

Recalling the Mini-Debates of Philadelphia

Instructions: The convention that took place in Philadelphia in the spring and summer of 1787 addressed the problems of the Articles of Confederation. As part of that effort, the delegates examined a variety of issues. The Constitution that they proposed did not emerge from a single, focused discussion, but was instead the product of a series of mini-debates.

In this exercise, you will help bring those debates back to life. Imagine that you are a delegate to the Philadelphia convention. You and fifty-four other delegates have come to America's largest city, crowded with forty-five thousand people, to represent your respective states. As spring gives way to summer, the weather has turned hot and humid. The second floor of the Pennsylvania State House where you are meeting is often stifling.

You and your fellow delegates generally support the strengthening of the national government, the establishment of a two-house legislature, and the addition of executive and judicial branches of government. Beyond that, however, there are clear divisions. With each passing week, the disagreements seem to sharpen. The ten questions below are among the issues that are most vigorously debated.

1. *How should members of the lower house of Congress be elected?*
2. *What should be done about the slave trade?*
3. *What should be the national government's role in issuing paper money?*
4. *Which governmental body or bodies should have the power to declare war?*
5. *How should the power of the executive branch be structured?*
6. *What should be the extent of executive veto power?*
7. *How should the proposed Constitution be considered for ratification?*
8. *How should power be divided between the national and state governments?*
9. *How should the states be represented in the national legislature?*
10. *Should slaves be counted in determining representation in the national legislature?*

Your teacher will assign your group two issues to examine. Your group's assignment is to re-enact the debates that took place in 1787 on the two issues. Each member of your group will be expected to defend at least one position.

You should develop the strongest possible case for the position you have been given. Your arguments should reflect the values, interests, and attitudes of the delegates.

To help you present your position, you will receive excerpts from arguments that were made by delegates to the Philadelphia convention. (The excerpts are taken from the notes of James Madison.) Include the excerpts in your arguments. Be prepared to share your own views on the issues with your classmates.

The Mini-Debates of Philadelphia (Issues #1 and #2)

Issue #1—How should members of the lower house of Congress be elected?

Position A: The state legislatures should elect members of the lower house.

"The [common] people should have as little to do as may be about the government. They lack information and are constantly liable to be misled." (Sherman, Connecticut) "The evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy. The people do not want virtue; but are the dupes of pretended patriots. In Massachusetts it has been fully confirmed by experience that they are daily misled into the most harmful measures and opinions by the false reports circulated by designing men." (Gerry, Massachusetts)

Position B: Citizens qualified to vote in elections for the state legislatures should elect members of the lower house.

"[The lower house] was to be the grand depository of the democratic principle of the government. It ought to know and sympathise with every part of the community. We ought to attend to the rights of every class of the people." (Mason, Virginia) "No government can long subsist without the confidence of the people. It is wrong to increase the weight of the state legislatures. The opposition of the states to federal measures has proceeded more from the state legislatures than from the people at large." (Wilson, Pennsylvania.)

Position C: Citizens owning land should elect members of the lower house.

"The freeholders [owners of land] are the best guardians of liberty; we should restrict the right to them as a necessary defense against the dangerous influence of those multitudes without property and without principle, with which our country like all others will in time abound." (Dickinson, Delaware) "Give the votes to people who have no property and they will sell them to the rich who will be able to buy them." (Morris, Pennsylvania.) "Viewing the subject in its merits alone, the freeholders would be the safest depositories of Republican liberty." (Madison, Virginia.)

Issue #2—What should be done about the slave trade?

Position A: The slave trade should be abolished.

"Slavery is the curse of heaven on the state where it prevails. Compare the free regions of the middle states where a rich and noble cultivation marks the prosperity and happiness of the people, with the misery and poverty which overspread the barren wastes of Virginia, Maryland and the other states having slaves. The inhabitants of Georgia and South Carolina go to the coast of Africa and in defiance of the most sacred laws of humanity tear away their fellow creatures from their dearest connections. Domestic slavery is the most prominent feature in the aristocratic countenance of the proposed Constitution. The vassalage of the poor has ever been the favorite offspring of aristocracy." (Morris, Pennsylvania)

Position B: The national government should not interfere with the slave trade.

"Let every state import what it pleases. The morality or wisdom of slavery are considerations belonging to the states themselves. What enriches a part enriches the whole and the states are the best judges of their particular interest." (Ellsworth, Connecticut.) "South Carolina can never receive the Constitution if it prohibits the slave trade. In every proposed extension of the powers of Congress, that state has expressly and watchfully excepted that of meddling with the importation of negroes." (Pinckney, South Carolina) "Religion and humanity have nothing to do with this [the slave trade]. Interest alone is the governing principle with nations." (Rutledge, South Carolina)

Advanced Study Guide—Part IV

The Road to the Constitutional Convention

1. Why did the state legislatures become "political battlegrounds" in the 1780s? What were the main areas of friction?

2. Why did many prominent Americans view the Roman Republic as a model for their own young republic? Why did they believe that they were best qualified to rule?

3. What were the main arguments of the Federalists? Which groups were attracted to their arguments?

4. What were the main areas of weakness in the Articles of Confederation? What problems resulted from these weaknesses?

5. How did Shays's Rebellion contribute to the movement to reform the Articles of Confederation?

6. Why did Patrick Henry remark that he "smelt a rat" when he learned of plans to hold a convention in Philadelphia in May 1787? Were his concerns justified?

Study Guide—Part IV

The Road to the Constitutional Convention

1. After the War of Independence, voting privileges in most states were limited. Who was allowed to vote?

2. There were no political parties, but people backed “factions.” Some represented shopowners and other city dwellers. Another major faction represented _____.

3. List four traits American political leaders believed were important in a person’s character.
 - a.

 - b.

 - c.

 - d.

4. With what ancient empire did they associate these characteristics?