Group
  - b. Maps Group
  - c. Rules of the New Government Group
  - d. People Group

*Note: Although the this lesson divides the cards into four categories, students should be allowed to create new categories and organize themselves differently using arguments based on evidence from the video or other authoritative sources about the United States Constitution.*
3. Instruct each group to discuss and create an argument or thesis about the making of the Constitution in which their cards provide evidence for their argument. They should use their *Watch and Note* worksheet to help remember the information in the video. Allow time for each group to share their argument with the class. If needed, provide one of the following inquiry statements to groups as a prompt to support argument or thesis construction:
  - a. What role did compromises have in the making of the U.S. Constitution?
  - b. What forces were acting on the new nation to bring states together or pull them apart?

- c. How are the first seven articles of the U.S. Constitution important to the way the government operates?
  - d. How did individuals who lived in the 18th century affect the making of the U.S. Constitution?
4. Provide students with a copy of the handout *Key Concepts of the Constitution* (included in the ZIP file download) to reinforce all twenty key concepts.
5. Distribute the *Essay Prompt* (included in the ZIP file download) to students. Allow them to use their *Watch and Note* worksheets and *Key Concepts of the Constitution* as reference during their writing.

*Note: A suggested rubric is included in the ZIP file download to aid in grading essays.*

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**OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:**

1. Instruct students to research each concept in order to put the Concept Cards in chronological order.
2. Challenge students to practice their visual analysis skills using the worksheet *20 Questions for Reading and Evaluating Historic Prints*  
<http://www.mountvernon.org/education/lesson-plans/lesson/20-questions-for-reading-and-evaluating-historic-prints/>
3. Ask students to create original imagery to convey a Constitutional issue from history or from today. Research primary sources from the era for inspiration on the types of images that would appropriate to for the period to convey the issue.
4. Students can identify a key concept of the Constitution that is not fully addressed in the video *A More Perfect Union* and create their own video in response.

George Washington's Mount Vernon presents

*A More Perfect Union: George Washington and the Making of the Constitution*

Support for this program provided by The Life Guard Society of Historic Mount Vernon, Claude Moore Charitable Foundation, and Ann & Hugh Scott III

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[www.mountvernon.org/ampu](http://www.mountvernon.org/ampu)

*Compromise Cues*

*Maps Cues*

*Rules of New Government Cues*

*People Cues*

#### **PART 1: SECURING THE PEACE**

[Narrator]

History is filled with stories of rebellion and revolution. Oppressor and oppressed. But for every dictator overthrown and noble victory achieved, too many revolutions have succumb to either the siren call of new tyrants, or descended into bloody chaos.

So how is it that the United States, formed from its own eight-year war, managed to avoid these common pitfalls? How is it that no American king stepped forward to be crowned? That thirteen fractious states chose to unify, rather than go their separate ways. It was largely due to the leadership of a small group of visionaries, who understood the lessons of the past. And sought a new representative form of government. Leaders like George Washington who are capable of compromise while pursuing a more perfect Union.

The American Revolutionaries declared that government existed to protect fundamental rights. And when those rights were violated, that government could be overthrown. But what should fill the void? **A government made too powerful could lead to tyranny. But without power to protect the rule of law and the liberties of the people, anarchy. The trick was finding the right balance.**

During the War for Independence, the colonies had united under the Articles of Confederation. The bond formed under the Articles was weak at best. The Confederation Congress had no power to tax, or coordinate foreign policy. The states, retaining much of their original sovereignty, even had their own separate currencies. **Though the Americans had secured their independence under the Articles, it was increasingly evident that this weak government was no match for the diverging interests and priorities of the individual states.** It was a Union in name only.

Though he had lead the Americans to victory, General George Washington was unsure about the lasting stability of this new American nation. If the citizens did not find a way to set aside their regional interests for the greater good, America risked Civil War, or being picked apart by foreign powers. **But he had relinquished his command and resumed a private life at Mount Vernon. Now, he**

said, it was the choice of the people whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a nation. But his advice was ignored. The states were in debt from the war, and acted with increasing self-interest. Some responded by printing paper money, causing rampant inflation. Others raised taxes on farmers, throwing them in jail when they could not pay. Without power to tax or enforce law, the Confederation Congress could do little but watch. **It was so weak; it did not even have the power to enforce the peace treaty with Great Britain whose forces lingered menacingly in American territory.** Foreign policy consisted of begging for new loans to pay existing debts.

