

Journey back with us to a time before computers, automobiles and, most pressing for the 55 delegates who attended during that hot and humid Philadelphia summer, air-conditioning. The date is May 25th, 1787 and the Constitutional Convention has just begun. The delegates are worried about their ability to come to the sorts of compromises needed to get the fledgling republic off the ground. Rather than deal with messy things such as negotiating and meeting halfway, they turn to their wisest advisor. The Greeks had Nestor, the Arthurians had Merlin, the Enterprise had Spock, and now the Colonial Americans have: you. No pressure.

That's right – the 55 delegates here assembled have decided to present you with three key issues and submit to your final decision on them. They make no guarantees that they will ratify any such document, but it was either this or a rousing rock-paper-scissor tournament.

Can you craft a new document that will satisfy the demands of 13 very different states in this young union? Or will things fall apart as so much of the world, and many of your compatriots, expect? Let's find out.

Everyone has already agreed that the existing government, the Articles of Confederation, have to be scrapped and things started anew. Some are happier than others about this, but things have deteriorated to the point that even the Articles' supporters agree it is not a functioning system.

The first thing to be determined is how the first and most important branch of government, the legislature, will look. Some want the legislature to be unicameral, to have one house. Others prefer a bicameral, or two-housed legislature.

Those who favor a unicameral legislature point out that there are some advantages. For one, it is cheaper to staff and to run. That is no small consideration for a young nation drowning in the debt of its own revolution. Second, it is more efficient. Some of the delegates from the less functional states (looking in your direction, Rhode Island) point out that two houses might not be able to agree on what kinds of laws to pass, which could lead to gridlock. Finally, one house makes it easier to hold a government accountable for its actions.

Those who favor a bicameral legislature concede that it is more expensive, but they say you get more viewpoints involved in government and you have more opportunity for deliberate consideration of legislation. Besides, they say, it is preposterous to think that even a government with two houses would ever be unable to decide on basic laws needed to deal with public emergencies.

Which do you choose?

1. Unicameral Legislature
2. Bicameral Legislature

Now your dilemma is to decide how the two houses must be apportioned.

1. Have both chambers apportioned by population

2. Have both chambers apportioned by equal votes for each state
3. Have one house proportionally and one house equally by state

The next major issue you are called on to address is how to deal with the large population of slaves in the southern states. Under the Articles of Confederation there had not been a need to have an accurate count of each state's population because each state had one vote in the legislature and the national government could not levy taxes. But under the various proposed representation systems, you might need an accurate count of the number of people residing in each state. Such a count will also be needed to determine how much each state owes the new federal government in taxes. And that's where the trouble comes in. Each state is proposing things that work in its own best interest. The northern states argue that because slaves are not granted the same freedoms as other people, they should not count towards the population for the purposes of representation. Such an argument would dilute the power of the south in the legislature. Similarly, the southern states argue that if slaves do not count for representation then why would they count for the purposes of taxation? The two sides come to you to settle the dispute.

1. Slaves should not count for the purpose of taxation or representation
2. Slaves should count for the purpose of taxations and representation
3. Slaves should count for the purpose of taxation and representation but some negotiated value
4. Slavery is wrong and should be abolished

The delegates tell you they have one last decision for you to make and then you can go back to whatever it is that the wise do when not sitting around issuing proclamations. There has been some discussion about civil liberties and whether the new constitution ought to say more about protecting people from governmental abuses of power. Some favor adding in protections for things like freedom of speech, religion, the press, and assembly along with things like the right to a jury and the right to not have to quarter troops in one's house. They worry that a new, more powerful national government requires checks on its authority. Others say that state constitutions already have such protections and that adding them in will therefore be redundant and might actually empower the national government in all of the areas where there are not specific prohibitions.

1. Add such civil liberty protections into the body of the Constitution
2. Leave such civil liberty protections out of the body of the Constitution