Issues and Compromises
The delegates—the Framers of the Constitution—discussed alternatives, offered compromises, and reached decisions that became the basic principles of American government. James Madison, a young delegate from Virginia, put the decisions into words and gave the document its shape. Therefore, he is usually known as the “Father of the Constitution.”

Vs.

THE VIRGINIA PLAN vs. THE NEW JERSEY PLAN

The Virginia delegates acted boldly within days of the opening of the Constitutional Convention. Governor Edmund Randolph proposed a plan of government that would replace the Articles of Confederation. The Virginia Plan was challenged by the small states in the New Jersey Plan, proposed by Attorney General William Paterson of New Jersey.

THE VIRGINIA PLAN

The legislature should be bicameral, with a lower house elected by the people and an upper house selected by the lower house from nominees submitted by state legislatures.

Representation in each house should be based on population and/or money contributed to the national government by the state.

The executive would be chosen by the legislative branch and could serve only one term. Together with the judicial branch, the executive could veto acts of the legislature.

The judicial branch should consist of judges chosen by the legislative branch.

THE NEW JERSEY PLAN

The legislative branch should be unicameral with representatives selected by state legislatures.

All states should be represented equally in the legislature.

The executive branch would be made up of several persons and would have no veto power over the legislature.

Supreme Court members should be appointed by the executive branch for life.
One important issue involved equality of the states. Some thought that state governments should remain powerful and equal to one another because they ensured that a tyrannical central government would not emerge. Others believed that equality could best be achieved by considering the populations of each state. The earliest and most time-consuming argument at the Convention took place between the large states, who believed that representation in the national legislature should be based on population, and the small states, who supported equal representation of each state. These two positions were embodied in the Virginia Plan, supported by the large states, and the New Jersey Plan, supported by small states.

The conflict between the plans was finally settled after weeks of heated debate by a compromise suggested by the Connecticut delegates. Under the Connecticut or Great Compromise, Congress would be bicameral, with equal representation of the states in the upper house and representation by population in the lower house. The Compromise passed by a razor-thin majority, but it enabled the delegates to move on to other equality issues.

Three-Fifths Compromise

The Three-Fifths Compromise addressed whether or not slaves should be counted in the populations of the southern states. Most delegates from the southern states argued that slaves should be counted, and most from the North took the opposite view. The compromise they reached lasted until slavery was abolished in the late 1860s. It serves as a bizarre example of concessions given on both sides. For purposes of determining representation and taxation, each state was to count three-fifths of all its slaves.

In addition to the issues of equality, the Founders were also very concerned about the poor state of the American economy and the need to preserve individual liberties. Opinions varied as to how serious the economic problems were, but most believed that the economic powers of the new national government should be strengthened. Even though the delegates ultimately tilted the balance between liberty and order toward increasing order, they believed that the Constitution established a limited government that would not threaten individual freedoms. But when the delegates submitted the document to the states for ratification, the critics complained vigorously about how little the Constitution said about individual liberty.