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THE THREE-FIFTHS COMPROMISE

Multiple Choice Quiz

ABOUT THIS QUIZ



The Three-Fifths Compromise

This quiz is about the Three-Fifths Compromise.

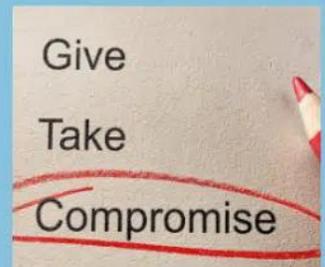
All questions have 4 possible answers of which only 1 is correct.

You may read the article over the next few pages to freshen up before taking the quiz!

At the back of the book, will be an answer sheet.

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What is the 3/5 Compromise?



The three-fifths compromise is an infamous passage in the US Constitution.

Introduced as a way of bridging the interests of Southern and Northern states, this compromise proved to be a temporary measure.

What was the 3/5 compromise?

The 3/5 compromise meant that slaves had 3/5 of a vote in elections.

What Is The Three-Fifths Compromise?

Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3 of the US Constitution outlines how both representatives and taxes are to be split between states. The compromise itself is the phrase

“three fifths of all other Persons,”

meaning that every five slaves in a state would count as three free people for the purposes of determining how many congresspeople a state would be allotted.

The three-fifths compromise has since been superseded by the Fourteenth Amendment. Not only did the fourteenth amendment remove the three-fifths clause, but it also included language that attempted to reduce states' congressional representation if they prevented otherwise eligible voters from voting.

While the three-fifths compromise brought all of the states on board to ratify the Constitution, regional differences and continuing debates over slavery, representation, and laws ultimately caused a bloody civil war.

Why Was The Three Fifths Compromise Significant?

The three-fifths compromise was a vital part of negotiations surrounding the first constitution. Without this clause, it would have been far more difficult to get Southern states to ratify the document, making it less likely that a unified United States would have been created. The institution of slavery contributed to regional and economic differences between the Northern and Southern states. As Southern states had smaller populations of free whites, they would have been outvoted in Congress without the three-fifths compromise or another similar law.

The American Slave Economy

While slavery was somewhat legal in some European countries, it was wholly unchecked in American and Caribbean colonies. European colonists used African slaves as a source of cheap labor on their plantations, transporting about half a million enslaved Africans to the United States. While some slaves were kept in Northern states, the majority of them were owned by plantations in the south.

Slavery saw an exponential increase in profitability after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, six years after the Constitution was written.
How Slaves Affected Population

The first US Census in 1790 illustrated a stark difference between the population of Northern and Southern states. Massachusetts had a population of 378,787 with zero slaves. Virginia had a population of 747,610, but 292,627 of its residents were slaves. Without the three-fifths compromise, Massachusetts would have been allotted a similar number of congressional representatives, despite the fact that Virginia had nearly twice the population.

Regional Political Differences

The American Revolutionary War started over issues of unfair representation in government. Slogans like “no taxation without representation” inflamed the colonists against the British. This meant that the idea of fairly splitting power between states was incredibly important to the framers of the Constitution.

Despite the importance of this concept, however, the three-fifths compromise was perhaps more greatly influenced by political necessity than fairness. Northern and Southern states had very different economies, and this disparity would only grow as the Industrial Revolution progressed.

This meant that issues like trade and taxation would affect the regions differently, forcing constitutional delegates from Southern states to fight tooth and nail for representation to ensure that future legislation would be fair for their states.

Different Political Ideologies

Northern states were ideologically very different from Southern ones. In Southern states, attacking the institution of slavery was virtually unheard of. In Northern ones, not only were abolitionists hard at work trying to enact laws to ban the practice, there were advocates attempting to give women and blacks the right to vote. They achieved varying degrees of success.

The existence of these ideas (from a somewhat-unified block of states that was culturally and economically different) further contributed to Southern delegates’ very valid fears about being overrun in Congress. Without some sort of consideration for their slaved populations, these states would have had a very tough time fighting against national abolitionist legislation. As a result, the three-fifths compromise was necessary to protect the Southern way of life.

The Civil War

The Constitution was written less than a decade prior to the introduction of the cotton gin. The ability to efficiently process harvested cotton changed American slavery forever, as working an acre of farmland became much, much more profitable. This change deepened the existing ideological and economical divides between Northern and Southern states.

Had the Constitution been penned as little as a decade later, it's possible that the founders would have recognized this growing divide and produced a better solution than the three-fifths compromise.

In the 1850s, political tension surrounding the institution of slavery began to rise. The three-fifths compromise had so far guaranteed that Southern states had the votes they needed to protect the institution. Their ability to do so forever seemed to be crumbling. After Lincoln was elected president in 1860, the political climate changed, and Southern states began to secede from the United States to prevent the seemingly inevitable creep of abolitionism.

