

Our system of checks and balances

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Scales of Justice. Image by DonkeyHotey, Wikimedia.

The Founding Fathers had an important goal when they wrote the U.S. Constitution. They wanted to make sure that one person could not have too much power. To do this, they created three branches of government. These three branches have a system of checks and balances. One branch may use its powers to check the powers of the other two. This keeps a balance of power among the three branches.

The Constitution of the United States decided how the national government, called the federal government, should work. It divides the federal government into three branches. These branches are:

Legislative — Makes laws (Congress)

Executive — Carries out laws (president, vice-president, Cabinet)

Judicial — Evaluates laws (Supreme Court and other courts)

Each branch of government can change acts of the other branches.

Legislative Branch

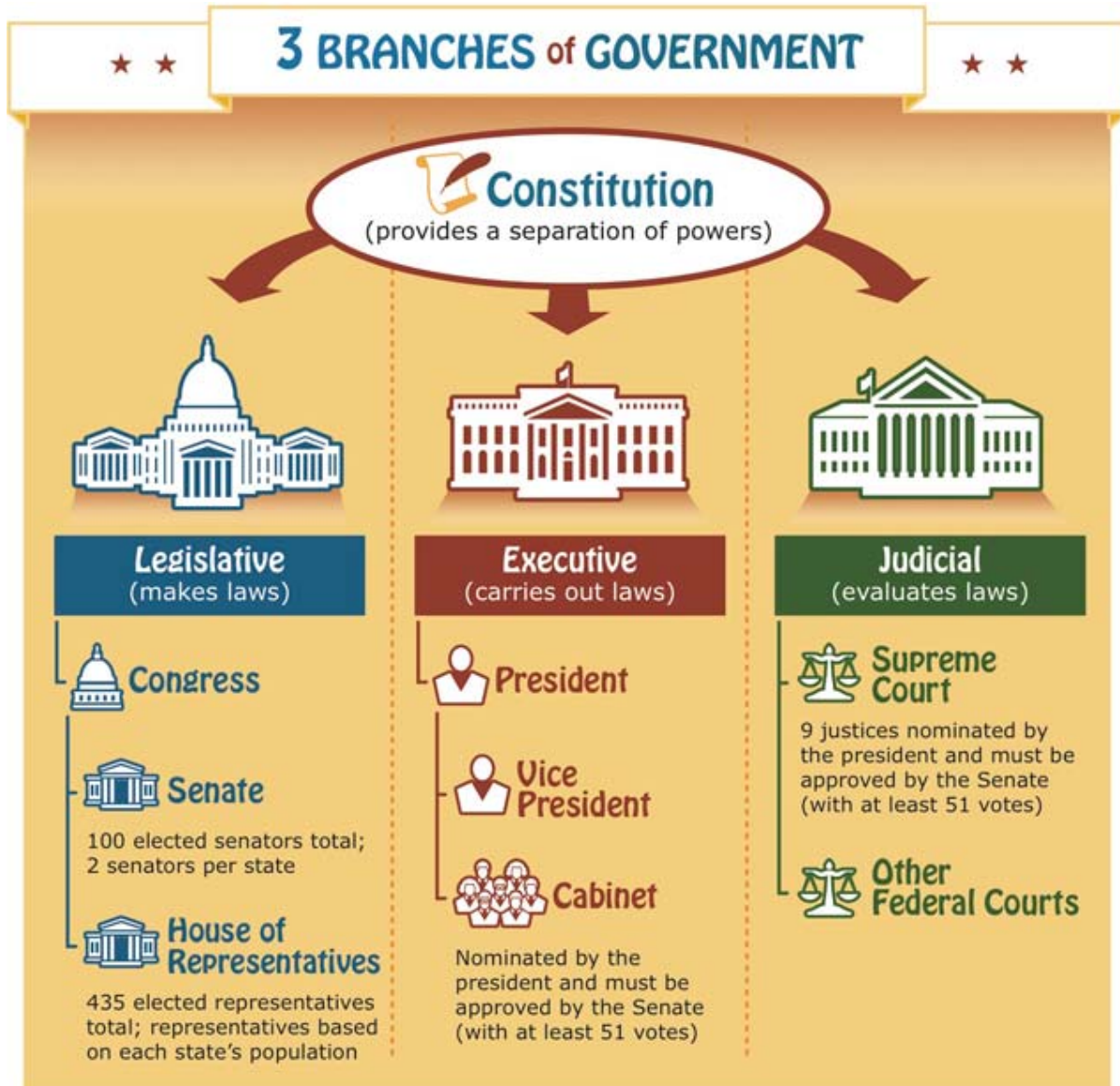
The legislative branch mostly works on creating laws.

This branch includes Congress, which is made up of the Senate and House of Representatives. American citizens vote for senators and representatives.

Senate — There are two elected senators for each state. That means there are 100 senators in total. A senate term is six years, and there is no limit to the number of terms a senator can serve.

House of Representatives — There are 435 elected representatives, divided among the 50 states based on the state's population. States with more people get more representatives. A representative serves a two-year term. There's no limit to the number of terms an individual can serve.

The legislative branch proposes ideas for laws. These are called bills. When the same bill has been passed in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, it gets sent to the president. The bill becomes a law if the president signs it. If the president does not sign it, it is called a veto.



Executive Branch

The executive branch carries out and enforces laws. It includes the president, vice-president, the Cabinet, executive departments, and other groups.