By 1786, the Union was unravelling. Amending the Articles of Confederation required unanimous support of the thirteen states. An impossible hurdle. To a growing number of the nations' political and intellectual leaders a new lasting solution was needed. A new national Constitution. But without widespread public support, could there really be any chance of reform? For the Constitutional Convention to have any chance of success, they needed the leadership of the only man known and trusted throughout the states. They needed George Washington.

But Washington was reluctant to leave Mount Vernon and risk his hard won reputation in a cause that was less than certain. "That it is necessary to revise and amend the Articles of Confederation, I entertain no doubt," he uttered, "but what may be the consequences of such an attempt is doubtful."

In the fall of 1786, angry mobs of farmers, led by the Revolutionary War veteran, Daniel Shays, went on the march through Massachusetts, protesting high taxes, closing courthouses, and threatening the armory in Springfield. **Ultimately, Shays' rebellion was brought to a bloody halt. But the fear of further uprisings convinced Congress that action was needed.** They called for a national convention to be held in Philadelphia, in 1787.

"There are combustibles in every state, which a spark may set fire to," Washington exclaimed. He agreed to attend the convention, concluding that, "Reform of the present system is indispensable." He would wager his hard-earned reputation on the hope that the convention would succeed. Not in revising the Articles of Confederation, but in drafting a new Constitution that would create a truly national government.

## **PART II: THE CONVENTION**

[Narrator]

Throughout May 1787, delegates from all over the union arrived in Philadelphia. Luminaries like Benjamin Franklin, and rising stars like Alexander Hamilton were in attendance. There were seven former governors, including Virginia's Edmund Randolph, and jurists, like Pennsylvania's James Wilson. And there were relative newcomers, like James Madison. **Eventually, 55 men would serve at the Convention, and chairing this body, George Washington.**

Together, they had won the war. Now, they needed to secure the peace. Foreign powers had predicted the American experiment would fail. This Convention sought to prove the world wrong. The delegates

agreed that they would write a new Constitution. It was risky. They were only authorized by Congress to suggest amendments to the existing Articles of Confederation. To proceed, they would work in secret. Windows were shuttered despite the summer heat, and oaths of secrecy were taken. It was thanks to James Madison's diligent note taking that we even know what took place. There was little unity over many of the most important questions confronting the delegates.

Smaller states, which had enjoyed equal representation in the existing government, feared they would lose sovereignty to the dominance of the larger states. Delaware's Gunning Bedford warned that the small states would find some foreign ally if their autonomy was threatened. The larger states wanted representation based on population. James Wilson reminded the delegates, "Can we forget for whom we are forming a government? Is it for men, or for the imaginary beings called states?" As the debate went on, two delegates from New York walked out, believing the Convention had exceeded its mandate. If others left, the Convention might collapse.

Overseeing the debate, Washington grew anxious for a solution. **Then Roger Sherman of Connecticut arrived with a proposal. It would come to be known as the Great Compromise. Sherman proposed a legislature split into two bodies. One would allocate representatives based on a state's population. The other would treat states as equals.** **Here was the birth of the House of Representatives and Senate.** The Great Compromise broke the deadlock between large and small states, but left them with a new, troubling question.

The next challenge: how would enslaved people be counted for purposes of representation and taxation? In 1787, slavery existed in every state except Massachusetts. But the institution was most heavily concentrated on the plantations and farms of the southern states. This painful reality raised the question of how should states determine population. More to the point, who counts as a person? The southern state delegations, led by Charles Pinckney and Pierce Butler, sought to have slaves counted as part of their population, even though they were considered to be property by their owners. The southern delegates threatened to oppose any actions that would limit or constrain slavery.

