

# Was the Constitutional Convention a Success?



This inquiry unit asks students to consider the nature of compromise, and to what extent a decision can be considered successful when concessions have been made on both sides. The traditional narrative for students surrounding the writing of the U.S. Constitution suggests that the convention was a triumph of American ideals, this inquiry suggests the perspective that the issues left unresolved had serious repercussions for the future of the United States.

## Supporting Questions

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1. What was the purpose of the Constitutional Convention?
2. What argument over representation led to the Great Compromise?
3. How did the Constitutional Convention address the issue of slavery?
4. What was the impact of excluding slavery from the Constitution?

7 Grade Illinois Hub Creating the Constitution Inquiry by Lincoln Middle School 7th grade Social Studies

## Was the Constitutional Convention a Success?

Inquiry Standard	<b>SS.IS.5.6-8.MdC.</b> Identify evidence from multiple sources to support claims, noting its limitations
Staging the Compelling Question	Present the students with a series of "Would You Rather" questions and ask them take a position. Tally the responses. After several rounds, discuss with students how it felt to be in the majority or the minority. How did it feel to compromise?

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
What was the purpose of the Constitutional Convention?	What argument over representation led to the Great Compromise?	How did the Constitutional Convention address the issue of slavery?	What was the impact of excluding slavery from the Constitution?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Write a newspaper headline about the Constitutional Convention and a lead to the article containing answers to Who, What, Where, When, and Why.	Students complete a RAFT activity in which they take on the ROLE of a representative from a small state or large state, address the AUDIENCE of the Constitutional Convention, use the FORMAT of a speech, addressing the TOPIC of representation.	List and explain the three compromises that the North and the South reached about the issue of slavery.	Create a poster illustrating the central ideas of the primary source documents and provide text evidence to support the ideas.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
Source A: Excerpt from Creating the Constitution, by Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier Source B: Address to the People of New York by John Jay	Source A: Article I of the U.S. Constitution Source B: 1790 Census Data	Source A: Excerpt from "The Constitution and Slavery"	Source A: An excerpt from The Great Crisis!, by William Lloyd Garrison Source B: Remarks of Thurgood Marshall on Bicentennial of Constitution, 1987

Summative Performance Task	<b>ARGUMENT</b> Was the Constitutional Convention a success? After reading primary and secondary sources on the Constitutional Convention, create a product in which you discuss the purpose of the Constitutional Convention, describe the compromises made, and evaluate whether or not the Constitutional Convention was a success.
	<b>EXTENSION</b> Students can present their products to the class.
Taking Informed Action	<p><b>UNDERSTAND</b> Students should research an issue in local government about which a compromise was reached.</p> <p><b>ASSESS</b> Students interview someone involved in the decision-making process to learn about the process for reaching a compromise.</p> <p><b>ACTION</b> Write an open letter in response to the issue that required local government officials to compromise, addressing and evaluating the process that was used to reach a compromise.</p>

### Inquiry Description

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This inquiry unit asks students to consider the nature of compromise, and to what extent a decision can be considered successful when concessions have been made on both sides. The traditional narrative for students surrounding the writing of the U.S. Constitution suggests that the convention was a triumph of American ideals, this inquiry suggests the perspective that the issues left unresolved had serious repercussions for the future of the United States.

### Structure

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The inquiry begins with sources that explain background about the Constitutional Convention, including the information about the "5W's". These sources also introduce the perspective that the Constitution is one of the most important documents ever written. Additionally, the idea that the Constitution required a great deal of compromise is also introduced. In Supporting Questions 2 and 3, students will learn more about specific compromises made within the Constitution, including the "Great Compromise," which resolved the issue of equal versus proportional representation, and the Three-Fifths Compromise, which attempted to define the person-hood of slaves. In the final supporting question, students read documents articulating the point of view that the compromises made about slavery were too egregious to overcome.

## Staging the Compelling Question

Compelling  
Question

Was the Constitutional Convention a Success?

### Staging the compelling question

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Discussion around this activity should prompt students to consider how much compromise is acceptable in order for a decision to be successful. This understanding will guide their learning on this inquiry, allowing them to recognize that drafting the Constitution was an exercise in compromise. While the U.S. Constitution is generally regarded as one the greatest documents ever written, some people feel that the compromises made during its drafting were too egregious to overcome.

