Compromises in the Constitution

The 18th-century statesmen who met in Philadelphia believed in the Enlightenment concept of the balance of power in politics. This led them to establish three branches of government: a legislative, or law-making branch made up of Congress, and executive, or administrating branch made up of a President and Vice-President, and a judicial branch, made up of the courts. These three branches were to be so harmoniously (pleasantly) balanced that no one could ever gain total control. The delegates agreed that the legislative branch, like the colonial legislatures and the British Parliament, should be bicameral or consist of two houses. On these points there was unanimity (total agreement) within the assembly.

Great Compromise
But sharp differences also arose. Representatives of the small states – New Jersey, for instance – objected to changes that would reduce their influence in the national government by basing representation upon population rather than upon statehood (one state, one vote), as was the case under the Articles of Confederation. On the other hand, representatives of large states, like Virginia, argued for proportional representation (based on population). This debate threatened to go on endlessly until Roger Sherman of Connecticut came forward with arguments for representation in proportion to the population of the states in one house of Congress, the House of Representatives, and equal representation in the other, the Senate. This was known as the Great Compromise or the Connecticut Compromise.

Slavery and the Three-Fifths Compromise
To modern eyes, the most stunning and disturbing constitutional compromises by the delegates was over the issue of slavery. The Constitution never mentions the word ‘slavery,’ but does have plenty to say about it. As a concession to slave states, the writers treated slavery not as a moral issue (about right and wrong) but as a political and practical one to be negotiated for the sake of unity between the states.
Once it was decided that representation in the House of Representatives as to be based on population, delegates from Northern and Southern states had a difference of opinion on how enslaved people should be counted. Delegates for the Northern states where the economy did not rely heavily on slavery felt that enslaved people should not be counted towards representation. This would provide the South with a greater number of representatives. On the other hand, Southern states fought for enslaved people to be counted in terms of representation. The compromise between the two became known as the Three-Fifths Compromise because every five enslaved people would be counted as three individuals when counting population for the purpose of representation in Congress.

Slave Trade Compromise
Those who opposed slavery in the northern states wanted to bring an end to the importation and sale of slaves. On the other hand, southern states felt that slavery was vital to their economy and did not want the government interfering in the slave trade. In the end, the North agreed to wait until 1808 before Congress would be able to ban the slave trade in the US.

Federal Power and States’ Rights
Some delegates wanted an extremely strong central or federal government that could veto (vote down) state laws. Instead, the framers of the Constitution forbade states from creating the kind of laws that were causing divisions between the states. No longer could states create their own currencies or allow forgive peoples’ debts, nor could they create treaties with another government or impose taxes on another state’s products, for example. Each state was required to recognize federal laws in the Constitution and decisions by the courts as the law of the land and enforce them in their states.

Election of the President
The Articles of Confederation did not provide for a Chief Executive of the United States. Therefore, when delegates decided that a president was necessary, there was a disagreement over how he or she should be elected to office. While some delegates felt that the president should be popularly elected, others feared that the electorate would not be informed enough to make a wide decision. In the end, the two sides compromised with the creation of the electoral college. Thus, the citizens vote for electors who then vote for the president.

The Bill of Rights
At the time, Federalists were those who supported a strong central government and Anti-Federalists were those who opposed having a central government that was too powerful. The largest issue that the Anti-Federalists had with the proposed constitution was that it lacked a bill of rights. All states had their own constitutions, with its own bill of rights, but the Anti-Federalists did not believe that this would be enough to protect the citizens from this new, powerful federal government. This issue was resolved when the first 10 Amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, were added to the Constitution, which contained a guarantee of personal freedoms and rights, clear limitations on the government’s power in judicial and other proceedings, and explicit declarations that all powers not specifically delegated to Congress by the Constitution are reserved for the states or the people.