



Historical Committee: United States Constitutional Convention

Chairs: Peter Connolly '19
Rapporteur: Griffin Seidel '21

Hello Delegates,

My name is Peter Connolly, and I am a senior at Concord Academy with a strong interest in politics and public policy. I am one of two co-heads of our Model UN team that travels to university conferences across the country. My rapporteur is Griffin Seidel, a sophomore at Concord Academy and a member of our Model UN team.

Our committee will be charged with writing the Constitution for the United States in 1787, having just won a hard fought war for their freedom. Each of you will represent a state and will have your own agendas as you work to rewrite the Constitution from scratch. However, as you deliberate, the eyes of the world will be watching to see if all these eloquent words of liberty and freedom translate into an effective government.

We will also ask ourselves: how can the Constitution and our government be made more effective and strong in the face of tyranny and corruption? Can the issue of slavery be resolved or will the U.S. be divided by a civil war? You delegates must tackle these issues head on and also make sure to represent your state's interest.

This committee is a specialized historical committee, and while it's not a crisis committee, we will receive regular updates about what is occurring in the outside world, and delegates may receive letters from their home states notifying them of what their state thinks of their actions.

I look forward to meeting all of you in April!

Peter Connolly '19, Chair

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The Articles of Confederation

The Continental Congress created the Articles of Confederation in 1777 and they were ratified by all thirteen colonies by March 1st, 1787. The articles, true to their name, created a weak confederation of the thirteen colonies. Every state had a different currency and states had to negotiate tariffs and taxes on interstate trade with each other individually. The confusing laws and taxes built up and quickly became burdensome for merchants, hindering trade and economic activity. Furthermore there was only one chamber of congress and each state had one vote. Congress needed 9 out of 13 votes to pass a law, and this impossible threshold brought the government to a grinding halt. Amending the articles was nearly impossible because it required a unanimous vote from all thirteen states.

The central government could not collect taxes, so it depended on voluntary payments from the states since it lacked the enforcement power to collect taxes on its own. The central government had so little power that states conducted foreign policy on their own. Negotiating with the U.S. was challenging because foreign powers had to negotiate with each individual state. The founders knew this weak confederation was not strong enough to repel any real invasion or foreign interference.¹

Shay's rebellion, however, was the last straw. In 1786, former soldiers who had fought in the



Revolutionary War were angry that they still had not received pay for fighting in the war, and that the government had raised taxes despite the country's recent independence. Led by Daniel Shay, farmers across western Massachusetts rose up and began attacking local courthouses and government buildings across the state. In the end, a private militia paid for by private entities in Boston put down the rebellion, but it quickly became clear that

the nation was ill-prepared to defend itself. The rebellion alarmed the founders, including George Washington, and prompted them to meet and start discussing changes to the documents.²

¹ <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/10-reasons-why-americas-first-constitution-failed>

² <https://www.history.com/topics/early-us/shays-rebellion>

The Constitutional Convention

Every state except Rhode Island sent delegates to the convention in Philadelphia, intending to amend the Articles of Confederation. However, it quickly became clear that a new Constitution would need to be drafted. Large states were granted four delegates while small states were given two. The committee began in May of 1787 and the delegates planned to continue for as long as it took to find a solution and establish a functioning government.

As committee chair, I will be representing George Washington, keeping order and making sure delegates are respectful to the process and to one another. We will use standard committee procedure with a few exceptions. Delegates can produce multiple drafts of the Constitution in the same way we normally draft Model UN resolutions. But in the end our committee must only produce one document, so delegates will have to compromise and merge their drafts by the end of the session, in order to create a unified Constitution. Adding amendments to the draft Constitution will only require a simple majority.

Slavery

Slavery was one of the most divisive issues of the time. Southern states wanted slaves to be counted as a full person in the census, so those states could benefit from better representation in congress and in presidential elections. However, they did not want slaves to be counted as a full person when it came to taxation, because taxes were apportioned by population and large slave populations would increase the tax burden on those states.

There was also a strong movement to abolish the importation of slaves, and the issue remains for you delegates to contend with. Many northern states saw ending the international slave trade as a way to abolishing slavery, and they worked hard to accomplish that.³

Federal versus State Governance

³ <https://constitution.laws.com/three-fifths-compromise>

In the time of our committee, states wanted to retain their autonomy and laws, but the Articles of Confederation showed how a weak central government can cripple the economy and prevent the country from remaining stable. Many of the delegates wondered, how would a central government operate in conjunction with state legislatures? There were also questions about whether a central judiciary could operate alongside their state judiciary counterparts.⁴

The Representation Issue

Despite the inadequacies of the Continental Congress, delegates agreed that a federal legislature was an effective and less tyrannical form of governance. However, debate continued to rage over equal representation among the states based on population. States varied drastically in terms of size, and large states like Virginia and Massachusetts didn't want equal representation for all states, but smaller states like Rhode Island didn't want to be overshadowed by those larger states. For many delegates, the decision for states to ratify the new Constitution will hinge on whether a compromise on this issue can be reached.⁵

Bill of Rights

There was much contention over whether to include a Bill of Rights within the Constitution. Federalists believed that states should protect the rights of their people, and that the people have enough power to retain their rights. But Anti-federalists, ever fearful of a large federal government, believed that a Bill of Rights is necessary to safeguard individual liberties. Delegates will need to decide whether a Bill of Rights is necessary, and if so, what rights should be specifically enumerated within the Constitution.

Checks and Balances

The Enlightenment philosopher Baron de Montesquieu wrote that the best way to prevent despotism and autocracy from taking over a government is to embrace the principle of Separation of Powers, in which “different bodies of government exercise legislative, executive and judicial power, with all these bodies subject to the rule of law.” After suffering under the tyranny of the British government, the

⁴ <https://www.americanhistoryusa.com/topic/supremacy-clause/>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Constitutional-Convention>

delegates primary concern was to avoid another tyrannous king. The philosophy of separation of powers is a defining concept of our Constitution today, and something that delegates should keep in mind.⁶

Questions to Consider

1. Should there be a single president or executive running the federal government?
2. How should such a president or executive be chosen?
3. How will the separation of powers concept be included in your draft of the Constitution?
4. What are the prominent political issues in your state, and what type of central government does your state want?
5. How do you ensure the issue of slavery does not tear the country apart?
6. Should there be equal representation among the states in the federal legislature, and if so, how might that inequality affect the democratic process?
7. As we consider potential invasions from enemy states, or a return of the British army, should the U.S. establish a standing army of its own?
8. If the committee decides to draft a Bill of Rights, what rights should be included?

⁶ <https://www.history.com/topics/us-government/checks-and-balances>