## Supporting Question 1

Supporting Question	What was the purpose of the Constitutional Convention?
Formative Performance Task	Write a newspaper headline about the Constitutional Convention and a lead to the article containing answers to Who, What, Where, When, and Why.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Source A:</b> Excerpt from Creating the Constitution, by Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier</li><li>● <b>Source B:</b> Address to the People of New York by John Jay</li></ul>

Using two source documents, students will build background information about the Constitutional Convention. The first document is a secondary source document. In this document, the authors reveal their perspective that the Constitution was one of the greatest documents ever written. Document B is an excerpt from an address given to the people of New York by John Jay. This document alludes to the rationale behind drafting a new Constitution, and foreshadows that the document contains compromises by stating, "for no one man or thing under the sun has ever yet please every body."

SS.CV.2.6-8LC. Describe the origins, purposes, and impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements.

SS.CV.2.6-8.MdC. Explain the origins, functions, and structure of government with reference to the U.S. Constitution, Illinois Constitution, and other systems of government.

### Formative Performance Task

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Students can look at the format of current newspapers. After a brief discussion about the structural features of a newspaper's front page, they can create a headline and a lead to an article that answers the supporting question.

## Supporting Question 1

Featured Source A

Excerpt from *Creating the Constitution*, by Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier

### Excerpt

It is, said William Gladstone, the celebrated nineteenth-century English politician, “the most remarkable work known to me in modern times to have been produced by the human intellect at a single stroke...” Many historians agree with Gladstone. The American Constitution is certainly one of the most important written documents written in modern times, and a case can be made that it is one of the most important pieces of writing ever.

Why can we make such bold claims for this work, which is only about a dozen pages – fewer than six thousand words? For one thing, it finally bound the very argumentative thirteen original states into a single republic, which would, a hundred and fifty years later, be the most important and influential nation on earth. Without the Constitution or something very much like it, there would be no United States of America as we know it, and the history of the world would have been much different....The Constitution of 1787 provided all these new nations, and those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well, with a model of how their freedoms could be secured. By what magic, then, did this great document come into being?

It was no easy task. There were more forces pulling the states apart than pushing them together. They were quite different from one another in many ways. The New England states had a great shipbuilding industry and earned a lot of their money through fishing and trade. The Southern states, by contrast, had few ships. They earned their money by growing tobacco, rice, and other crops, and depended upon New England ships to carry much of their produce to markets at home and abroad.

In the Southern states a large proportion of the labor was provided by slaves and a whole way of life was built around slavery. The Northern states were gradually eliminating slavery; many people there, although by no means most, thought that slavery ought to be forbidden.

Religious ideas varied considerably...The majority of Americans were descended from English men and women. Nonetheless, other nationalities were represented... The states had different needs and interests. Could they ever compromise those needs?

Twelve states responded affirmatively to the call to Philadelphia. In all, seventy-seven men were chosen to go, but only fifty-five actually attended...Their meeting place was the brick building known today as Independence Hall... They began by electing George Washington president of the Convention...Washington would speak rarely during the meeting, although he was influential behind the scenes. The leading role at the Convention was played by James Madison. Indeed, historians today call him The Father of the Constitution. Not only did Madison play an important part in the debates, speaking many times each day, but he brought into the Convention a carefully worked-out scheme of government, much of which ended up in the finished document.

#### Source:

*Creating the Constitution*, Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier (1997)

## Supporting Question 1

Featured Source B

Address to the People of New York by John Jay

### Excerpt

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Friends and Fellow-citizens: The Convention concurred in opinion with the people, that a national government, competent to every national object, was indispensably necessary; and it was as plain to them, as it now is to all America, that the present Confederation does not provide for such a government. These points being agreed, they proceeded to consider how and in what manner such a government could be formed, as, on the one hand, should be sufficiently energetic to raise us from our prostrate and distressed situation, and, on the other, be perfectly consistent with the liberties of the people of every state. Like men to whom the experience of other ages and countries had taught wisdom, they not only determined that it should be erected by, and depend on, the people, but, remembering the many instances in which governments vested solely in one man, or one body of men, had degenerated into tyrannies, they judged it most prudent that the three great branches of power should be committed to different hands, and therefore that the executive should be separated from the legislative, and the judicial from both. Thus far the propriety of their work is easily seen and understood, and therefore is thus far almost universally approved; for no one man or thing under the sun ever yet pleased every body.

