



Grade 5 Lesson Plan #6: Why Compromises Shaped the Constitution—Building a Fair America

Teacher Notes

This lesson builds directly on Lessons 4 and 5. Students analyze how delegates at the 1787 Constitutional Convention resolved major conflicts through compromise in order to create a new Constitution. Rather than focusing on memorizing isolated historical details, students examine how specific compromises shaped the structure of the Constitution and evaluate which compromise they believe was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created and endure. The lesson emphasizes constitutional reasoning rather than memorization of historical facts. The learning objective for this lesson is that students will analyze key conflicts at the Constitutional Convention and evaluate which compromise they believe was most important in helping the Constitution be created and endure.

Materials:

Highlighters or pencils for text coding

Text: Handout 1: Why Compromises Shaped the Constitution: Building a Fair America

Handouts:

- Handout 2: Final Written Response
- Handout 3: Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Preparation:

Number paragraphs in the Lesson 6 reading text.

Review previously taught vocabulary (Compromise, Representation, Proportional, Executive, Checks and Balances, Ratify, Popular Sovereignty).

Prepare vocabulary cards for Word Sort activity.

Prepare Linear Array terms (Conflict → Debate → Compromise → Ratify).

Review debate prompts and synthesis questions.

Be prepared to connect this lesson to:

- Lesson 4 (weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation)
- Lesson 5 (objectives of the Convention)

Key Conceptual Clarification for Teachers:

The Constitutional Convention did not begin with agreement. Delegates represented states with different populations, economic systems, and positions on slavery. Without compromise, the Convention would have collapsed, and no Constitution would have been created. The compromises addressed major structural conflicts at the Convention:

- The Great Compromise (Connecticut Compromise) resolved disputes between large and small states over representation.
- The Three-Fifths Compromise resolved disputes between Northern and Southern states over representation and taxation.
- The Electoral College Compromise resolved disputes about how to choose the president.

Teacher Clarification: Three-Fifths Compromise:

Southern slaveholding states wanted enslaved people to count fully to increase their representation in Congress and political power. Delegates from states where slavery was less common generally argued that enslaved people should be counted as less than fully for representation, since enslaved people had no political rights. The Three-Fifths Compromise was a political agreement about representation and taxation. It did not grant rights or citizenship to enslaved people. It reflected deep sectional divisions that would continue to shape the nation. Students do not need to memorize this explanation, but they should understand that this compromise involved political power and representation.

Standards Alignment:

Florida Grade 5 Civics Literacy Standard-**SS.5.CG.1.2**: Explain how and why the U.S. government was created by the U.S. Constitution. *Clarification 3*: Students will describe why compromises were made during the writing of the Constitution and identify those compromises (e.g., the Great Compromise, the Three-Fifths Compromise, the Electoral College).

Reading/Writing: Students will read an explanatory historical text about the Constitutional Convention and analyze how major compromises shaped the U.S. Constitution. Through reading, text coding, discussion, and writing, students will:

- Identify key conflicts at the Convention.
- Explain how specific compromises resolved those conflicts.
- Evaluate which compromise they believe was most important.
- Cite textual evidence using paragraph numbers.
- Produce a written response connecting historical compromise to constitutional structure.

Essential Question

Why were compromises necessary at the Constitutional Convention and which compromise do you think was most important in allowing the Constitution to succeed?

Opening (25-32 minutes, Handout #2)

Review and Hook (5 minutes)

- **Recall:** Review Lesson 5's essential question about the objectives of the Convention.
- **Connect:** "Last lesson, we examined what the delegates wanted to accomplish. Today, we ask: How did they actually make it happen?" Explain: "Even with shared goals, delegates disagreed on major issues. Without compromise, the Convention could have collapsed."

Hook Question:

Have you ever wanted something different from a friend or classmate and had to meet in the middle? What happened?

Students turn and talk, then write one sentence.

Predictive Question:

Which compromise do you think was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created—and why?

(Optional sentence frame provided on Handout 2.)

Vocabulary Instruction (12–15 minutes)

Step 1: Review Previously Taught Terms

The following terms were introduced in earlier lessons:

- Compromise (Lesson 1)
- Popular Sovereignty (Lesson 2)
- Representation (Lesson 4)
- Proportional (Lesson 4)
- Executive (Lesson 4/5)
- Checks and Balances (Lesson 5)
- Ratify (Lesson 5)

Teacher Note: Do not fully reteach these. Ask students to recall definitions and provide examples from earlier lessons. Suggested prompt: "Where have we seen this word before? What problem was it connected to?"

