

SECTION 1

THE CONSTITUTION AND BILL OF RIGHTS

Laws are made, carried out, and interpreted by the government. In this section, you will learn about the national government of the United States.

VOCABULARY

amendment

a change

assembly

when a group of people gathers together

bail

money paid by a person accused of a crime to stay out of jail until the trial

bill

a proposal for a new law

checks and balances

each branch of the government has ways to limit the power of the other branches, which keeps the power equal among all the branches

Congress

the part of the national government that makes the laws and that is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate

constitution

a paper that lists the rules of a government

executive branch

the part of a government that carries out the laws

judicial branch

the part of a government that interprets the laws

judicial review

the power of the courts to decide if laws and other government actions are allowed by the Constitution

jury

a group of people that listens to the facts in a court case and makes a decision about the case

legislative branch

the part of a government that makes the laws

petition

to ask for something

ratify

approve

separation of powers

the power of the national government of the United States is divided among three branches

unconstitutional

actions or laws not allowed by the U.S. Constitution

veto

to reject and send back

In 1776, the 13 colonies broke away from Great Britain. Soon after the United States became its own country, leaders formed a new national government. Government leaders wrote a paper listing the rules of the new government. This paper is called the U.S. **Constitution**. The Constitution became law in 1788 and is still in effect today.

The writers of the Constitution divided the power of the national government among three parts, or branches. These branches are the **legislative, executive, and judicial branches**. The Constitution lists the powers and responsibilities of the three branches. Each branch plays a part in making, carrying out, and interpreting the laws of the United States. Together, the three branches run the national government.

The legislative branch is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate. This branch, which is also called **Congress**, is in charge of making the laws. Making laws for the United States is an important job, but Congress also has many other jobs. For example, Congress is in charge of declaring war.



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The executive branch carries out the laws of the United States. The leader of the executive branch is the President. After Congress proposes a law, the President either approves or **veto**es the law. If the President approves a law, then he or she makes sure it is carried out.

Congress makes laws for the United States in the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.

Did you know?

One of the reasons the colonists were angry with Great Britain was because they had no representatives to speak for them in Parliament. Parliament is Great Britain's legislative branch. When the United States was started, the founding fathers made sure every state had representatives in the government. In the United States, every state has two senators to represent it in the Senate. Each state has at least one representative in the House of Representatives. The number of representatives a state has depends on the state's population.

The judicial branch interprets the laws. This branch is made up of the Supreme Court and the lower federal courts. The Supreme Court was established by the Constitution. The lower courts are set up by Congress.

The government is arranged so that no branch can control the other branches. This is called **separation of powers**. The writers of the Constitution created this separation of powers to make sure no branch has too much power.

Checks and Balances

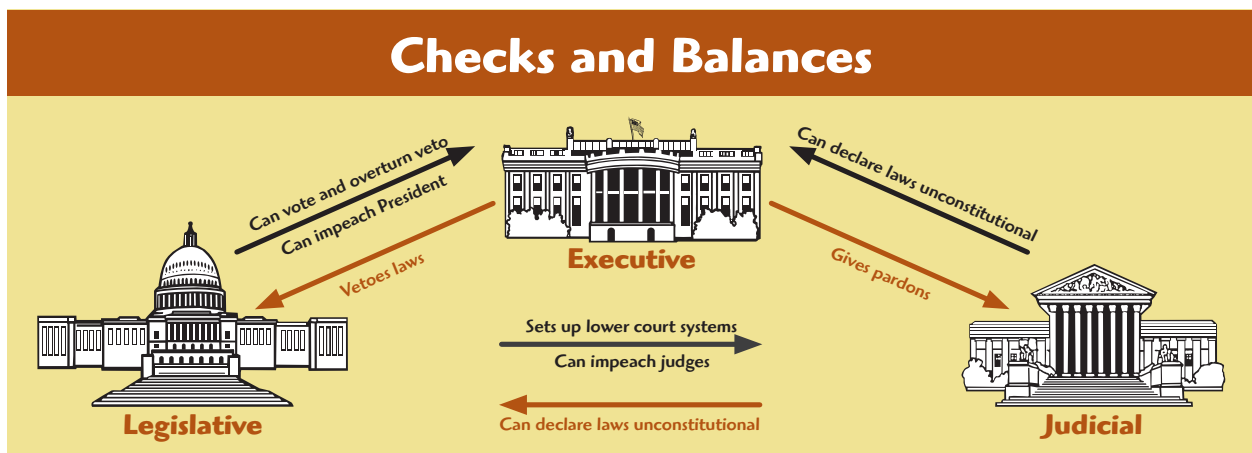
Each branch has a way to check, or limit the power of, the other branches. This keeps the power of the branches balanced.