**Source:**

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/pre..>

## Supporting Question 2

Supporting Question	What argument over representation led to the Great Compromise?
Formative Performance Task	Students complete a RAFT activity in which they take on the ROLE of a representative from a small state or large state, address the AUDIENCE of the Constitutional Convention, use the FORMAT of a speech, addressing the TOPIC of representation.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Source A:</b> Article I of the U.S. Constitution</li><li>● <b>Source B:</b> 1790 Census Data</li></ul>

Students will articulate the debate over population size and how to determine congressional representation led to the Great Compromise and the resulting two houses of congress.

SS.CV.4.6-8.LC. Explain the connection between interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when addressing issues in government and society.

SS.CV.4.6-8.MdC. Analyze ideas and principles contained in the founding documents of the United States and other countries, and explain how they influence the social and political system

SS.H.2.6-8.MdC. Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

### Formative Performance Task

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Formative performance task should demonstrate the nature of the debate and proposed solutions to the question of representation.



## Supporting Question 2

Featured Source A

Article I of the U.S. Constitution

### Excerpt

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"The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several states...Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxes, three fifths of all other Persons...

The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof, for six Years..."

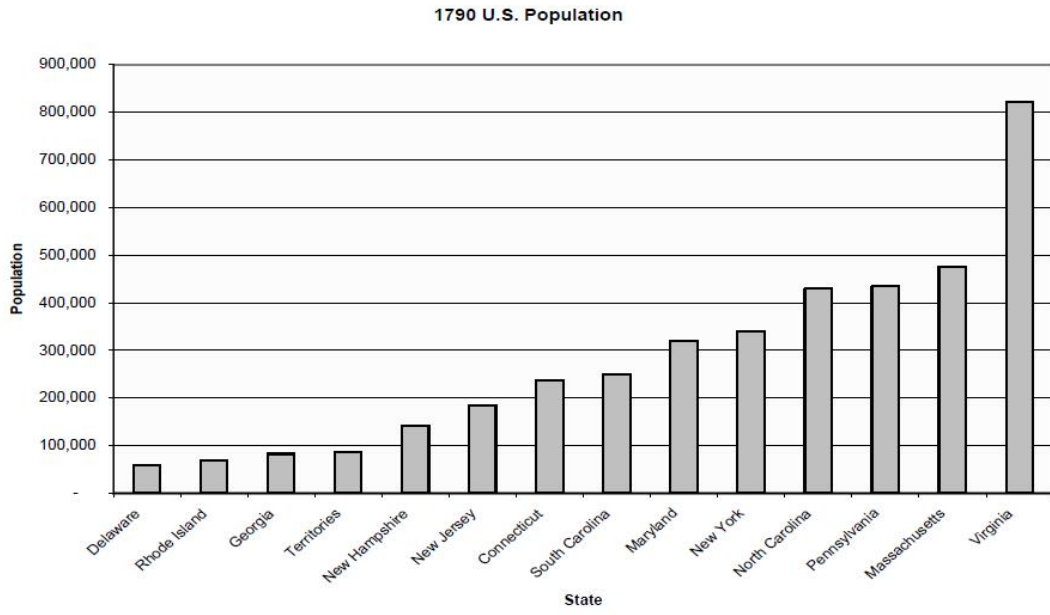
**Source:**

Article I of the U.S. Constitution

# Supporting Question 2

Featured Source B

1790 Census Data



1790 Census

## Supporting Question 3

Supporting Question	How did the Constitutional Convention address the issue of slavery?
Formative Performance Task	List and explain the three compromises that the North and the South reached about the issue of slavery.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Source A:</b> Excerpt from "The Constitution and Slavery"</li></ul>

In this question, students will be able to list the three main compromises made in regards to the issue of slavery. This question will build background knowledge for the next supporting question, which address the impact of the compromises, and will allow students to evaluate the success of the convention.

**SS.CV.4.6-8.MdC.** Analyze ideas and principles contained in the founding documents of the United States and other countries, and explain how they influence the social and political system.

### Formative Performance Task

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In this task, students should identify the Three-Fifths Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the banning of the slave trade after 1808 as being the three compromises associated with slavery.

## Supporting Question 3

Featured Source A

Excerpt from "The Constitution and Slavery"

### Excerpt

When the American colonies broke from England, the Continental Congress asked Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence...Yet at the time these words were written, more than 500,000 black Americans were slaves. Jefferson himself owned more than 100. Slaves accounted for about one-fifth of the population in the American colonies. Most of them lived in the Southern colonies, where slaves made up 40 percent of the population.

