



# How America Works



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# AMERICA'S DEMOCRACY

Suppose your class has to name a class pet. There are several good choices for a name. How does the class pick one? You may all vote on it. The name that gets the most votes is the winner. That's how a democracy works: people decide matters by voting.

This idea is also behind one of the basic principles of democratic governments like the United States. The people rule by making decisions themselves. Or they may elect people to make decisions for them. This idea unites all Americans under one federal government today.



↑ Our nation's founders carefully wrote a plan of government for the United States. This document is called the Constitution. Everyone must obey the laws in the Constitution—leaders and citizens alike.

## Three Branches of Government



↑ The Constitution explains how our government works. It sets up three branches, or parts, of government. Each branch of government has a separate job to do. Each branch is just as important as the other. The legislative branch makes laws. The executive branch carries out the laws. The judicial branch decides if the laws are fair.

# Levels of Government

➔ What if the federal government had to take care of every problem in the country? It couldn't. It would be difficult for it to handle everything from protecting the country from enemies to collecting garbage in your neighborhood. The federal government has to share responsibilities with states and local communities. So, in the United States there are three levels of government—federal, state, and local—that work together. Each one oversees laws that are specific to its level and each one handles problems of a different size or kind.

## Federal Government

The federal government deals with matters that affect the whole nation. For example, the federal government is in charge of the army, works with other countries, and runs post offices.

## State Government

The Constitution says that states have any powers not given to the federal government or not clearly denied to the states. State governments take care of state parks and state highways. Each state provides driver's licenses and public education for its citizens.

## Local Government

Local governments deal with matters that affect the local community, such as speed limits and trash collection. Many local governments have an executive, called a mayor. A city council may make up the legislative branch.

# A System of Checks and Balances

Congress—the legislative branch—passes a law.

Congress passes a law and the president approves it.



The president, as the head of the executive branch, can reject the law.



The Supreme Court, as part of the judicial branch, can say the law is unconstitutional.

↑ Each branch can check, or limit, the power of the other two branches. This system is called checks and balances. It keeps any one branch from becoming too powerful.



# THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

Congress is the legislative branch of the national government. That's the branch that makes laws. Congress has two parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

## SENATE

↓ The Senate is made up of 100 senators. Each state has two senators. Senators are elected to six-year terms. There is no limit to the number of times a senator can be re-elected.

➔ The Capitol building in Washington, D.C., is where Congress meets. The main work of Congress is to make laws for the nation. Senators may introduce any type of bill, or plan for a new law, except those that have to do with taxes. A tax is money that citizens pay to run the government and to provide services. Only members of the House can write bills about raising money through taxes. Imagine deciding how to spend a trillion dollars!



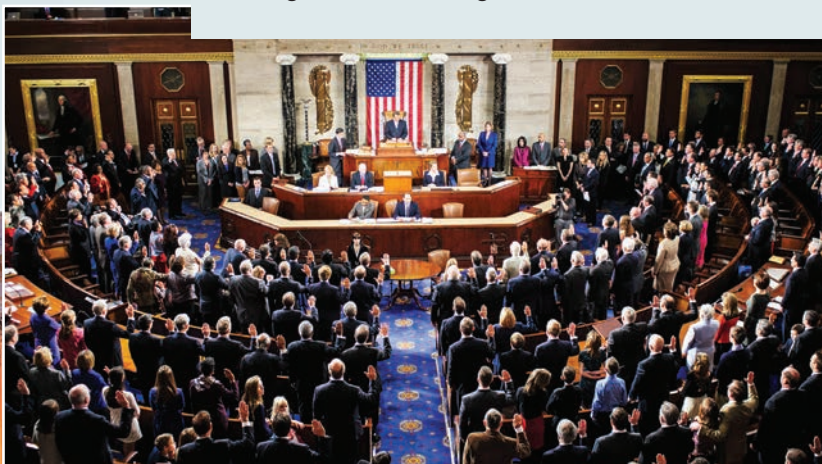
➔ Mitch McConnell from Kentucky is one of the leaders of the Senate.





# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

↓ The House of Representatives, or simply the House, has 435 members. The more people a state has, the more representatives it has in the House. California has more people than any other state. So it has the most members in the House. This way, the needs of states with more people are balanced with the right of all states to be equally represented. Pretty cool. Representatives are elected to terms of only two years. They can run for re-election as many times as they like.



