Wanted: A Just Right Government

Independent Citizens Seek Awesome Government

When the American colonists gained their independence from the British after the Revolutionary War, the Americans were faced with a problem: What kind of government should they have? They'd lived for years under British rule, and they had lots of complaints. Now they would create a government from scratch, and they had a few requirements.

Benjamin Franklin worked on the Articles of Confederation before he helped write the Constitution.

A Rocky Start

On one hand, the Articles of Confederation had qualities that citizens appreciated. Because the Articles did not set up a very strong government, states got to keep their power and independence. There was no powerful government telling them what to do. Citizens also wanted protection, and the Articles gave Congress the power to create a military to protect all the states.

However, there were problems. For one thing, the Articles did not give Congress the power to enforce its laws. Congress also had no power to collect taxes to pay for the military. And in order to change the Articles, every single state had to agree to the changes. These and other problems meant that, in general, citizens felt like the relationship... or, the government, wasn't working.

Lots of Differences

With thirteen different states, there was no easy solution. Here's why:

- **States had different needs.** For example, some states depended on fishing, while others mostly grew crops.
- **States had different sizes.** Some states had many people; others had few.
- **People had different opinions.** Some people feared a central government, while others thought a central government was necessary.

That last one was especially troublesome. Many people feared they would lose their freedom if a central government had too much power. Others were tired of the weak government created under the Articles of Confederation and felt like nothing would ever get done if nobody was in charge.
Compromise?

The states decided to put aside some of their differences and come together to try to solve the problem of forming another government. Some states floated a new idea: Instead of a government with just one branch, Congress, why not create a government with three branches? The new government could have a legislative branch with a congress to make laws, an executive branch led by a president to carry out laws, and a judicial branch with courts to interpret laws. It sounded good, but one major sticking point kept it from moving forward: How many votes would each state get in the Congress?

Voting in Congress: Yes, It’s a Big Deal

Why? Because some states have a large population and some have a small population. Under the Articles of Confederation, each state got one vote no matter how many people it had. That meant people in large states had less influence in Congress. Naturally, large states thought this wasn’t fair. They thought they should get more votes because they had more people. Small states, however, thought it was a pretty good deal. Even though they were small, they had the same amount of power and influence as large states. They wanted to keep a one-vote-per-state system.

Battle of the Plans

Two different plans emerged—one favoring small states and one favoring large states. Can you tell which is which?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Virginia Plan</th>
<th>New Jersey Plan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislative branch has 2 chambers</td>
<td>• Legislative branch has one chamber</td>
<td>• Each state gets one vote</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of votes for each state depends on the state’s population</td>
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The Constitution Solution

The two sides—large states and small states—finally reached a compromise. The Constitution was the second and final attempt to write a document that would govern the United States, and we still follow it today. Under the Constitution, Congress is divided into two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. In the Senate, each state gets two votes no matter what size it is. This favors small states. In the House of Representatives, the more people a state has, the more votes it gets. This favors large states. The Constitution also solved some other problems found in the Articles of Confederation.

- The Articles didn’t require states to treat citizens from other states the same as their own citizens, but the Constitution does.
- The Articles couldn’t be changed unless all states agreed, but the Constitution can be changed if 3/4 of the states agree.
- The Articles didn’t require states to follow the laws Congress passed, but the Constitution says federal laws are superior to state laws.

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