

## Ben Franklin and the Constitution

Although Franklin was eighty-one years old and in generally poor health, he participated as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia with George Washington presiding. Many of the delegates had widely different ideas about how the country should be organized and run, including Franklin. For instance, he believed that executive power was too great to be placed in the hands of one person and that a committee was a much better option. Alexander Hamilton, on the other end of the argument, wanted a single executive, appointed for life. The convention chose a single executive with a limited term.

For the legislative branch, Franklin favored a unicameral legislature. His beliefs were not favored by the majority, however. The convention deliberated over a way to provide equal representation for both small and large states. Franklin helped break the deadlock and pave the way for what became known as the "great compromise." Larger states would have their way in the lower house of the legislature, where representatives would be selected according to population. The upper house or Senate would have an equal number of senators from each state.

In September 1787, the Constitution was completed, but many delegates were disgruntled. Franklin wrote an impassioned speech, in which he used his persuasive powers to urge all delegates to sign the Constitution. Franklin admitted that it was an imperfect document but probably the best they could expect. Following the speech, the Constitution was signed. To Franklin's disappointment, some delegates still refused to sign.

As the representatives signed the Constitution, Franklin watched. The president's chair was at the front of the hall, and a sun was painted on the back of the chair. Franklin told some of the members near him that it was always difficult for painters to show the difference between the rising sun and the setting sun. He said that during the convention he had often looked at the painted sun and wondered "...whether it was rising or setting. But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun."