

# FEDERALIST 54

## JAMES MADISON

*Madison here gives voice to the understanding of the South regarding the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, which required that three-fifths of the slaves in each state be counted for purposes of representation. This clause had a strange history. Most Southerners argued that slaves should be counted as full persons for voting purposes, while Northerners opposed to slavery advocated that they not be counted at all. Here Madison's "Southerner" presents the compromise position with approval, but in the process admits much of its moral illogic.*

FEBRUARY 12, 1788

### THE APPORTIONMENT OF MEMBERS AMONG THE STATES

...“We subscribe to the doctrine,” might one of our Southern brethren observe, “that representation relates more immediately to persons, and taxation more immediately to property, and we join in the application of this distinction to the case of our slaves. But we must deny the fact that slaves are considered merely as property, and in no respect whatever as persons. 5  
The true state of the case is that they partake of both these qualities: being considered by our laws, in some respects, as persons, and in other respects as property. In being compelled to labor, not for himself, but for a master; in being vendible by one master to another master; and in being subject at all times to be restrained in his liberty and chastised in his body, by the capricious will of another—the slave may appear to be degraded from the human rank, and classed with those irrational animals which fall under the legal denomination of property. In being protected, on the other hand, in his life and in his limbs, against the violence of all others, even the master of his labor and his liberty; and in being punishable himself for all violence committed against others—the 15

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James Madison, “No. 54: The Apportionment of Members Among the States,” in Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Mentor, 1999), 334–35.

slave is no less evidently regarded by the law as a member of the society, not as a part of the irrational creation; as a moral person, not as a mere article of property. The federal Constitution, therefore, decides with great propriety on the case of our slaves, when it views them in the mixed character of persons and of property. This is in fact their true character. It is the character bestowed on them by the laws under which they live; and it will not be denied that these are the proper criterion; because it is only under the pretext that the laws have transformed the Negroes into subjects of property that a place is disputed them in the computation of numbers; and it is admitted that if the laws were to restore the rights which have been taken away, the Negroes could no longer be refused an equal share of representation with the other inhabitants....