Step 2: New/Reinforced Term

- **Bicameral** – A legislature with two houses.
Clarify meaning in context of the compromises.

Vocabulary Activity: Word Sort (5–7 minutes)

Purpose: Reinforce that the Constitution involved principles, structures, and processes.

Distribute vocabulary cards or project words.

Students sort words into conceptual categories:

Category A: Democratic Principles

- Popular Sovereignty
- Representation
- Proportional

Category B: Government Structure

- Bicameral
- Executive
- Checks and Balances

Category C: Decision-Making Process

- Compromise
- Ratify

Discussion Questions:

- Which words describe ideas?
- Which words describe parts of government?
- Which words describe actions?

Vocabulary Extension: Linear Array (Optional: 3–5 minutes)

Purpose: Reinforces the lesson theme that compromise moves disagreement toward agreement.

Linear Array: Degree of Agreement

Create a continuum on the board:

Disagreement ←————→ **Full Agreement**

Place these terms along the line:

- Conflict
- Debate
- Compromise
- Ratify

Discuss:

- Can you ratify something without compromise?
- Where were delegates at the beginning of the Convention?
- Where were they by the end?

Reading and Text Coding (30 minutes)

Reading #1: Categorizing and Connecting (15 minutes)

Text Coding: Students read the text “*Why Compromises Shaped the Constitution: Building a Fair America*” and use three codes to mark sections:

- **P:** Problem or Conflict
- **O:** Objective
- **C:** Compromise

Teacher Modeling: Model coding for paragraph 1, marking:

- **P** where the text notes that states disagreed/had different needs.
- **O** where forming a “more perfect Union” is mentioned.
- **C** where compromise is defined.

Suggestion for teacher modeling: “The delegates were not enemies. They were leaders with different priorities. Compromise was the only way forward.”

Independent Practice: Students continue coding the remaining paragraphs using **P / O / C**, citing paragraph numbers.

Encourage students to look for patterns:

- What conflict led to this compromise?
- How did the compromise balance competing interests?

Reading #2: Directed Note-Taking (15 minutes, Handout #3)

Guiding Question: What conflicts required compromise at the Constitutional Convention, and how did those compromises shape the Constitution?

Handout 3 Graphic Organizer: Students use their coded text (P/O/C) to complete a chart showing the key conflicts at the Constitutional Convention and how the compromises that resolved them shaped the design of the U.S. Constitution.

Reminder for Students: States differed in size, population, and views on slavery. Without compromise, the Constitution would not have been created. As you complete this chart:

- Use evidence from the text (with paragraph numbers).
- Explain why each conflict created a serious problem at the Constitutional Convention.
- Identify the compromise that resolved the conflict.
- Describe how the Constitution reflects that compromise.

You will use this chart to support your debate and final written response.

Conflict/Issue	Evidence (Paragraph #)	Why This Was a Problem	The Compromise Solution	How the Constitution Reflected It
Representation in Congress				
Counting Enslaved People				
Choosing the President				

Optional teacher model for first row:

- Conflict/Issue: Representation in Congress
- Evidence (Paragraph #): Paragraphs 3–4
- Why This Was a Problem: Representation conflict (large vs. small states)
- The Compromise Solution: Great Compromise
- How the Constitution Reflected It: Bicameral legislature (Article I)

Teacher Reminder: These compromises are specifically identified in the benchmark clarification for this lesson.

Extended Text Discussion (20 minutes, Handout #3)

Partner Share and Preparation (5 minutes)

- **Question:** “Which compromise at the Constitutional Convention do you think was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created—and why?”
- **Task (Handout #3):** Partners select ONE compromise and identify two pieces of textual evidence (with paragraph numbers) showing why they believe this compromise was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created—and why. Students must also prepare a defense of their reasoning. Remind students: All compromises were important. You must decide which you believe was most essential.