The exact factors that led to the Civil War were numerous and complex. The three-fifths compromise's biggest contribution was that it served as a short-term fix to a growing long-term problem. It was the political equivalent of throwing a rug over an issue and ignoring it. Debates over the issues surrounding slavery and representation continued, certainly, but the three-fifths compromise was effective at stopping them in such a way that no meaningful progress could be made towards resolving the issue of slavery.

Introducing the Three-Fifths Compromise

The Three-Fifths Compromise in the Articles of Confederation

The three-fifths compromise in the US Constitution was preceded by a proposal for a similar measure under the Articles of Confederation.

The Articles of Confederation assigned tax obligations to each state based on population. A Virginian, Benjamin Harrison, suggested that slaves should be counted as half of one person. Several representatives from New England attempted to argue the number up to three-fourths before James Madison proposed the three-fifths number. The amendment very nearly passed, falling just two votes short of becoming law under the Articles of Confederation.

The Three-Fifths Compromise at the Constitutional Convention

During the Philadelphia Convention to draft the Constitution, the three-fifths compromise was first proposed by James Wilson and Charles Pinckney. Wilson was an English-born legal scholar and orator who was responsible for drafting key pieces of the Constitution, notably those concerning the executive branch. Pinckney was a delegate from a plantation in South Carolina who later served as governor of his state three times.

The core of their proposal, that congressional representation in one house of Congress should be based on population, was unanimously accepted in principle. Debate centered around the three-fifths number. Northern state delegates argued that only voters should count, while Southern state delegates argued that every person should count, regardless of their ability to vote. Eventually, the three-fifths compromise was agreed to by a majority vote.

The initial idea was proposed on June 11, passing by a 9-2 majority. The detailed debate commenced between July 9 and 13, and the three-fifths number was initially rejected 6-4. Southern states quickly realized that a higher number (such as five-fifths) would not pass, so they ultimately agreed to the compromise, allowing it to pass 8-2.

Differences Between the Three-Fifths Compromises

Notably, the three-fifths compromise in the Constitution is essentially the reverse of the proposed amendment to the Articles of Confederation. Under the Articles of Confederation, states were taxed based on their population, so states wanted to have a low population. Under the Constitution, states were given congressional power based on their population, so states wanted to have a high population. This means that the same politicians that might have tried to argue one number in one direction may very well have tried to argue the other number in the opposite direction.

The Legacy of the Three-Fifths Compromise

Disproportionate Representation of Southern States

Armed with census data, historians have been able to examine the effects of the three-fifths compromise on the nation's history. By removing congressional seats earned based on slaves, it's possible to estimate how different events could have played out with a slightly different vote count.

Notably, southern states would have been outvoted in the House nearly immediately. In 1793, for example, slave states had 47 of 105 congress seats. Without the three-fifths compromise, this number would have been reduced to 33. In 1812, Southern states had a thin majority of 76 out of 143 seats. Without the compromise, they'd have been a minority of 59.

The electoral college ensures that presidential votes are apportioned based on congressional representation. Historians believe that without the three-fifths compromise, Thomas Jefferson would have lost the 1800 presidential election to John Adams. The loss of power by the Federalist party was a clear turning point in the early history of the United States. Had Jefferson not defeated Adams, it's likely that Federalist influence would have continued and changed the course of the country.

Gone, But Not Forgotten

While slaves were ostensibly freed in 1865 by the Thirteenth Amendment, Southern states continued to benefit disproportionately from their black populations for decades afterward. Freed slaves could vote, meaning they counted fully for the purposes of determining congressional representation. All the states had to do was ensure that they did not vote meaningfully.

Voter suppression efforts were fantastically successful, especially during the antebellum era.

Disenfranchisement tactics included poll taxes, unfair literacy tests, and overt threats, including lynching. The effectiveness of these tactics meant that immediately after the Civil War, Southern whites effectively had even more disproportionately advantageous representation in the House of Representatives than they did under the three-fifths compromise.

Just like under the compromise itself, this increased representation gave Southern states disproportionate political power. This power helped shape important national laws, elections, and decisions for nearly a century.

Civil Rights Activism

Congress began investigating the tactics used by the Southern bloc in the 1900s, although these tactics would continue in earnest for decades. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s began to find some traction, resulting in the passage of several federal statutes and a constitutional amendment. While some argue that voter suppression tactics continue today, these efforts are far less direct and much more likely to be successfully challenged in court than the tactics employed prior to the Civil Rights movement.

