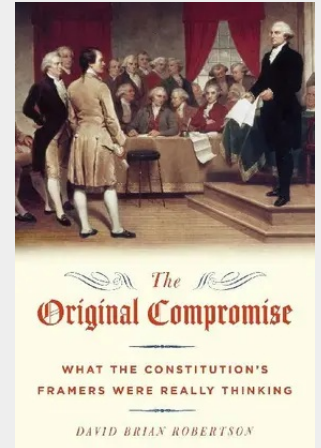


The Original Compromise

What The Constitution's Framers Were Really Thinking

The eighty-five famous essays by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay--known collectively as the Federalist Papers--comprise the lens through which we typically view the ideas behind the U.S. Constitution. But we are wrong to do so, writes David Brian Robertson, if we really want to know what the Founders were thinking. In this provocative new account of the framing of the Constitution, Robertson observes that the Federalist Papers represented only one side in a fierce argument that was settled by compromise--in fact, multiple compromises. Drawing on numerous primary sources, Robertson unravels the highly political dynamics that shaped the document. Hamilton and Madison, who hailed from two of the larger states, pursued an ambitious vision of a robust government with broad power. Leaders from smaller states envisioned only a few added powers, sufficient to correct the disastrous weakness of the Articles of Confederation, but not so strong as to threaten the governing systems within their own states. The two sides battled for three arduous months; the Constitution emerged piece by piece, the product of an evolving web of agreements. Robertson examines each contentious debate, including arguments over the balance between the federal government and the states, slavery, war and peace, and much more. In nearly every case, a fractious, piecemeal, and very political process prevailed. In this way, the convention produced a government of separate institutions, each with the will and ability to defend its independence. Majorities would rule, but the Constitution made it very difficult to assemble majorities large enough to let the government act. Brilliantly argued and deeply researched, this book will change the way we think of "original intent." With a bracing willingness to challenge old pieties, Robertson rescues the political realities that created the government we know today.

What were the Founding Fathers really thinking when they gathered in the Pennsylvania State House to draft the United States Constitution? When answering this question, most have relied on The Federalist Papers, which was first published in book form after the close of the Convention, in 1788. To this day, the book's status is sacrosanct for most Americans. Yet as David Brian Robertson shows, the Papers represented one side of the debate and does not fully capture the political sensibilities that produced the U.S. Constitution. Robertson, drawing from the full range of contemporary sources and not just the Papers, provides a truly authoritative account of the founders' collective political reasoning during the Convention. Organized thematically, each chapter covers a crucial Constitutional issue: the respective roles of the executive, the judiciary, and the legislature; the balance between the federal government and the states; slavery; and war and peace. In virtually every instance, the process was decidedly political, fractious, and piecemeal. As much as they wanted to design the government that would best serve their people, the Founders struggled to balance their broad ideals with self-interested policies and procedures. Robertson's boldly revisionist account of the political horse-trading that dominated the Convention not only greatly enriches our understanding of the nation's founding; it also elucidates why the government they created has proven so difficult to use.



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