Vote Trading in the First Federal Congress? James Madison and the Compromise of 1790

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Abstract

Introduction. It is fitting that the men who designed the Constitution of the United States in 1787 are known as "the Framers," for that document is skeletal indeed. This is not to say that these individuals chose to engage in an abstract exercise in implementation theory. Advocates of particular policies, eager to have their preferences graven into constitutional bedrock, compelled delegates to the Constitutional Convention to consider all the major issues of the day. With a few exceptions, however, specific policies were not embedded into the Constitution, as doing so would have precluded adoption or stymied ratification. It was thus left to the First Federal Congress, elected in the first federal election of 1788, to address the many thorny questions that the Convention had left unresolved.
On June 20, 1790, when Congress was temporarily meeting in New York City, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson hosted a dinner. In attendance were Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Representative from Virginia James Madison. Keep in mind these men were on opposing ends of the political spectrum. Hamilton, a Federalist, wanted the Federal Government to hold the bulk of the political and economic power; Madison and Jefferson, Republicans, wanted that power to remain with the states. Hence the dinner meeting. Key was a bargain in which Madison agreed not to block assumption of state debt and convince enough southern members to support it. This may be one of the earliest examples of legislative “log rolling,” or voting trading in Congress.