Some northern delegates were incredulous. Once again faced with the threat of a mass defection and a doomed Convention, the delegates reached yet another compromise. **They agreed to count all slaves for purposes of representation as three-fifths of a person.** Looking back through time, this three-fifths decision looks like a moral failure. But to the delegates, many who assumed that slavery was already fading away, this compromise was deemed necessary if the Constitutional Convention was to have any chance of success. Of course, what the delegates could not see is that this new Constitution left millions in bondage and failed to extinguish the slow fuse that would ignite in bloody civil war 70 years later.

The last challenge: would the American people accept the powerful executive? The Article of Confederation lacked one. Each state could overrule the others. There was no body to transcend states' interests and represent the nation's. Hamilton and Madison argued a powerful national leader was necessary. Madison's proposal, the Virginia Plan, offered a powerful single executive, balanced by a

representative legislature and a judiciary. Others, including Edmund Randolph, questioned the nature of this executive, worrying that too much power in the hands of one person could lead to monarchy.

Even Benjamin Franklin expressed concern. Though he expected Washington would likely be the first to serve as the chief executive, he worried that nobody knows what sort may come afterwards. But in the end, the proposal for a single executive carried, based largely on the hope that one man would lead the new government. George Washington.

### **PART III: RATIFICATION AND BEYOND**

[Narrator]

The public had been kept in the dark for months. What had the greatest minds of their country, their beloved General Washington, conceived? By the time the Constitution was ready for signing, 42 of the original 55 delegates remained in Philadelphia. Washington signed first, followed by the rest. Three delegates, George Mason, Elbridge Gerry, and Edmund Randolph, refused to sign, protesting the lack of a Bill of Rights.

What they signed contained a mere seven Articles, seven pieces that together formed the new government. **The first three defined the Branches of Government, creating checks and balances between them. Three more outline the relationship between the states and the federal government, along with the process for making amendments. And the seventh established rules by which the new Constitution could be adopted.**

The reaction was mixed. The Confederation Congress briefly considered censuring the delegates for exceeding their original mandate, but they concluded something needed to be done and that this new Constitution was the best option. The states were called upon to form conventions to ratify or reject the new charter. At least nine states had to approve for it to take effect. Any less and the Constitution would be dead. Rival factions quickly formed.

- A King is a King is a King.

- I disagree, what's to keep us all together is--

[Narrator]

Some favored the new Constitution as a necessity. **They became known as Federalists.** Others, like the patriot Patrick Henry, were skeptical. The Constitution had no guarantee of individual rights, like a free press, and protections against unlawful prosecution. And they feared the Executive could become a tyrant.

- The whole of Europe has been within that space for hundreds, nay, thousands--

[Narrator]

**Together, they were known as Anti-Federalists.** In states where Federalists held sway, ratification came quickly. Delaware was first, voting unanimously in favor on December 7th. Five more states followed

over the next two months, but six states were far from the nine required. Even worse, the largest and most powerful states, New York and Virginia, were deadlocked. Could there really be a United States without New York and Virginia?

In Virginia Patrick Henry and George Mason were the most vocal opponents of ratification, fearing its lack of safeguards for individual liberty. James Madison, with the quiet support of Washington, argued fervently in support of the Constitution. Two more States voted to ratify. Just one was needed for the Constitution, the new Federal Government, to be born. Who would be the ninth? Could New York be convinced to ratify? Could Virginia? Or would the United States be born in pieces? Would Washington suffer the indignity of seeing his native State reject the Constitution he worked so hard to conceive?

On June 25, 1788, Virginia's votes were cast. It was two days before the new reached Mount Vernon. Virginia's convention had compromised. They asked that a Bill of Rights be added to the Constitution, and they had voted to ratify by a margin of just ten votes. **Unbeknownst to them, just four days earlier, New Hampshire had become the ninth State to ratify.** They had ensured the United States would be born. Now, by its vote, Virginia had ensured the United States would live.