American citizens vote for the president and vice-president. Voting is free and secret.

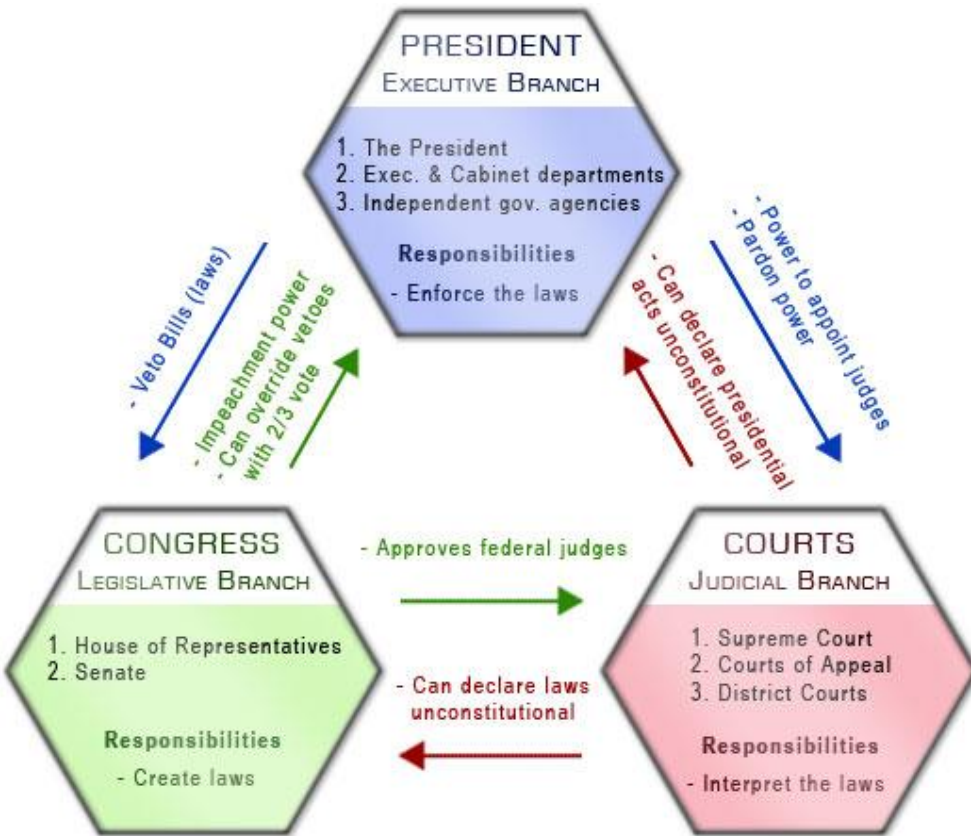
Key jobs of the executive branch include:

President — The president leads the country. This includes being the head of the federal government and the commander-in-chief of the U.S. military. The president serves a four-year term and cannot be elected more than two times.

The president has the power either to approve bills or to veto them. Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds vote.

The executive branch also maintains relationships with other countries. The president has the power to make and sign treaties, which are deals with other countries. They must be supported by two-thirds of the Senate.

The president can also make executive orders. Executive orders are rules for people who work in the executive branch to follow. The president also has the power to forgive people for crimes, which is called a pardon.



Vice president — The vice president supports the president. If the president is unable to serve, the vice president becomes president. The vice president also serves as the president of the United States Senate, where he or she casts the deciding vote in the case of a tie.

The Cabinet — Cabinet members advise the president. They include the vice president and the heads of executive departments. The Cabinet members are in charge of 15 different departments. One is the Department of Education. Cabinet members are nominated by the president and must be approved by the Senate.

Judicial Branch

The judicial branch decides the meaning of laws. They also decide if laws go against the Constitution.

The judicial branch is made up of the Supreme Court and other federal courts, which are courts that decide things at the national level.

Supreme Court — The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. The Supreme Court is made up of justices. These justices are nominated by the president and must be approved by the Senate. Congress decides the number of justices. Currently, there are nine. There is no fixed term for justices. They usually serve until they die or they decide to stop working.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the section "Legislative Branch," which of these statements is TRUE?
 - (A) A state with a small population has the same number of representatives as a state with a large population.
 - (B) A state with a small population has fewer senators than a state with a large population.
 - (C) A state with a small population has fewer representatives than a state with a large population.
 - (D) A state with a small population has more representatives than a state with a large population.

- 2 Based on the article, which of these statements describes the relationship between the president and Congress?
 - (A) The president makes laws and Congress votes to accept them or not.
 - (B) Congress gives advice to the president about different areas of government.
 - (C) Congress makes laws and the president approves them or vetoes them.
 - (D) The president asks Congress to make decisions about the federal courts.

- 3 Based on the chart titled "3 Branches of Government" and the article, what is the role of the nine justices on the Supreme Court?
 - (A) to help Congress carry out laws
 - (B) to evaluate laws
 - (C) to approve of laws at the national level
 - (D) to enforce laws

- 4 Look at the graphic that comes in the middle of the section "Executive Branch."
Which piece of information about the executive branch is in the graphic but is not described in the section?
 - (A) The president is part of the executive branch.
 - (B) The Cabinet is part of the executive branch.
 - (C) The executive branch includes independent government agencies.
 - (D) The executive branch has the responsibility of enforcing the laws.