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Great Debates in American Democracy
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The Road to a Democratic and Centralized Government

In looking at the progression from the Articles of Confederation to the Federal Constitution, one can see early America's struggle in creating a functioning democratic government in the wake of liberating itself from an oppressive monarchy. With the creation of the Constitution, America became a nation of states clearly united by a strong, democratic and representational central government.

With the shift from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution, the basis of representation in the Congress changed from a body constructed to represent the states to one built to represent the people. The Articles of Confederation state that "[n]o state shall be represented in Congress by less than two, nor by more than seven Members... In determining questions of the united states in Congress Assembled, each state shall have one vote." (Article V) As outlined in the Articles of Confederation, each state is represented equally in Congress. Alternatively, the Constitution, as was suggested in section 2 of the Virginia Plan, developed a Congress that would in some way directly represent the people. The Constitution reads, "The number of Representatives (to the House of Representatives) shall not exceed one for every thirty thousand, but each state shall have at Least one Representative." (Article I, Section 2) The Senate, the other body of Congress, "shall be composed of two senators from each State... and each Senator shall have one vote." (Article I, Section 3) Congress, as outlined in the Constitution, represents the people while, through the Senate, including those citizens of small states whose

voices are weakened in the House of Representatives. The creation of a Congress that is representative of the people ensures a more democratic federal government.

In another area of difference, the Constitution granted Congress more autonomy by giving it, instead of the states, the right to tax the citizens of America. The Articles of Confederation state that “[a]ll charges of war, and all other expences that shall be incurred for the common defence or general welfare ... shall be defrayed out of a common treasury... The taxes for paying that proportion shall be laid and levied by the authority and direction of the legislatures of the several states...” (Article VIII) Despite the ability of Congress to use tax money collected by the state legislatures, the responsibility and right to collect them is reserved only for the states. However, the Constitution reads, as is the suggestion of the New Jersey Plan in section 2, that “[t]he Congress shall have the Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises...” (Article I, Section 8) Congress’s ability to tax the American citizens further centralizes the American government and grants the federal government more power and authority.

Further, with the ratification of the Constitution, the United States Federal Government has gained more autonomy. In the Articles of Confederation, the independence and sovereignty of the states, in many ways, takes precedence to the flexibility and power of a central government. In many instances, Congress may only act if its proceedings do not infringe on the individual rights of the states (Article IX). Alternatively, influenced by section 6 of the Virginia Plan which grants Congress the right to veto “contravening” state laws, the Constitution states that “[t]his Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof... shall be the

supreme Law of the land...” (Article VI) This shift distributes more power and authority to the federal government creating a more unified union.

With the creation of the Constitution, the United States gained a more a democratic government through the institution of proportional representation and a Congress comprised of two bodies. It gained a stronger central government through the ability to tax the people of the nation directly for the specific purposes outlined in Section 8 of Article I. Lastly, it also established a more powerful and autonomous federal government through establishing the actions of Congress as the “supreme law of the land.” It is with this document, the Constitution, that the United States of America gained a strong and democratic central government.