## TRY THIS!

Who are your senators? To find out, go to [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) and enter your state's name. Who are your representatives? Go to [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and enter your ZIP code.



# THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

The executive branch carries out the laws that Congress makes.



⬅ The president is the leader of the executive branch. The president works in the Oval Office in the White House. The president serves a four-year term and can be re-elected only once.

## THE PRESIDENT'S CABINET

The executive branch also includes the vice president and the cabinet. The cabinet is a group of the president's most important advisers.



Agriculture



Defense



Energy



Homeland Security



Interior



Labor



Commerce



Education



Health & Human Services



Housing & Urban Development



Justice



State

➔ The president is also in charge of the armed forces.



Today, if you want to phone the president, just dial **202-456-1414**. The president may not be in, but you can leave a message. You can also write to the president at the **White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20500**, or use the e-mail form at **[whitehouse.gov/contact](http://whitehouse.gov/contact)**.



➔ One of the president's jobs is to make a budget for the country. Like a family budget, the U.S. budget is about balancing how much money comes in with how much money gets spent. The government has to decide how much tax money to spend on the military, government programs, and salaries for government workers.



Members of the cabinet are experts in areas such as defense, justice, education, transportation, agriculture, and labor.

## OTHER KEY POSTS



Transportation



Veterans Affairs



Director of National Intelligence



CIA Director



EPA Administrator



Treasury



National Security Adviser



U.N. Ambassador



# THE JUDICIAL BRANCH

The judicial branch makes sure that laws do not go against the Constitution. It consists of the Supreme Court and 13 circuit courts. Under the circuit courts are 94 district courts.

The Supreme Court justices receive about 8,000 case requests each year. They hear and prepare written opinions for about 80 of them. They work hard!



➔ There are eight associate justices on the Supreme Court and one chief justice.







← The Senate must approve the president's choice of new Supreme Court justices. The justices serve until they retire or die. That way, they can make decisions without worrying about losing their job.

← The Supreme Court is the highest (most important) court. Its judges, or justices, hear cases that have to do with federal law or the Constitution. They decide whether laws have been used fairly.



↓ The Supreme Court has the power to strike down any law that goes against the Constitution. Congress can only replace a law struck down by the Supreme Court by changing the Constitution.

To be taken up by the Supreme Court, cases must already have worked their way up through the court system, starting at the bottom. That's why you hear the phrase "taking the case all the way to the Supreme Court."







# AN AMERICAN SYMBOL

The United States has a very diverse population. Some of us are native to this land. Many of us (or our ancestors) come from Europe, from Asia, from Africa, from the Middle East, and from South America. Despite our differences, we form a single nation like no other. Our belief in our government, and the experiences and symbols we share, are part of what holds us together.

Our flag tells our history. Each star stands for a state in our nation. Each stripe stands for one of the original 13 states.



# STATE GOVERNMENTS

Every state in the United States has a government with a legislative, an executive, and a judicial branch—just like the federal government. Each state government takes care of matters that affect people in that state.

## Three Examples of State Governments

### Pennsylvania



**State legislature:**  
203 Representatives  
50 Senators

**Governor:**  
Four-year term;  
limited to two terms

**Supreme Court of Pennsylvania:**  
Seven judges elected to ten-year terms

### Wisconsin

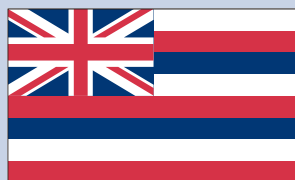


**State legislature:**  
99 representatives,  
33 senators

**Governor:**  
Four-year term; no  
term limits

**Wisconsin Supreme Court:**  
Seven judges elected to ten-year terms

### Hawaii



**State legislature:**  
51 representatives,  
25 senators

**Governor:**  
Four-year term;  
limited to two term

**Hawaii Supreme Court:**  
Five judges appointed by the governor to ten-year terms







↓ Each state has a capital city where the state government is based. At 3,255 square miles, Juneau, Alaska, is the largest capital city in land area. It's larger than the entire state of Delaware. Phoenix, Arizona, is the most populous U.S. state capital. It's the only capital with more than 1 million citizens. Montpelier, Vermont, is the least populous state capital.