[In order to decide the issue of representation in Congress, the delegates arrived at the Great Compromise.] Part of this compromise included an issue that split the convention on North–South lines. The issue was: Should slaves count as part of the population?...

Only the Southern states had large numbers of slaves. Counting them as part of the population would greatly increase the South's political power, but it would also mean paying higher taxes. This was a price the Southern states were willing to pay. They argued in favor of counting slaves. Northern states disagreed. The delegates compromised. Each slave would count as three-fifths of a person.

Following this compromise, another controversy erupted: What should be done about the slave trade, the importing of new slaves into the United States? Ten states had already outlawed it. Many delegates heatedly denounced it. But the three states that allowed it — Georgia and the two Carolinas — threatened to leave the convention if the trade were banned. A special committee worked out another compromise: Congress would have the power to ban the slave trade, but not until 1800. The convention voted to extend the date to 1808.

A final major issue involving slavery confronted the delegates. Southern states wanted other states to return escaped slaves. The Articles of Confederation had not guaranteed this. But when Congress adopted the Northwest Ordinance, it a clause promising that slaves who escaped to the Northwest Territories would be returned to their owners. The delegates placed a similar fugitive slave clause in the Constitution. This was part of a deal with New England states. In exchange for the fugitive slave clause, the New England states got concessions on shipping and trade.

These compromises on slavery had serious effects on the nation. The fugitive slave clause (enforced through legislation passed in 1793 and 1850) allowed escaped slaves to be chased into the North and caught. It also resulted in the illegal kidnapping and return to slavery of thousands of free blacks. The three-fifths compromise increased the South's representation in Congress and the Electoral College. In 12 of the first 16 presidential elections, a Southern slave owner won. Extending the slave trade past 1800 brought many slaves to America. South Carolina alone imported 40,000 slaves between 1803 and 1808 (when Congress overwhelmingly voted to end the trade). So many slaves entered that slavery spilled into the Louisiana territory and took root.

Northern states didn't push too hard on slavery issues. Their main goal was to secure a new government. They feared antagonizing the South. Most of them saw slavery as a dying institution with no economic future. However, in five years the cotton gin would be invented, which made growing cotton on plantations immensely profitable, as well as slavery.

#### Source:

Costly, A. (n.d.). The Constitution and Slavery. Retrieved September 13, 2016, from <http://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/the-con.>

## Supporting Question 4

Supporting Question	What was the impact of excluding slavery from the Constitution?
Formative Performance Task	Create a poster illustrating the central ideas of the primary source documents and provide text evidence to support the ideas.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Source A:</b> An excerpt from The Great Crisis!, by William Lloyd Garrison</li><li>• <b>Source B:</b> Remarks of Thurgood Marshall on Bicentennial of Constitution, 1987</li></ul>

In this supporting question, students should be able to articulate the positions of William Lloyd Garrison and Thurgood Marshall. Both men believed that the integrity of the Constitution was compromised by not ethically addressing the issue of slavery. In this question, students are not asked to take a position about whether or not they agree with Garrison and Marshall, but should be able to articulate their positions.

**SS.H.1.6-8.MdC.** Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

**SS.H.2.6-8.LC.** Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

### Formative Performance Task

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Protest posters should draw from textual evidence from one or both source documents. Students should not provide personal opinions about slavery, however should limit their posters to representing the ideas presented by Garrison and Marshall.

**SS.CV.6.6-8.LC.** Determine whether specific rules and laws (both actual and proposed) resolve the problems they were meant to address.

**SS.CV.5.6-8.MdC.** Analyze the purposes, implementation, and consequences of public policies in historic and contemporary settings.

