**Section 8.6 - Resolution: The Great Compromise**

*Roger Sherman, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, helped construct the Great Compromise that called for a Congress with two houses.*

The New Jersey Plan was warmly received by delegates from small states. The majority of delegates, however, saw William Paterson’s plan as offering little improvement over the Articles of Confederation and rejected it. But they could not agree on what should replace it.

**Tempers Rise** The debate over representation in Congress continued into July, with tempers rising day by day. To most delegates from large states, representation based on population seemed both logical and fair. “Can we forget for whom we are forming a Government?” asked James Wilson of Pennsylvania. “Is it for men, or for the imaginary beings called States?” To Wilson, the answer was obvious. But his logic could not overcome the fears of small-state delegates. One hot Saturday afternoon, Gunning Bedford of Delaware tore into the delegates from large states. “They insist,” he said, “they will never hurt or injure the lesser states.” His reply to his own concern was straightforward. “I do not, gentlemen, trust you!” If the large states continued in their efforts to “crush the smaller states,” Bedford warned, “the small ones will find some foreign ally of more honor and good faith who will take them by the hand and do them justice.”

Rufus King of Massachusetts was shocked at this reference to foreign powers. He said that he was “grieved, that such a thought had entered his heart.” Still, every delegate knew that Great Britain, France, and Spain were just waiting for the United States to fall apart so they could pick up the pieces.

**A Compromise Is Reached** Finally, a compromise was proposed based on a plan put forward earlier by Roger Sherman of Connecticut. The compromise plan kept a two-house Congress. The first house, the House of Representatives, would represent the people. In this
house, the number of representatives from each state would be based on the state’s population. The second house, the Senate, would represent the states. Each state would have two senators, to be elected by their state legislatures. The vote was very close, but the compromise plan was approved. This plan saved the convention and became known as the Great Compromise.

**Section 8.7 - Issue: How Should Slaves Be Counted?**

How do you think delegates from each of the states shown in this graph would want slaves to be counted?

Would they want the slave population to be considered when determining representation in Congress, or would they want slaves to be counted as property that could be taxed?

The Great Compromise kept the framers working together. But having agreed to base representation in one house of Congress on state population, they faced a new and difficult question. As Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania put it, “Upon what principle shall slaves be computed in the representation?”

**People or Property?** By the time of the convention, nine-tenths of the slaves in the United States lived in the South. Like everyone else, southerners wanted as many representatives in the House as possible. They argued that slaves should be counted the same as any other people in determining representation.

Delegates from the North challenged this idea. Were slaves to be considered people with a right to be represented in Congress? Or were they property? “Blacks are property and are used to the southward as horses and cattle to the northward,” argued Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts. Most northern delegates agreed. Slaves should be counted only as property that could be taxed like any other property. If slaves were to be counted as people in
determining representation in Congress, said Morris, “then make them citizens and let them vote.”

**New Thinking on Slavery** This argument signaled a growing division among white Americans. The Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution forced many whites to reexamine their views on slavery. Some became active in trying to end what they now saw as a great evil. Benjamin Franklin, for example, became president of an antislavery society in 1787. In the North, this new thinking led one state after another to pass laws ending slavery.

Although many southerners were uneasy about slavery, they were not yet ready to abolish it. The South’s economy was still very dependent on the labor of enslaved African Americans. But some southern states did pass laws making it easier for owners to free their slaves.

**Section 8.8 - Resolution: The Three-Fifths Compromise**

After a bitter debate, Madison proposed a compromise. Count each slave as three-fifths of a person, he suggested, when determining a state’s population for representation in the House of Representatives. The delegates approved this idea, which became known as the Three-Fifths Compromise, because it seemed the only way to keep the convention moving forward.

**Another Slavery Issue** A dispute over trade raised another issue about slavery. To help business in the North, northern delegates favored giving Congress broad power to control trade between the states and other countries. This proposal made southern delegates nervous. They worried that Congress might try to tax southern export crops such as rice and tobacco. Southerners also worried that Congress would use its power over trade to outlaw the slave trade—the importing of slaves from Africa.

Southerners had reason to be fearful. By 1787, several states had outlawed the slave trade within their boundaries. A majority of the convention’s delegates favored ending the slave trade completely
South Carolina and Georgia, however, objected that their economies would collapse without a constant supply of new slaves. Neither state would agree to any constitution that threatened to end the slave trade.

