

2 How the Federal Government Works

Prepare to Read

Objectives

- In this section, you will
- List the powers of the legislative branch.
 - Identify the roles the President fills as head of the executive branch.
 - Describe how the judicial branch is organized.
 - Explain how each branch of government can check the powers of the others.

Key Terms

House of Representatives
Senate
bill
electoral college
Supreme Court
appeal
unconstitutional
veto
override
impeach



Target Reading Skill

Main Idea Copy the table below. As you read, complete the table with information about the three branches of the federal government.

LEGISLATIVE	EXECUTIVE	JUDICIAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Congress • Makes laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •



Main Idea The United States government is divided into three branches with separate roles and responsibilities.



Great Seal of the United States

Setting the Scene Tonight, the vast chamber of the House of Representatives is packed to capacity. Applause begins as the President of the United States enters the room and steps to the podium. Behind the President sit the Vice President and the Speaker of the House. In the audience are many of the most powerful people in the nation—members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, Cabinet secretaries. At home, millions of Americans tune in on their television sets. The State of the Union Address is about to begin.

In delivering this speech each January, the President fulfills a duty spelled out in the Constitution: “He shall from time to time give to the Congress information of the state of the Union, and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” The State of the Union Address also gives Americans a rare chance to see leaders of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches in one place at one time. Our government depends on these three branches working together.

The Legislative Branch

The first and longest article of the Constitution deals with the legislative, or lawmaking, branch. Article I sets up the Congress to make the nation’s laws. Congress is made up of two bodies: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

House of Representatives The larger of the two bodies is the House of Representatives, which currently has 435 members. Representation in the House is based on population, with larger states having more representatives than smaller states. Every state has at least one representative.

Federal Officeholders

Office	Number	Term	Selection	Requirements
Representative	At least 1 per state; based on population	2 years	Elected by voters of congressional district	Age 25 or over Citizen for 7 years Resident of state in which elected
Senator	2 per state	6 years	Original Constitution— elected by state legislature Amendment 17— elected by voters	Age 30 or over Citizen for 9 years Resident of state in which elected
President and Vice President	1	4 years	Elected by electoral college	Age 35 or over Natural-born citizen Resident of United States for 14 years
Supreme Court Justice	9	Life	Appointed by President Approved by Senate	No requirements in Constitution

Representatives are elected by the people of their district for two-year terms. As a result, the entire House is up for election every other year. Representatives may run for reelection as many times as they want.

The leader of the House is called the Speaker. The Speaker of the House is one of the most powerful people in the federal government. The Speaker regulates debates and controls the agenda. If the President dies or leaves office, the Speaker of the House is next in line after the Vice President to become President.

The Senate Unlike the House, the Senate is based on equal representation, with two senators for each state. Senators are elected to six-year terms. Their terms overlap, however, so that one third of the members come up for election every two years. This way, there is always a majority of experienced senators.

Not all of the Founding Fathers trusted the judgment of the common people. As a result, they called for senators to be chosen by state legislatures. Over the years, the nation slowly became more democratic. The Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, provided that senators be directly elected by the people, like members of the House.

The Vice President of the United States is president of the Senate. The Vice President presides over the Senate and casts a vote when there is a tie. The Vice President cannot, however, take part in Senate debates. When the Vice President is absent, the president pro tempore, or temporary president, presides.

Powers of Congress The most important power of Congress is the power to make the nation's laws. All laws start as proposals called bills. A new bill may be introduced in either the House or the Senate. However, an appropriations bill, which is a bill designed to

CHART Skills

The Constitution details the length of term, method of selection, and requirements for officeholders in the three branches of government.

- 1. Comprehension**
(a) At what age can you be elected to the Senate? The House of Representatives? (b) How long may a Supreme Court Justice remain in office?
- 2. Critical Thinking
Drawing Inferences**
Why are the requirements for President and Vice President the same?



raise money for the government, must be introduced in the House. After a bill is introduced, it is debated. If both houses vote to approve the bill, it is then sent to the President, who must sign it before it becomes a law. (See the chart on page 226 to see the steps a bill must follow in order to become a law.)

The Constitution gives Congress many other powers besides law-making. Article I, Section 8, lists most of the powers of Congress. They include the power to levy, or collect, taxes and to borrow money. Congress also has the power to coin money, to establish post offices, to fix standard weights and measures, and to declare war.

The Elastic Clause Not all the powers of Congress are specifically listed. Article I, Section 8, Clause 18, states that Congress can “make all laws which shall be necessary and proper” for carrying out its specific duties. This clause is known as the elastic clause because it enables Congress to stretch its powers to deal with the changing needs of the nation.

Americans have long debated the true meaning of the elastic clause. What did the framers mean by the words *necessary* and *proper*? For example, early leaders debated whether the elastic clause gave Congress the right to set up a national bank, even though the Constitution does not specifically give Congress that power. Today, some Americans still worry that Congress might use the clause to abuse its powers.

Committees The first Congress, meeting from 1789 to 1791, considered a total of 31 new bills. Today, more than 10,000 bills are introduced in Congress each year. Clearly, it would be impossible for every member of Congress to give each new bill careful study. To deal with this problem, Congress relies on committees.

Both the House and the Senate have permanent, or standing, committees. Each committee deals with a specific topic, such as agriculture, banking, business, defense, education, science, or transportation. Members who have served in Congress the longest are usually appointed to the most important committees.

Congress may sometimes create joint committees made up of both Senate and House members. One of the most important kinds of joint committees is the conference committee. Its task is to settle differences between House and Senate versions of the same bill.

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The Executive Branch

Article II of the Constitution sets up an executive branch to carry out the laws and run the affairs of the national government. The President is the head of the executive branch. Other members include the Vice President, the Cabinet, and the many departments and agencies that help them in their work.

Roles of the President You are probably more familiar with the President than with any other government leader. You see him on television climbing in and out of airplanes, greeting foreign leaders, or making speeches. Yet, many Americans do not know exactly what the President does.