

Q28 – Why does each state have two senators?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:

Each state has two senators to give equal representation to large and small states alike – what’s known as the Great Compromise of the Constitutional Convention.

The Constitution is built on a series of compromises, and the Senate is one of the greatest compromises of them all. When the Framers met to draft the Constitution, their convention nearly broke up over arguments about the size of Congress.

Delegates from the most populous states advocated proportionate representation: the more people, the more representatives.

Small states objected to big states wielding so much power. All states are equal, they said – and they advocated having an equal number of representatives from each state.

Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman saved the day – by adopting both arguments. He proposed not one but two chambers for the new Congress: A House of Representatives, where a state’s delegation is based on its population. And a Senate, where each state – big or small – has two members.

With the Senate, the Constitution protects small states from the tyranny of the majority: a constant fear of the Framers. Roger Sherman’s ingenious solution is known as the Great Compromise. And it’s a timely reminder. Partisanship and passion are nothing new in politics, they’ve been with us since day one. But so has compromise. It’s in America’s DNA.