← State governments build state highways and take care of and state parks. They also run public schools. And if you need a driving, fishing, or hunting license, you go to offices run by the state government for it.

## THINK PIECE!

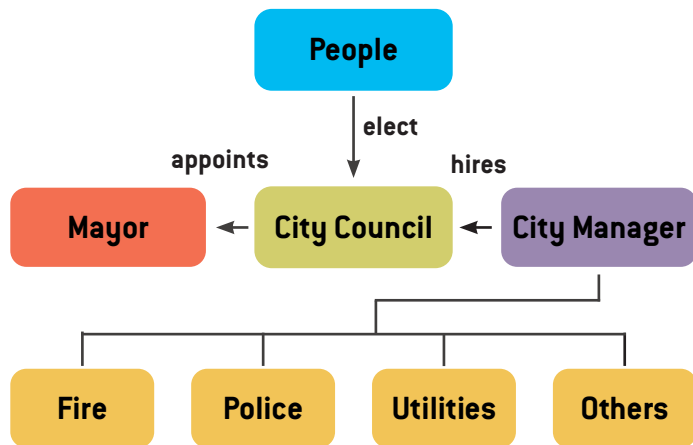
Who is the governor of your state?  
Can you name any of the state senators or state representatives for your area?



# LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

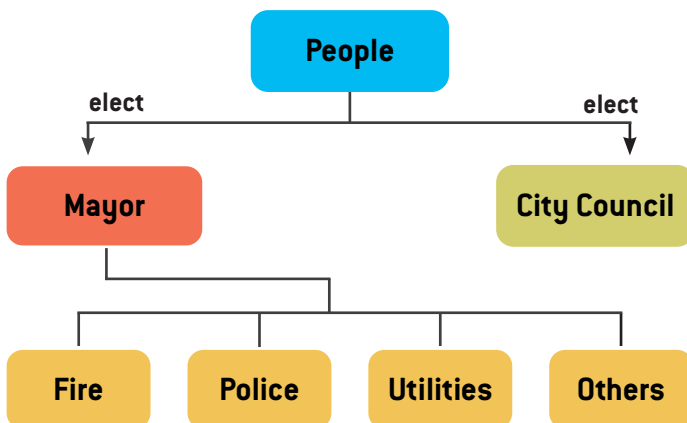
You may live in a big city or a small town. Perhaps you call a suburb home. All these places have government—local government. Local government includes municipal, or city, government and county government. A county is the largest division of government in most states.

## COUNCIL-MANAGER



Most cities have one of two different forms of government. Some have the council-manager form of government. A council is a group of people that makes laws. In this kind of city government, voters elect a city council. The city council usually chooses one of its members as mayor. It also hires a city manager to help run the city.

## MAYOR-COUNCIL



The other common form of city government is the mayor-council form. Voters elect the mayor and the council members. The mayor and the council work together to run the city. The mayor leads the executive branch. He or she make sure city laws are carried out. The mayor also hires people to run city departments, such as the police department or the fire department. The council is the legislative branch. It makes laws for the city.





## THREE EXAMPLES OF CITY GOVERNMENTS

### ➔ New York City, New York

- **City Council:** 51 members
- **Mayor:** Four-year term; limited to three terms
- **Courts:** Many different courts, including criminal court and family court; judges are elected or appointed by the mayor depending on the court



### ⬆ Oakland, California

- **City Council:** 8 members
- **Mayor:** Four-year term; limited to two terms



### ⬆ Estes Park, Colorado

- **Board of Trustees:** Mayor and six board members; elected for a four-year term
- **Courts:** One municipal court judge



## COUNTY GOVERNMENTS

County governments are the highest level of local government. A county seat is the city or town where the main government offices of the county are located. The citizens of the county elect a board of supervisors. The board members discuss and solve problems that affect the county.

## RUNNING THE CITY

All cities and most towns have police and fire departments to keep people safe. They also have departments that collect trash and make sure streets are in good repair. Making sure there is clean water? Most cities have a department for that, too. Some communities also have a parks department.

Now think about it. These kinds of services cost a lot of money. And firefighters, city bus drivers, sanitation workers, and police must be paid. Where does the money come from? Taxes! Citizens may have to pay a sales tax on some of the goods and services they buy in their community. Residents of some cities, such as New York City, also pay city income tax.



# OTHER FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

Democracies aren't the only form of government. Here are some other kinds of governments in other parts of the world.