Whole-Class Discussion: The Compromise (15 minutes)

- **Focus:** Pairs present their arguments, explaining which compromise they believe played the largest role in allowing the Constitution to be created and endure—and why.
- **Teacher Facilitation:**
 - **Presentations:** Groups argue for their chosen compromise, citing paragraph numbers from the text.
 - **Teacher prompts:** “Why do you believe this compromise mattered most?”
“How did this compromise help resolve conflict between the states?”

“Would the Constitution have succeeded if this compromise had not been reached?”

“How did this compromise influence the structure of the government?”

- **Synthesis:** Guide students to recognize that the Constitution was created through compromise among states with different interests and priorities. The Great Compromise resolved disagreements about representation, the Three-Fifths Compromise addressed conflicts over representation and taxation, and the Electoral College balanced different ideas about how to choose the president. While students may argue that one compromise was most important, the Constitution ultimately succeeded because delegates were willing to negotiate and make agreements that allowed the new government to move forward.

Final Written Response and Closure (15 minutes)

Handout #2: Final Written Response (12 minutes)

Writing Prompt: Which compromise at the Constitutional Convention do you think was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created and endure?

Instructions:

Write a well-developed paragraph that:

- Clearly states which compromise you believe was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created and succeed.
- Acknowledges that the other compromises were also important.
- Uses at least TWO pieces of textual evidence (with paragraph numbers).
- Explains the conflict that led to this compromise.
- Explains how the Constitution reflects this compromise and why it mattered for the new government.

Closure (3 minutes)

Turn-and-Talk:

“Why is compromise necessary in a democracy, even when people strongly disagree?”

Exit Ticket:

“Write one sentence explaining how compromise helped the Constitution succeed.”

Handout #1

Why Compromises Shaped the Constitution: Building a Fair America

Have you ever had a disagreement with someone where there was no way you could both get exactly what you wanted? Maybe you want to play a video game, but your friend wants to go on a hike. You cannot both get what you want. Sometimes our desires or goals conflict with someone else's; but, if we want to get along, we have to make a compromise. That's what happened at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, when leaders, called delegates, met in Philadelphia to fix the Articles of Confederation. This first plan for America's government was too weak. Within the first week of the convention, the delegates moved from proposing amendments to the Articles to creating an entirely new Constitution. But the states had different needs and goals that conflicted with one another—they could not all get exactly what they wanted at the same time—so they made compromises. That is, they had to make agreements where everyone gives up something to get a deal. Let's explore why these compromises were needed and learn about key ones, like the Great Compromise, the Three-Fifths Compromise, and the Electoral College, using new words like representation, proportional, and ratify.

Why Compromises Were Needed

The goal of the new U.S. Constitution is stated right in the preamble, where, among other things, it states one of the purposes is to “form a more perfect Union.” Today, some people read this statement to mean “we want to get better over time,” increasingly becoming “more perfect.” But that's not exactly the meaning the framers of the Constitution had in mind. They wanted to unite the separate states more securely than they were united under the Articles of Confederation. Under the Articles, the national government lacked power to tax, regulate trade, or settle disputes, and there was real worry about the future of the new United States. So, in 1787, 55 delegates from 12 states (Rhode Island didn't attend) gathered to create a stronger government. This was easier said than done. The 13 states were very different from one another. Some were large states, with many people; some were small states with few. Moreover, in some states there were large populations of slaves; while other states had taken steps to abolish slavery. Every state, big and small, slave and non-slave, wanted to make sure their state's voice and power were protected under a new constitution with a stronger federal government.

The Great Compromise

One big argument was about representation—how states would get a voice in Congress, the group that makes laws. Big states, like Virginia, wanted a proportional system, where states with more people got more votes. Their plan, the Virginia Plan, suggested two houses of Congress, both based on population. Small states, like New Jersey, wanted equal representation, where every state got the same number of votes, as in their New Jersey Plan. Without a compromise, small states would reject the Virginia plan and large states would reject the New Jersey plan. That meant neither plan alone would help make a “more perfect union.”

The compromise, called the Great Compromise or Connecticut Compromise, was proposed by Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth. It created a bicameral Congress with two houses: the House of Representatives, where seats are proportional to population (helping big states), and the Senate, where each state gets two seats (helping small states). This balanced representation ensured all states had a say, ensuring all states had a voice in the lawmaking process. The Constitution's Article I reflects this, setting up Congress to make laws with input from all states. The compromise also helped to balance power between the interests of large and small states.