Though he had remained publicly silent in the debate, the public's faith in George Washington's role at the Constitutional Convention played a vital role in Virginia's assent. "Be assured," wrote James Monroe in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, "that Washington's influence carried the government." **The new government now a certainty, and with the endorsement of Virginia, the remaining states, including New York, voted in favor. Rhode Island would be the last holdout, joining the Union in 1790.** After ratification the question now turned toward just who would lead this new government.

It seemed a forgone conclusion that George Washington would be its first President. He had presided over the Constitutional Convention. He was trusted, beloved. Many had agreed to support ratifying the new charter because they believed Washington would assume a leadership role. But he was eager for a life of tranquility at his Mount Vernon estate. Letters from leaders throughout the states began to arrive, urging him to reconsider. No other man could bind the fractious nation together. Duty overcame desire. To deny the call, he realized, would see the country shipwrecked inside of the port. He decided he would reenter public life if the voters wanted him. **On April 14, 1789, the answer came by way of a messenger from Congress. It had taken several months to complete the tally. George Washington had been elected President by unanimous vote of the Electors.**

His leadership carried a nation ahead and into a realm unknown to humankind. There were rights to be guaranteed, a Presidency to be defined, and a nation to be built from a collection of feuding States. There were rivalries to be healed and compromises to be made, to ensure the great American experiment continued. Thanks to the leadership of George Washington and his fellow delegates, the former colonies were truly unified into one United States. **Equipped with a representative government that was both balanced and empowered to serve the people.**



TRANSCRIPT

A MORE PERFECT UNION: GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE MAKING OF THE CONSTITUTION

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Now more than two hundred years old, the U.S. Constitution has endured to become the world's oldest representative Constitution in existence today. Born of compromise and enhanced through amendments, the Constitution continues to be the democratic bedrock of our more perfect Union.

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Use the chart to organize your notes and identify specific items for each category that appear in the video *A More Perfect Union: George Washington and the Making of the Constitution*.

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>ITEMS IDENTIFIED</b>
<b>PEOPLE</b>	
<b>PLACES</b>	
<b>DATES</b>	
<b>EVENTS</b>	
<b>VOCABULARY</b>	
<b>COMPROMISES</b>	

WORKSHEET: A MORE PERFECT UNION  
WATCH AND NOTE (P.P.D.E.V.)

Use your notes from the movie *A More Perfect Union: George Washington and the Making of the Constitution* to answer the following three questions.

1. What is one thing you learned about George Washington and the making of the Constitution that you did not know before?

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2. What is one big idea, or thesis, you remember from this video?

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3. What is one thing from this video that you will tell to someone else?

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### Concepts of the Constitution

Creating compromise requires finding balance.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The federal design of the Constitution strikes a balance between too much central power, which could lead to tyranny and too little, which could lead to anarchy.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights work together to balance the power of the central government with the rights of individuals.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The Great Compromise, also known as the Connecticut Compromise, found a way to balance the interests of the large states, who wanted representation based on population, and the small states, who preferred a one-state/one-vote model.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The 3/5ths Compromise counted enslaved individuals as 3/5ths of a person when measuring the relative size of a state's population. This helped determine the number of people each state could send to the House of Representatives. With this compromise, the delegates prioritized the new national government over regional disagreements about slavery.

### Concepts of the Constitution

Despite their loss to the United States in the War for Independence, the British Empire still threatened the existence of the new nation through military and economic pressure.

### Concepts of the Constitution

Without the British as a common enemy, individual states lacked a common cause and put their own interests before national unity.