## Constitutional Monarchy

Spain and the United Kingdom have constitutional monarchies. In these countries, a king or queen is the head of government, but the people elect members of parliament. A prime minister runs the country.



◀ In June 2014, King Carlos I of Spain gave up the throne to his son. Felipe VI is now the king of Spain.



➤ By tradition, the British prime minister meets with Queen Elizabeth II every week. The person next in line to be the United Kingdom's monarch is Queen Elizabeth's oldest son, Prince Charles.





## Absolute Monarchy



◀ Jordan has an absolute monarchy. The king is the head of government, with unlimited power over the nation and its people. There is no elected parliament or congress. King Abdullah II took the throne in 1999 after the death of his father, King Hussein.

**IN A TOTALITARIAN STATE**



...a dictator...



...controls the people

## Totalitarian Government

➔ From 1933 to 1945, Germany had a totalitarian government. The party in power forced its ideas on the people. No opposition was allowed, and ordinary people had no say in how the government was run. The leader of a totalitarian government is called a dictator. Adolf Hitler was Germany's dictator.



# Activities

## CREATE A GOVERNMENT HANDBOOK



Work with classmates to make a government handbook in which you describe the roles of national, state, and local government. Make a section for each level of government. Identify the workers and leaders at each level. Learn about the people in your own state and local government and the work they do. Then explain why each level of government is needed and how all the levels of government work together to meet the needs of citizens. Display your government handbook in the classroom.

## WRITE A SPEECH

Imagine that you are running for mayor. Research some of the issues that are important in your community. Write and give a speech telling what you will do for your community if elected. Tell how you might accomplish your goals.





## MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH THESE RELATED TITLES



### America Heritage and Culture

The American flag. The bald eagle. "The Star Spangled Banner." We celebrate American history in many ways, from sonV d paintings to documents and landmarks. Learn the backstory about why we celebrate the things we do, and discover the legends who helped build our great nation.



### Role of Citizens

If you're a member of a community, you're a citizen. You're probably a citizen of many communities. That means you have many rights and many responsibilities. What are they? Who are the people who fought for them? What do they mean for you and how you live every day? Being a good citizen makes your home and your community a better place.



### Settling the Land

Step back in time to discover the earliest communities in North America. Fast-forward to investigate why and how explorers from Europe changed the world. Stroll through the early days of settlement and Colonial times. Then pause to appreciate the founding and growth of our country to the present day. It is all here.



## LEARN MORE ONLINE!

- What powers does the federal government have that the states do not? What can the states do that the federal government cannot? What are some of the powers shared by both? Find out!
- All bills proposed in Congress have to go through a long process to become a law.
- The nation's founders were careful to set up a system of checks and balances to keep any one branch of government from becoming too powerful.
- The sovereign governments of American Indians are able to take part in the United States government, but are like separate nations in many ways.



## CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

**HSS 3.2** Students describe the American Indian nations in their local region long ago and in the recent past.

**3.2.3** Describe the economy and systems of government, particularly those with tribal constitutions, and their relationship to federal and state governments.

**HSS 3.4** Students understand the role of rules and laws in our daily lives and the basic structure of the U.S. government.

**3.4.3.** Know the histories of important local and national landmarks, symbols, and essential documents that create a sense of community among citizens and exemplify cherished ideals (e.g., the U.S. flag, the bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty, the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Capitol). **3.4.4.** Understand the three branches of government, with an emphasis on local government. **3.4.5.** Describe the ways in which California, the other states, and sovereign American Indian tribes contribute to the making of our nation and participate in the federal system of government.

### Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills

#### Historical Interpretation

**2.** Students identify the human and physical characteristics of the places they are studying and explain how those features form the unique character of those places.



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**Original Illustrations:**

**Houghton Mifflin Harcourt:** 3 Branches of Government, p. 2 bottom; State Map, p. 13 bottom; **Ken Bowser:** girl, p. 7 center; judge, p. 9 bottom right; fireman, p. 15 bottom right; queen, p. 16 bottom left.

## GRADE 3 TITLES

Mapping Our World

U.S. Geography

People and the  
Environment

Protecting Resources

The First People

Settling the Land

Communities Change

Role of Citizens

**How America Works**

America: Heritage  
and Culture

Producers and Consumers

Saving and Spending

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