## Supporting Question 4

Featured Source A

An excerpt from *The Great Crisis!*, by William Lloyd Garrison

### Excerpt

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There is much declamation about the sacredness of the compact which was formed between the free and slave states, on the adoption of the Constitution. A sacred compact, forsooth! We pronounce it the most bloody and heaven-daring arrangement ever made by men for the continuance and protection of a system of the most atrocious villainy ever exhibited on earth... It was a compact formed at the sacrifice of the bodies and souls of millions of our race, for the sake of achieving a political object—an unblushing and monstrous coalition to do evil that good might come. Such a compact was, in the nature of things and according to the law of God, null and void from the beginning. No body of men ever had the right to guarantee the holding of human beings in bondage. Who or what were the framers of our government, that they should dare confirm and authorise such high-handed villainy—such flagrant robbery of the inalienable rights of man—such a glaring violation of all the precepts and injunctions of the gospel—such a savage war upon a sixth part of our whole population?...By this sacred instrument, the Constitution of the United States, dripping as it is with human blood, we solemnly pledge you our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor, that we will stand by you to the last. People of New-England, and of the free States! Is it true that slavery is no concern of yours? Have you no right even to protest against it, or to seek its removal? Are you not the main pillars of its support? How long do you mean to be answerable to God and the world, for spilling the blood of the poor innocents? Be not afraid to look the monster Slavery boldly in the face. He is your implacable foe—the vampire who is sucking your life-blood—the ravager of a large portion of your country, and the enemy of God and man.

### Source:

An excerpt from [The Great Crisis!](#), *The Liberator* Vol. II., No. 52 (December 29, 1832).

## Supporting Question 4

Featured Source B

Remarks of Thurgood Marshall on Bicentennial of Constitution, 1987

### Excerpt

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#### In Maui, Hawaii May 6, 1987

1987 marks the 200th anniversary of the United States Constitution. A Commission has been established to coordinate the celebration. The official meetings, essay contests, and festivities have begun.

The planned commemoration will span three years, and I am told 1987 is “dedicated to the memory of the Founders and the document they drafted in Philadelphia.”... We are to “recall the achievements of our Founders and the knowledge and experience that inspired them, the nature of the government they established, its origins, its character, and its ends, and the rights and privileges of citizenship, as well as its attendant responsibilities.”

Like many anniversary celebrations, the plan for 1987 takes particular events and holds them up as the source of all the very best that has followed. Patriotic feelings will surely swell, prompting proud proclamations of the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice shared by the Framers and reflected in a written document now yellowed with age. This is unfortunate, not the patriotism itself, but the tendency for the celebration to oversimplify, and overlook the many other events that have been instrumental to our achievements as a nation. The focus of this celebration invites a complacent belief that the vision of those who debated and compromised in Philadelphia yielded the “more perfect Union” it is said we now enjoy.

I cannot accept this invitation, for I do not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever “fixed” at the Philadelphia Convention. Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound. To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation to attain the system of constitutional government, and its respect for the individual freedoms and human rights, we hold as fundamental today. When contemporary Americans cite “The Constitution,” they invoke a concept that is vastly different from what the Framers barely began to construct two centuries ago.

For a sense of the evolving nature of the Constitution we need look no further than the first three words of the document’s preamble: “We the People.” When the Founding Fathers used this phrase in 1787, they did not have in mind the majority of America’s citizens. “We the People” included, in the words of the Framers, “the whole Number of free Persons.”

...No doubt it will be said, when the unpleasant truth of the history of slavery in America is mentioned during this bicentennial year, that the Constitution was a product of its times, and embodied a compromise which, under other circumstances, would not have been made. But the effects of the Framers’ compromise have remained for generations. They arose from the contradiction between guaranteeing liberty and justice to all, and denying both to Negroes.

#### Source:

The Bicentennial Speech. (2016). Retrieved September 13, 2016, from <http://thurgoodmarshall.com/the-bicentennial-speech..>

## Summative Performance Task

Compelling Question	<b>Was the Constitutional Convention a Success?</b>
Argument	Was the Constitutional Convention a success? After reading primary and secondary sources on the Constitutional Convention, create a product in which you discuss the purpose of the Constitutional Convention, describe the compromises made, and evaluate whether or not the Constitutional Convention was a success.
Extension	Students can present their products to the class.

### Argument

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Students products might include presentation slides, a poem or rap, or a multi-paragraph essay. Responses should make a claim about whether or not the Constitutional Convention should be considered a success, taking in to account the compromises that were made in the document.

### Extension

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## Taking Informed Action

Understand	Students should research an issue in local government about which a compromise was reached.
Assess	Students interview someone involved in the decision-making process to learn about the process for reaching a compromise.
Action	Write an open letter in response to the issue that required local government officials to compromise, addressing and evaluating the process that was used to reach a compromise.

Students can research local issues and interview school board members or aldermen.

**SS.CV.4.6-8.MC.** Critique deliberative processes used by a wide variety of groups in various settings

**SS.CV.5.6-8.MC.** Develop procedures for making decisions in historic and contemporary settings (such as the school, civil society, or local, state, or national government).