More Compromises on Slavery Again, the delegates settled on a compromise. Congress would have the power to control trade, but with two limitations. First, Congress could not place any tax on exports to other countries. Second, Congress could not interfere with the slave trade for 20 years, or until 1808.

To satisfy southerners, the delegates also agreed to a provision known as the fugitive slave clause. This clause said that escaped slaves had to be returned to their owners, even if they were caught in a free state.

Without such compromises, the states might never have come together in a single union. Still, the compromises only postponed the day when Americans would have to resolve the terrible contradiction between slavery and the ideals of liberty and equality. Meanwhile, generations of African Americans would spend their lives in bondage.

Section 8.9 - Issue: How Should the Chief Executive Be Elected?
Another major question facing the delegates concerned who would head the new government’s executive branch. Early in the convention, Charles Pinckney urged the creation of a “vigorous executive.” James Wilson followed with a proposal that a single person serve as the chief executive.

A sudden silence fell over the convention. A single executive? The very idea brought to mind unhappy memories of King George III.

Wilson broke the silence by explaining that good government depends on clear, timely, and responsible leadership. Such leadership, he said, is most likely to be found in a single person.

One Executive or Three? Edmund Randolph of Virginia disliked this proposal. He preferred a three-member executive drawn from different parts of the country. Three people, he argued, could lead the country better than one.
Benjamin Franklin opposed a single executive for different reasons. “The first man put at the helm will be a good one,” said Franklin, thinking of George Washington. “Nobody knows what sort may come afterwards.” The next chief executive, he warned, might be overly ambitious or too “fond of war.”

In spite of these objections, the framers agreed to a single executive, to be called the president. To keep this leader from becoming too kinglike, they limited the president’s term to four years. A vice president was also to be elected to fill that term if the president died in office.

**Choosing the Chief Executive** Equally troubling was the issue of how to choose the chief executive. Some delegates wanted Congress to appoint the president. Gouverneur Morris objected. The president “must not be made the flunky of the Congress,” he argued. “It must not be able to say to him: ‘You owe your appointment to us.’”

Several delegates thought that the people should elect the president. Madison, however, argued that voters would naturally vote for someone from their own state. As a result, this method would not be fair to candidates from small states.

Still others suggested that the president be elected by a specially chosen group of “electors” from each state. Such a group, they felt, would be able to look beyond state interests to make a wise choice for the entire country.

**Section 8.10 - Resolution: The Electoral College**

*This is a copy of the Electoral College vote for the election of 1789. At that time, which states had the most electoral votes?*

After some 60 votes on the issue of how to elect the president, the framers reached another
compromise. Neither Congress nor the people, they decided, should choose the president and vice president. Instead, a special body called the **Electoral College** would elect the government’s leaders.

**The Electoral College System** The Electoral College is made up of electors who cast votes to elect the president and vice president every four years. Each state has as many electors in the Electoral College as the number of senators and representatives it sends to Congress. The votes cast by electors are called electoral votes.

The delegates left the method of choosing electors up to each state. Before 1820, state legislatures chose electors in most states. Today, the people choose their state’s electors when they vote in presidential elections. The electors then cast their ballots for president and vice president on a date chosen by Congress.

Originally, the electors voted for two candidates without saying which one they preferred for president or vice president. The candidate receiving the most votes became president. The runner-up became vice president. This system caused great confusion in the election of 1800 and was later changed.

**Political Parties and Elections** The Electoral College system seems very odd to most Americans today. In our age of instant communication, it is hard to appreciate the framers’ concern that voters would not know enough about candidates outside their own state to choose a president wisely.

The delegates could not have predicted how quickly communications would improve in the United States. Nor could they foresee the rise of national political parties. Within a few years of the convention, political parties were nominating candidates for president and educating voters in every state about those candidates.

The Electoral College system still affects presidential elections today. In most states, the candidate who gets the most votes—even if less than a majority—wins all of that state’s electoral votes. As a result, a candidate can win a majority in the Electoral College without necessarily winning a majority of the votes cast across the country. In the presidential election
of 2000, George W. Bush won the presidency over Al Gore by getting the most Electoral College votes, even though Gore received more votes than Bush in the popular election.