### Concepts of the Constitution

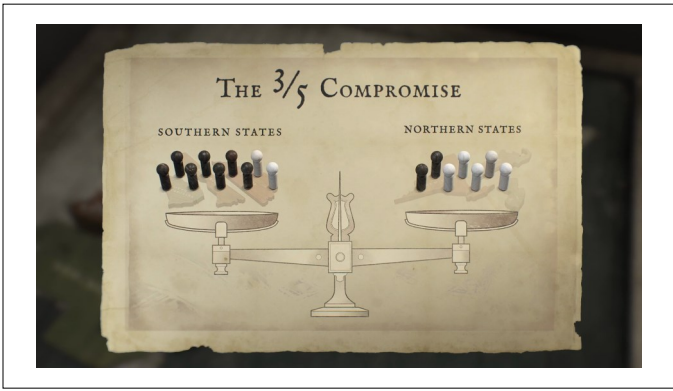
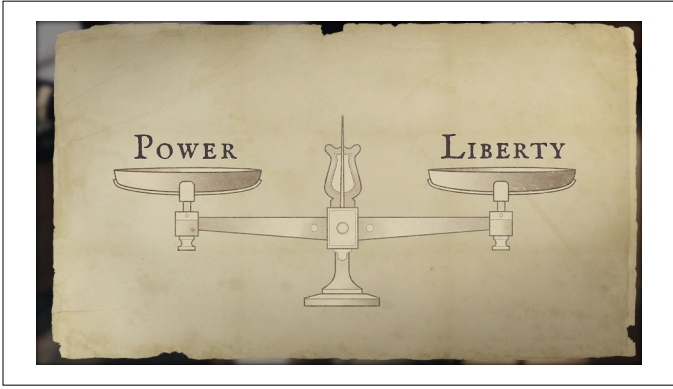
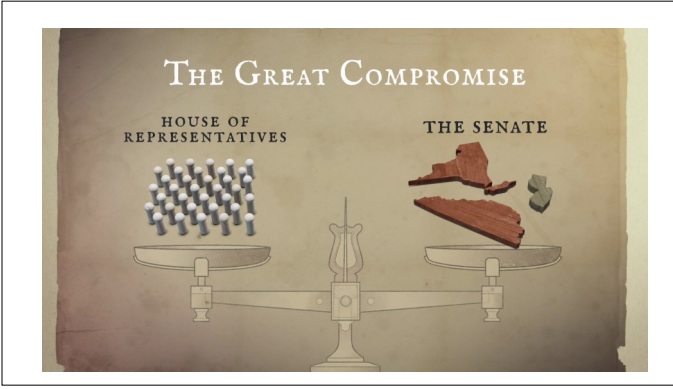
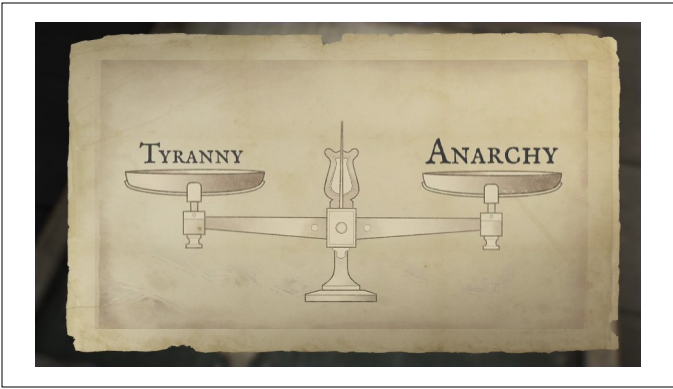
Shays' Rebellion showed the weaknesses of the government under the Articles of Confederation after the American Revolution. These events helped demonstrate the need to create a new type of government.

### Concepts of the Constitution

By signing and ratifying the U. S. Constitution, the states and the citizens agreed to move forward as one united nation.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The first three articles of the U.S. Constitution outline the three branches of government and create a system of checks and balances between them.



### Concepts of the Constitution

The U. S. Constitution created a legislature with two representative assemblies; one was based on a state's population and the other recognized states as equals.

### Concepts of the Constitution

Articles four, five, and six of the U. S. Constitution outline the relationship between the national government, now called the federal government, and the state governments.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The seventh article outlines the rules for states to adopt the U. S. Constitution and join the United States of America.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The U. S. Constitution had to be ratified in at least nine states in order to become the new government of United States of America.

### Concepts of the Constitution

George Washington relinquished his command of the army after the Revolutionary War to ensure the elected government had control over the military.

### Concepts of the Constitution

Delegates representing different states in the Union were sent to the Constitutional Convention. These individuals were men of influence who were concerned about the future of the new nation.

### Concepts of the Constitution

People from different regions respected George Washington as a leader. Delegates selected him to be the president of the Constitutional Convention.

