

Constitutional Convention

Summary

Enduring Understanding:

Students will understand the structure and function of the United States government established by the Constitution.

Essential Questions:

Why did the U.S. need a new government?

How did the Constitutional Convention evolve?

How did the delegates to the Convention resolve their differences of opinion through compromise? (Focus on the Great Compromise and the 3/5 Compromise)

Time Frame

3 class periods of 45 minutes each

Group Size

Small Groups

Life Skills

Thinking & Reasoning, Communication, Social & Civic Responsibility

Materials

3 x 5 cards with names of delegates to the Constitutional Convention and the state from which they represented.

Background for Teachers

It is important that the students understand the problems the country faced under the Articles of Confederation. (Debt, money, foreign threats, no way to admit new states, etc.) Representatives from each state were called together to address these problems. This meeting came to be called the Constitutional Convention after it was decided that an entire new document was needed.

Student Prior Knowledge

This lesson should be taught after the Articles of Confederation are taught. Students should have a knowledge of what the Articles of Confederation were and why they failed to work.

Instructional Procedures

Step 1 As students come into class, hand each student a card with the name of a Constitutional Convention delegate and tell students to seat themselves according to state. (Virginia delegates group together, Delaware delegates group together, etc. As there were 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, not all cards will be used. Try to distribute the cards proportionately to the number of delegates per state. For example, the group representing Pennsylvania, the colony with the most delegates, should have more students than the group representing New York.)

Step 2 Review with the class the problems faced under the Articles of Confederation.

Step 3 Tell students they have been invited to the Constitutional Convention. The year is 1787, the place is Philadelphia. They have been assigned the responsibility of creating a government that will work and will last far after they are gone. Encourage students to put themselves in the mindset of 200 years ago; try to forget what they currently know now about the workings of government.

Step 4 Hand out "Creating a Government" worksheet. (see attached) In their state groups, have students go over the questions and discuss the issues/problems the delegates faced. Have students come up with their suggestions at creating a government. (Not all questions have to be answered; if a group spends the whole time on one particular issue, that group will have covered the subject in depth and will be better prepared to contribute to the class discussion following group discussion.)

Step 5 Allow students the rest of class time (based on where discussions are going). Teachers may want to steer group discussions to focus on some of the more important issues of the convention, like representation and slavery. Large groups representing large states should realize that it would be to their advantage to have representation based on population; small states will see that they may be outvoted every-time unless they have an equal number of representatives in Congress. Southern states are going to want to keep their slaves and count them as part of the population; northern states are not going to want slaves to count as population. (Pennsylvania, the Quaker state, wants slavery to be abolished altogether in the new government). As the teacher, is it important that you help students see these issues based on their knowledge of the colony from which they come.

Step 6 Come together as a class—the whole convention—and discuss ideas. Go through and get viewpoints from each group. Encourage debate, posing key questions. Should we have a president? What if the president gets too power-hungry, like the king? Who decides who the president is going to be? Even the uneducated? (You may want to use a simple example like: should the entire student body choose the basketball team? Or should that decision be the responsibility of the coach—someone who knows basketball inside and out?) Who will make the laws? How many representatives will each state get? An equal number? But what if a state has more people? Shouldn't they have more of a say about a law affecting the nation?

*These questions are simply an elaboration of the questions on the Creating a Government worksheet. Based on student responses, you will want to lead the discussion to the main points of contention and then compromise: representation and slavery.

Step 7 After students have discussed the issues faced by the delegates, explain what actually happened. Hand out revised worksheets: "Government Created" (see attached) and have students write down what did happen. Go through the questions and answer them with the class. Be sure to explain the Virginia Plan, the New Jersey Plan, and the Great Compromise. Also, be sure to explain the 3/5 Compromise.

Strategies for Diverse Learners

Make sure to arrange groups so that struggling students will be included into stronger groups. If a large number of these students are present, the entire activity can be done in a group discussion format.

Assessment Plan

Complete group worksheet.

Complete discussion worksheet.

Comprehension Quiz (attached)

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