The Three-Fifths Compromise

Another tough issue was how to count people for representation and taxes, especially in Southern states where slavery was common. Enslaved people were denied the rights of citizens, including the right to vote and other freedoms. Southern states wanted to count slaves to increase their representation in the House and their political power. Northern states, where slavery was less common, said this was unfair since enslaved people weren't treated as citizens. The North also argued that representation and taxation should be proportional. If slaves were counted for representation, they should also be counted for taxes. The debate over the apportionment of slaves was a major point of contention that required a compromise for the Convention to succeed.

The Three-Fifths Compromise was the solution. It said that each enslaved person would count as three-fifths of a person for both representation and taxes. This gave Southern states more power in Congress but also made them pay more taxes. Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution includes this rule. While enslaved people still had no rights or freedoms, this compromise helped the delegates reach an agreement and create a Constitution that united all the states.

The Electoral College

The delegates also argued about how to choose the president, the executive who enforces laws. Some wanted Congress to pick the president, but others worried this would give Congress too much power and upset the system of checks and balances. Some delegates wanted citizens to vote directly, but others feared that people might not know enough about leaders from other states. Small states also worried that elections would be dominated by states with large populations.

The Electoral College was the compromise. Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution gives each state a number of electors equal to its total representation in Congress (House seats plus two Senators). These electors vote for the president. Big states get more electors because of their population, but small states get a boost from their Senate seats. This system, still used today, balances popular sovereignty with state power, ensuring citizens across the country have a voice in choosing the nation's leader.

Why It Matters

These compromises were like glue that held the Constitution together. Without them, the delegates might not have agreed on the new Constitution, and America could have stayed weak or split apart. The Great Compromise made sure all states had fair representation. The Three-Fifths Compromise, while it did not give enslaved people rights, helped keep the North and South together. The Electoral College gave every state a role in picking the president. Together, these agreements created a government that

protects unalienable rights through checks and balances, like Congress, the president, and courts working together.

These compromises show that a strong democratic government requires give and take. Leaders had to listen to each other, make trade-offs, and sometimes accept less than they wanted to create a system that works for everyone. Governing today, whether in your school or class student government, in your state, or in Congress, still requires compromise. As citizens, you're part of this big plan to keep America united. How will you use your voice to make fair compromises in your school or community?

Handout #2

Shaping Your Written Response

PREDICT—

In this lesson, you will learn that delegates at the Constitutional Convention disagreed about several important issues. States had different priorities based on their size, population, and views on slavery. Because of these disagreements, the delegates had to make compromises to create a Constitution that all the states could accept.

Before writing, think:

If groups strongly disagree about important issues, what might happen if no one is willing to compromise? How might compromise help leaders reach an agreement when they want different things?

Predict:

Which compromise of the Constitutional Convention do you think was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created—and why?

Use the sentence frame to help you:

I predict that the compromise that helped the Constitution be created was _____ because _____.

Write your prediction below:

FINAL WRITTEN RESPONSE —

Writing Prompt

Which compromise of the Constitutional Convention do you think was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created and succeed?

Instructions

Write a well-developed paragraph that:

- Identifies ONE compromise of the Constitutional Convention (Great Compromise, Three-Fifths Compromise, or Electoral College).
- Explains why you think this compromise was most important in allowing the Constitution to be created.
- Uses at least TWO pieces of evidence from today's text (include paragraph numbers).
- Describes how the U.S. Constitution reflects this compromise.
- Explains how this compromise helped the delegates reach an agreement.

Handout #3

Directed Note-Taking Graphic Organizer

Directions: Use your coded text to complete this chart showing how conflicts at the Constitutional Convention were resolved through compromise and shaped the design of the U.S. Constitution. Record evidence from the text (with paragraph numbers) to complete the chart.

Remember: At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, delegates from different states disagreed about several important issues. States differed in population size, economic interests, and views about slavery. To create a Constitution that all states could accept, delegates had to make compromises. These agreements helped resolve major conflicts and allowed the new Constitution to be written and eventually ratified. You will use this chart to support your debate and final written response.

Conflict / Issue	Evidence (Paragraph #)	Why This Was a Problem	The Compromise Solution	How the Constitution Reflected It
Representation in Congress				
Counting Enslaved People for Representation and Taxes				
Choosing the President				