### Concepts of the Constitution

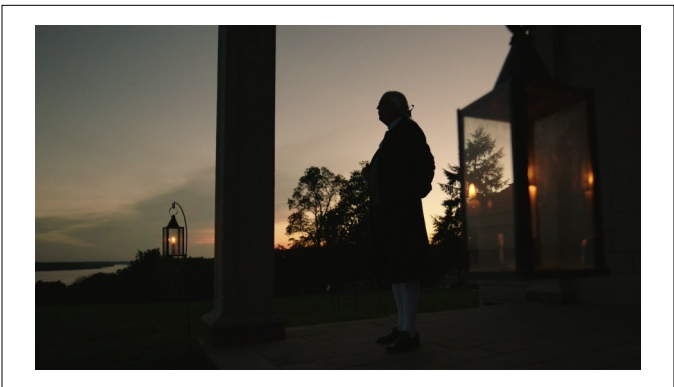
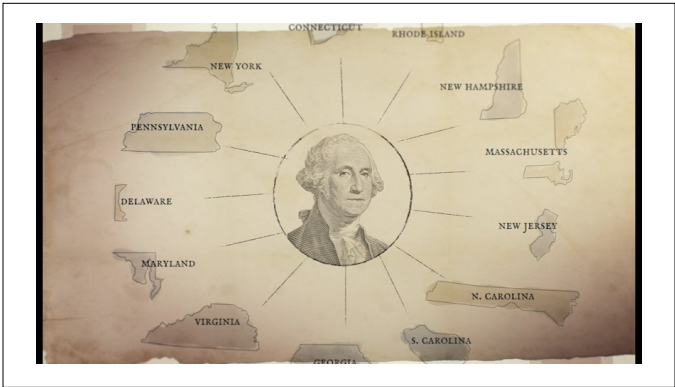
The Federalists, like James Madison, supported the adoption of the Constitution and argued for its ratification at state conventions and in the press.

### Concepts of the Constitution

The Anti-Federalists, like George Mason, felt the Constitution would hurt states' rights and individual rights. They argued against ratification at state conventions and in the press.

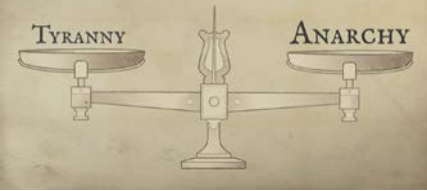
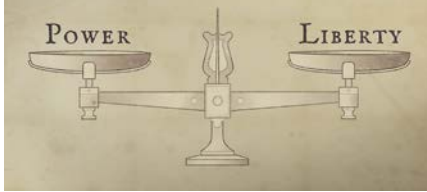

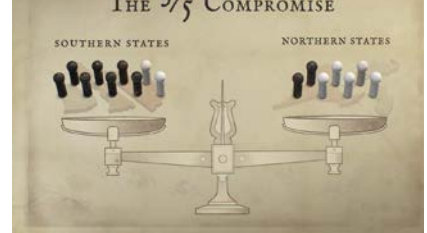
### Concepts of the Constitution

The Electoral College unanimously selected George Washington as the first President. He was reluctant to come out of retirement but he did so to honor the will of the citizens.







# KEY CONCEPTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

**Compromises Group:** The U.S. Constitution sought to resolve disagreements between delegates through compromises.






	<p>The federal design of the Constitution strikes a balance between too much central power, which could lead to tyranny and too little, which could lead to anarchy.</p>
	<p>The U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights work together to balance the power of the central government with the rights of individuals.</p>
	<p>The Great Compromise, also known as the Connecticut Compromise, found a way to balance the interests of the large states, who wanted representation based on population, and the small states, who preferred a one-state/one-vote model.</p>
	<p>The 3/5ths Compromise counted enslaved individuals as 3/5ths of a person when measuring the relative size of a state's population. This helped determine the number of people each state could send to the House of Representatives. With this compromise, the delegates prioritized the new national government over regional disagreements about slavery.</p>



**Maps Group:** After the War for Independence, internal and external factors threatened the future of the United States of America

	<p>Despite their loss to the United States in the War for Independence, the British Empire still threatened the existence of the new nation through military and economic pressure.</p>
	<p>Without the British as a common enemy, individual states lacked a common cause and put their own interests before national unity.</p>
	<p>Shays' Rebellion showed the weaknesses of the government under the Articles of Confederation after the American Revolution. These events helped demonstrate the need to create a new type of government.</p>
	<p>By signing and ratifying the U. S. Constitution, the states and the citizens agreed to move forward as one united nation.</p>

**Rules of the New Government Group:** The first seven articles of the U. S. Constitution ensured power was distributed between national and state governments.


	<p>The first three articles of the U.S. Constitution outline the three branches of government and create a system of checks and balances between them.</p>
	<p>The U. S. Constitution created a legislature with two representative assemblies; one was based on a state's population and the other recognized states as equals.</p>
	<p>Articles four, five, and six of the U. S. Constitution outline the relationship between the national government, now called the federal government, and the state governments.</p>
	<p>The seventh article outlines the rules for states to adopt the U. S. Constitution and join the United States of America.</p>
	<p>The U. S. Constitution had to be ratified in at least nine states in order to become the new government of United States of America.</p>

HANDOUT: KEY CONCEPTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

**People Group:** George Washington was a unifying figure among men of influence during a fractious time.

	<p>George Washington relinquished his command of the army after the Revolutionary War to ensure the elected government had control over the military.</p>
	<p>Delegates representing different states in the Union were sent to the Constitutional Convention. These individuals were men of influence who were concerned about the future of the new nation.</p>
	<p>People from different regions respected George Washington as a leader. Delegates selected him to be the president of the Constitutional Convention.</p>
	<p>The Federalists, like James Madison, supported the adoption of the Constitution and argued for its ratification at state conventions and in the press.</p>

HANDOUT: KEY CONCEPTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

 The image shows the text "ANTI-FEDERALISTS" at the top. Below it is a graphic of a document with a red 'X' over it, symbolizing opposition to the Constitution.	<p>The Anti-Federalists, like George Mason, felt the Constitution would hurt states' rights and individual rights. They argued against ratification at state conventions and in the press.</p>
 A silhouette of George Washington standing in a park-like setting at dusk or dawn, with a building and a lantern visible in the background.	<p>The Electoral College unanimously selected George Washington as the first President. He was reluctant to come out of retirement but he did so to honor the will of the citizens.</p>

ESSAY PROMPT  
KEY CONCEPTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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Review the two statements below and circle one to respond to. Be sure your response contains both an argument and evidence from the video *A More Perfect Union: George Washington and the Making of the Constitution* or other authoritative sources about the United States Constitution.

1. The compromises made at the Constitutional Convention can be seen in the rules of the government outlined in the U.S. Constitution. Do you agree or disagree? Defend your argument using evidence.
2. The new United States overcame challenges after the War for Independence thanks to the leadership of George Washington. Do you agree or disagree? Defend your argument using evidence.

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GRADING RUBRIC FOR ESSAY PROMPT  
KEY CONCEPTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

Review the two statements below and circle one to respond to. Be sure your response contains both an argument and evidence from the video *A More Perfect Union: George Washington and the Making of the Constitution* or other authoritative sources about the United States Constitution.

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	1 – Below level	2 – At level	3 – Exceeds level
Argument	Student does not respond to the prompt.	Student responds to the prompt.	Student effectively addresses all parts of the prompt, including addressing counter arguments.
Support	Student provides no evidence or provides evidence that is not credible or not related to their argument.	Student provides relevant evidence to support argument and provides analysis for how evidence supports the argument.	Student provides only relevant evidence that supports the argument and shows deep understanding and analysis of the topic.
Organization	Student does not put essay in any type of order and does not connect paragraphs or provide introduction or conclusion that connect to the argument.	Student provides an introduction, conclusion, and logical body paragraphs that support the argument.	Student uses a clear thesis to introduce the argument and places each paragraph in a logical order to support the argument. Student provides insight in the conclusion.