
Who Were the Framers of the U.S. Constitution?

Grade Level: 10–12 (Civics / U.S. Government / AP Government)

Time Required: 1–2 class periods

Lesson Type: Inquiry-based discussion + historical analysis

Materials:

- Informational handout (provided below)
- Student discussion worksheet or notebook
- Optional: Constitution excerpts (Preamble, Articles I–III)

Lesson Overview

One of the most persistent misconceptions about the Framers of the U.S. Constitution is that they were unsophisticated, “backwoods” individuals with little understanding of politics, economics, or human nature. In reality, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 were among the most experienced, educated, and internationally aware leaders in the Western world at the time.

This lesson examines **who the Framers actually were**, their backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs—and how those factors shaped the Constitution they created. Students will analyze demographic, economic, political, and religious data to better understand why the Constitution looks the way it does and to evaluate how the Framers might view modern America.

Essential Question

Who were the Framers of the Constitution, and how did their backgrounds shape the government they created?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify key demographic, professional, and political characteristics of the Framers
 - Explain how the Framers' life experiences influenced the structure of the Constitution
 - Evaluate common misconceptions about early American leadership
 - Analyze whether the Framers' expectations align with modern American government and society
 - Engage in civil discussion using historical evidence
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Key Misconception Addressed

The Framers were uneducated, rural, and politically inexperienced.

Reality:

The average American colonist was wealthier, healthier, and better educated than their European counterparts. The Framers, in particular, represented the political, legal, and economic elite of their time, with extensive experience in governance, military service, and constitutional design.

Background Information: Who Were the Framers?

The Constitutional Convention (1787)

- **Total delegates selected:** 74
- **Delegates who attended:** 55
- **Delegates who did not attend:** 19
- **Rhode Island:** Sent no delegates

Age Range

- **Oldest delegate:** 81 (Benjamin Franklin)
- **Youngest delegate:** 26

This wide age range blended revolutionary experience with younger, forward-looking perspectives.

Political & Military Experience

The Framers were **not political amateurs**:

- 29 served in the **Continental Army**
- 41 of the 55 attendees had served in the **Continental Congress**
- Nearly all had experience in **state or local government**
- 2 had been **Presidents of the Continental Congress**
- 8 signed the **Declaration of Independence**
- 6 signed the **Articles of Confederation**
- 4 served as **state governors**
- 30 helped draft **state constitutions**
- 2 later became **Presidents of the United States**

Key takeaway:

The Constitution was written by men who had already *failed once* under the Articles of Confederation—and knew exactly what needed fixing.

Occupations of the Delegates

(Many held multiple roles)

- 32 lawyers
- 13 merchants

- 6 land speculators
- 11 stock speculators
- 25 owned or had owned enslaved people
- 12 large farmers
- 2 small farmers
- 8 were elected officials at the time
- 3 were retired
- 2 scientists
- 3 doctors
- 2 college presidents

Discussion point:

Why might lawyers and merchants favor written rules, contracts, courts, and strong federal authority?

Demographics & Worldliness

- 9 delegates were **foreign-born**
- 17 lived in **more than one state**
- Several had **traveled to Europe**
- Over **half were college educated**

Key takeaway:

These men were not isolated colonials—they were globally aware and deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideas.

Religion

The Framers represented a **wide range of religious traditions:**

- 28 Episcopalian
- 7 Congregationalist
- 3 Roman Catholic
- 3 Presbyterian
- 2 Lutheran
- 2 Dutch Reformed
- 2 Methodist
- 6 claimed **no religious affiliation**

Important insight:

This diversity helps explain why the Constitution contains **no official national religion** and strongly protects religious freedom.

Family & Finances

While a few delegates were extremely wealthy, many of the wealthiest colonists had remained loyal to Britain and left the country. Most Framers had financial resources ranging from **comfortable to prosperous**, though not all were rich.

Key takeaway:

They had enough financial stability to focus on long-term governance rather than short-term survival.

Guided Discussion Questions

1. Why is the idea that the Framers were “unsophisticated” historically inaccurate?
2. How might military experience influence views on executive power and civilian control?
3. Why would lawyers dominate the Convention? How does that show up in the Constitution?
4. How did the Framers’ religious diversity shape the First Amendment?
5. What groups were **not** represented at the Convention—and how did that affect outcomes?

Student Activity: Then vs. Now

Prompt:

If the Framers could see the United States today, what would surprise them the most—and what would disappoint them?

Options:

- Small-group discussion
- Written reflection (1–2 pages)
- Structured debate
- Exit ticket summary

Students must support their claims using **specific evidence** from the Framers’ backgrounds.

Assessment Options

- Short response using evidence from the lesson
- Exit ticket: “*One misconception I had—and how it changed*”
- Discussion participation rubric
- AP-style FRQ connection to constitutional design

Teacher Notes

This lesson works especially well:

- Early in a Constitution unit
- As a corrective to myth-based civic understanding
- As a foundation for discussions on federalism, separation of powers, and elite influence