

## American Government Branches of Government: A Closer Look

The Constitution of the United States establishes three separate branches of our nation's government. This separation makes sure that no one part of government ever becomes too strong. Together, these branches share the work of creating, interpreting, and enforcing the laws of the United States to make sure they are followed. What role does each branch play?

### Legislative Branch

The legislative branch is represented by Congress. This branch *makes* the laws. Congress is made up of two **chambers**<sup>1</sup>, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The two have about equal power. Each state has two senators. The number of Representatives that a state sends to Congress is based on that state's population. Rhode Island is small and only has one representative, but New York has a larger population and has 29 representatives. The people elect all of the congressmen and congresswomen. Senators serve for six years, and representatives serve for two years.

### Executive Branch

The second branch of government is the executive branch. The executive in charge of this branch is the president. Unlike kings and emperors who **inherit**<sup>2</sup> their right to run a country from family, the people elect the president. The president cannot make laws. The president's job is to *enforce* the laws made by the legislative branch. To do that, the president has the help of 15 executive departments and about 80 agencies. They handle the daily work of administering **federal**<sup>3</sup> laws and programs. The president is also **Commander in Chief**<sup>4</sup> of the army. The president is elected to serve for four years. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment limits the president to two terms. It means a president can't be elected more than twice.

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<sup>1</sup> **chambers** – a hall where lawmakers, governors, or judges meet

<sup>2</sup> **inherit** – to get or have after someone dies

<sup>3</sup> **federal** – a central authority, formed by an agreement of states or groups, which has the power to handle their common affairs while the states or groups keep control of local affairs

<sup>4</sup> **Commander in Chief** – the person who has complete command of a country's armed forces

## Judicial Branch

The judicial branch is the third and final branch of government. The judicial branch *interprets* the laws made by Congress. It is made up of a system of federal courts and judges. The highest court in the nation is the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court's most important role is to judge whether a law is unconstitutional. If it is, it has the power to overturn the law. The president appoints **justices**<sup>5</sup> to the Supreme Court, but they have to be approved by Congress. They can serve from the time they are approved until they want to retire. Federal judges are very respected. They make important decisions that affect everyone, so they must be trustworthy and dependable. The black robes the judges wear help add to the seriousness of their honorable position.

All of the branches of government are located in Washington, DC, the nation's capital. Congress meets in the Capitol building and the president lives in the White House. The Supreme Court justices meet in the Supreme Court. These buildings have come to symbolize, or stand for, the government.

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<sup>5</sup> justices -- judges

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Why is there a difference between the number of representatives for Rhode Island and New York?
  - a. Rhode Island is not as important as New York.
  - b. New York has more people that need representation.
  - c. New York has fewer people that need representation.
  - d. Rhode Island has more people that need representation.
  
2. The word **enforcing** in the first paragraph means
  - a. ruling a country.
  - b. creating laws.
  - c. causing laws to be carried out.
  - d. getting rid of laws.
  
3. Which branch of government interprets the laws?
  - a. the executive branch
  - b. the judicial branch
  - c. the legislative branch
  - d. the congressional Branch
  
4. Which of the following details *least* helps you understand the passage you have read about the role of each branch of government?
  - a. The highest court in the nation is the Supreme Court.
  - b. The president is elected to serve for four years.
  - c. Each state has two senators.
  - d. Judges wear black robes.
  
5. Which branch of the government actually makes laws?
  - a. the legislative branch
  - b. the executive branch
  - c. the judicial branch
  - d. the lobbyists

6. Reread the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment in the passage above. Why do you think it was made a part of the Constitution? How does this Amendment ensure no one branch of government becomes too powerful?

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7. Why are federal judges well respected?

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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence

Senators serve for six years, \_\_\_\_\_ representatives serve for two years.

- a. so
- b. while
- c. after
- d. which

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Because both houses of Congress are about equal in power, laws are only passed when the House of Representatives and the Senate agree.

What? \_\_\_\_\_

(are) What? only passed

When? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

10. **Vocabulary Word:** unconstitutional: a law or action that goes against the Constitution of the United States of America

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

## Teacher Guide and Answers

**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 780

**Featured Text Structure:** Descriptive - the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic

**Passage Summary:** The author describes the three parts of government, namely, the legislative (in charge of making laws), the executive (in charge of enforcing laws), and the judicial (in charge of interpreting the law).

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  - c. the judicial branch
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6. Reread the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment in the passage above. Why do you think it was made a part of the Constitution? How does this Amendment ensure no one branch of government becomes too powerful?

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary but could include that the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment is a part of the constitution to make sure that one person does not stay in power too long. It helps ensure that the executive branch does not become too powerful and that the president does not become like a king.

7. Why are federal judges well respected?

**Suggested answer:** Because they make important decisions that affect everyone.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence

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Because both houses of Congress are about equal in power, laws are only passed when the House of Representatives and the Senate agree.

What? **laws**

(are) What? only passed

When? **the House of Representatives and the Senate agree**

Why? **both houses of Congress are about equal in power**

10. **Vocabulary Word:** unconstitutional: a law or action that goes against the Constitution of the United States of America

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.