Discrimination, segregation, and racism were not exclusively Southern problems. States like New York employed measures that ensured that blacks were second-class citizens well into the 1950s and 1960s, a century after the repeal of the three-fifths compromise.

The compromise's effective halt of forward movement on issues of slavery and racism likely contributed to this issue.

The Three-Fifths Compromise: A Weak Equilibrium

Compromise Created Deadlock

The importance of the institution of slavery to southern states was a key issue that shaped national politics as the US continued to grow. Westward expansion became a major political issue in the coming years. As settlers filled out new territories, they created the opportunity for new states to join the Union. Southern states used their political power (earned via the three-fifths compromise) to ensure that the US had an equal number of slaveholding and non-slaveholding states for years.

Slavery was the biggest issue that drove the Civil War, but the growing tension over the issue was a driving force behind armed conflict. The three-fifths compromise ensured that Southern and Northern states had similar amounts of political influence. Since neither side had the power to force a resolution on the issue, tensions continued to rise. When Lincoln was elected president, this equilibrium exploded into violent secession.

Politics Over Morality

Abolitionism and the morality of slavery were very much topics of debate among the founding fathers. These ideas were likely debated during the constitutional convention, although not in concrete terms. To the founding fathers, building a nation was the ultimate goal. All other concerns were secondary. As a result, politically possible compromises (like the three-fifths compromise) were considered over politically difficult ones like the abolition of slavery.

Equal Representation Wasn't Always The Goal

The three-fifths compromise was not the only concession that the founding fathers made in terms of proportionate representation. While the House of Representatives has seats allotted based on population, the Senate gets two representatives per state. This idea remains popular, as it creates a different, smaller environment for debate and ensures that all states are represented.

Multiple Choice Quiz

1. What did the Three-Fifths Compromise stipulate?

- A. 3/5 of southern states could veto legislation
- B. Slaves would count as 3/5 of a person when determining congressional apportionment
- C. Residents in northern states would count as 3/5 of a vote in determining congressional apportionment
- D. 3/5 of northern states could veto legislation

2. What article in the US Constitution was the Three-Fifths Compromise located in?

- A. Article 1
- B. Article 2
- C. Article 3
- D. Article 4

3. What amendment dissolved the Three-Fifths Compromise?

- A. 11th Amendment
- B. 13th Amendment
- C. 14th Amendment
- D. 15th Amendment

4. What 1793 invention made the institution of slavery more profitable?

- A. Gas turbine
- B. Steamboat
- C. Telegraph
- D. Cotton gin

5. What approximate percentage of Virginia's population was comprised of slaves according to the first US census in 1790?

- A. 30%
- B. 40%
- C. 50%
- D. 60%

6. What was a famous revolutionary slogan used against the British?

- A. No taxation without representation
- B. Freedom or fight
- C. Tariff of abominations
- D. All of the above

7. What was the name of the strong anti-slavery political faction in the northern states?

- A. Know-nothings
- B. Free soil party
- C. Abolitionists
- D. Barnburners

8. What election convinced the southern states to secede?

- A. Election of 1848
- B. Election of 1852
- C. Election of 1856
- D. Election of 1860

9. What president's election caused the commencement of secession and the Civil War?

- A. Abraham Lincoln
- B. Jefferson Davis
- C. Stephen Douglas
- D. James Buchanan

10. What Founding Father originally came up with the Three-Fifths proportional population standard for slaves?

- A. Benjamin Franklin
- B. John Adams
- C. George Mason
- D. James Madison

11. What 2 delegates officially proposed the Three-Fifths Compromise at the Constitutional Convention?

- A. James Wilson and Charles Pinckney
- B. George Mason and Thomas Jefferson
- C. John Adams and Benjamin Franklin
- D. Alexander Hamilton and George Washington

12. How many additional seats did the Three-Fifths Compromise give southern states during the 3rd Congress from 1793 to 1795?

- A. 10
- B. 14
- C. 25
- D. 30

13. What early American president probably would not have been elected without the Three-Fifths Compromise?

- A. George Washington
- B. James Monroe
- C. James Madison
- D. Thomas Jefferson

14. What issue surrounding slavery was a driving force behind the start of the Civil War?

- A. Tariffs
- B. Taxation
- C. Westward expansion
- D. Interstate trade

15. What movement helped to address continued problems with discrimination and representation originating from slavery and the Three-Fifths Compromise?

A. Free Soil

B. Civil Rights

C. Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness

D. Carpetbaggers

Multiple Choice Quiz Answers

1. B
2. A
3. C
4. D
5. B
6. A
7. C
8. D
9. A
10. D
11. A
12. B
13. D
14. C
15. B