One example of how **checks and balances** work is the process for making laws. Congress introduces and votes on a **bill**. A bill is a proposal for a new law. If both houses of Congress vote to pass a bill, it goes to the executive branch.

When the bill gets to the executive branch, the President can approve or veto it. If the President signs the bill, it becomes law. If the President vetoes the bill, the legislative branch can still pass it. If enough members of Congress vote for it, then they can overturn the President's veto.

After a bill becomes a law, it can be tested through the judicial branch. If a person thinks a law is unfair, that person can go to court to fight the law.

The judicial branch can decide if a law is **unconstitutional**. This is called **judicial review**. Judicial review is the power of the courts to decide if laws and other government actions are allowed by the Constitution. If the judicial branch decides a law is unconstitutional, the law will no longer be in effect.



If the legislative branch disagrees with the way the judicial branch has interpreted the law, it can introduce a new bill.

Checks and balances make sure that no part of the government has too much power. Checks and balances force the government to think carefully when it makes laws.

The writers of the Constitution knew the government would have challenges as the country grew. They understood that laws might need to be added to the Constitution. Also, they knew the Constitution might need to be changed. So, they made it possible to change the Constitution with **amendments**.

The first ten amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights. The writers of the Constitution wanted Americans to be treated fairly under the law. So, they wrote the Bill of Rights. These ten amendments were **ratified** in 1791, soon after the Constitution was written. They protect the basic freedoms of all Americans.

The rights given to Americans by the Bill of Rights are listed below.

Rights and Powers Given by the Bill of Rights

First Amendment	Gives the freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly , and petition
Second Amendment	Gives the right to own and use guns
Third Amendment	Stops soldiers from staying in people's homes
Fourth Amendment	Stops unreasonable searches by the police
Fifth Amendment	Protects the rights of people on trial
Sixth Amendment	Gives the right to a speedy, fair trial
Seventh Amendment	Gives the right to a trial with a jury
Eighth Amendment	Stops bail and fines from being too high, and stops cruel and unusual punishment
Ninth Amendment	Protects people's rights that are not listed in the Constitution
Tenth Amendment	Says that the Constitution lists the powers of the federal government and that any power that does not belong to the federal government belongs to the states and to the people

SECTION 2

THE COURT SYSTEMS

The United States has two separate court systems: the national system and the state system. The national system is also called the federal court system. The state system is made up of a set of courts in each state. In this section, you will learn about the court systems of the United States.

VOCABULARY

appeal

to ask that a court case be reviewed by a higher court

appellate jurisdiction

the power to review cases that have already been decided by lower courts

Chief Justice of the United States

the leader of the Supreme Court

civil case

a court case about a noncriminal matter

concurrent jurisdiction

when the federal court system and the state court system share the power to hear a case

county

the largest division of local government

court of appeals

a court that can review and overturn the decision of a lower court

crime

an act that can be punished by law

criminal case

a court case in which the defendant is accused of committing a crime

defendant

the person who is on trial

district court

another name for trial court

felony

the most serious type of crime

jurisdiction

the authority to interpret and apply the law

justice

a Supreme Court judge

juvenile

a young person

misdemeanor

a crime that is less serious than a felony

original jurisdiction

the authority to hear the first trial of a case

trial court

the court in which the facts of a case are heard

verdict

the outcome of a trial

The two court systems of the United States are similar to each other. Each system is made up of lower courts and a supreme court. The federal system has one Supreme Court. Each state also has one supreme court.

Both the federal court system and the state court system have two types of lower courts. They are **trial courts** and **courts of appeals**.