

State and Local Government in the United States

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The United States have three levels of government; a federal level, a state level and a local level. Each one has its own features and takes care of specific matters. What about these matters? Let's say that the Constitution of the United States lists what matters to the federal government in Washington, D.C. What's not listed there, then, "belongs" to states and municipalities, whose prerogatives are staunchly guarded by their citizens. The following text comes in part from the White House official website. The White House is the official residence and work place of the President of the United States, thus it is the living symbol of federal government.

State and Local Government. Most Americans have more daily contact with their state and local governments than with the federal government. Police departments, libraries, and schools - not to mention driver's licenses and parking tickets - usually fall under the oversight of state and local governments. Each state has its own written constitution and these documents are often far more elaborate than their federal counterpart. The Alabama Constitution, for example, contains 310,296 words more than 40 times as many as the U.S. Constitution.

State Government. Under the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, all powers not granted to the federal government are reserved for the states and the people. All state governments are modeled after the federal government and consist of three branches; executive, legislative and judicial. The U.S. Constitution mandates that all states uphold a "republican form" of government, although the three-branch structure is not required.

Local Government. Local governments generally include two tiers: counties, also known as boroughs in Alaska and parishes in Louisiana, and municipalities, or cities/towns. In some states, counties are divided into townships. Municipalities can be structured in many ways, as defined by state constitutions, and are called, variously, townships, villages, boroughs, cities, or towns. Various kinds of districts also provide functions in local government outside county or municipal boundaries, such as school districts or fire protection districts.

Municipal governments - those defined as cities, towns, boroughs (except in Alaska), villages, and townships - are generally organized around a population center and in most cases correspond to the geographical designations used by the United States Census Bureau for reporting of housing and population statistics. Municipalities vary greatly in size, from the millions of residents of New York City and Los Angeles to the 287 people who live in Jenkins, Minnesota.

Municipalities generally take responsibility for parks and recreation services, police and fire departments, housing services, emergency medical services, municipal courts, transportation services (including public transportation, and public works (streets, sewers, snow removal, signage. and so forth).

Whereas the federal government and state governments share power in countless ways, a local government must be granted power by the state. In general, mayors city councils, and other governing bodies are directly elected by the people.

Executive Branch. The President of the United States of America is the elected head of state and head of government of the United States. The president leads the executive branch of the federal government and is the commander-in-chief of the United States Armed Forces. Article II of the U.S. Constitution vests the executive power of the United States in the president. The power includes execution of federal law, alongside the responsibility of appointing federal executive, diplomatic, regulatory and judicial officers, and concluding treaties with foreign powers with the advice and consent of the Senate. The president is further empowered to grant federal pardons and reprieves, and to convene and adjourn either or both houses of Congress under extraordinary circumstances. The president is largely responsible for dictating the legislative agenda of the party to which the president is enrolled. The president also directs the foreign and domestic policy of the United States. Since the founding of the United States, the power of the president and the federal government has grown substantially.

The president is indirectly elected by the people through the Electoral College to a four-year term, and is one of only two nationally elected federal officers, the other being the Vice President of the United States.

On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama became the 44th and current president. On November 6, 2012, he was re-elected and is currently serving the 57th term. The next presidential election is scheduled to take place on November 8, 2016; on January 20, 2017, the newly elected president will take office.

The first power the Constitution confers upon the president is the veto. The Presentment Clause requires any bill passed by Congress to be presented to the president before it can become law. Once the legislation has been presented, the president has three options:

1. Sign the legislation; the bill then becomes law.
2. Veto the legislation and return it to Congress, expressing any objections; the bill does not become law, unless each house of Congress votes to override the veto by a two-thirds vote.
3. Take no action. In this instance, the president neither signs nor vetoes the legislation. After 10 days, not counting Sundays, two possible outcomes emerge:
 - o If Congress is still convened, the bill becomes law.

- If Congress has adjourned, thus preventing the return of the legislation, the bill does not become law. This latter outcome is known as the pocket veto.

The president also has the power to nominate federal judges, including members of the United States courts of appeals and the Supreme Court of the United States (Juridical powers of the President). However, these nominations do require Senate confirmation.

The president is elected indirectly. A number of electors, collectively known as the Electoral College, officially select the president. On Election Day, voters in each of the states and the District of Columbia cast ballots for these electors. Each state is allocated a number of electors, equal to the size of its delegation in both Houses of Congress combined. Generally, the ticket that wins the most votes in a state wins all of that state's electoral votes and thus has its slate of electors chosen to vote in the Electoral College.

The winning slate of electors meet at its state's capital on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December, about six weeks after the election, to vote. They then send a record of that vote to Congress. The vote of the electors is opened by the sitting vice president—acting in that role's capacity as President of the Senate—and read aloud to a joint session of the incoming Congress, which was elected at the same time as the president.

Pursuant to the Twentieth Amendment, the president's term of office begins at noon on January 20 of the year following the election. This date, known as Inauguration Day, marks the beginning of the four-year terms of both the president and the vice president.

In every state, the executive branch is headed by a governor who is directly elected by the people. In most states, the other leaders in the executive branch are also directly elected, including the lieutenant governor, the attorney general, the secretary of state, and auditors and commissioners. States reserve the right to organize in any way, so they often vary greatly with regard to executive structure. No two state executive organizations are identical.

Legislative Branch. The United States Congress is the bicameral legislature of the federal government of the USA consisting of two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Congress meets in the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Both senators and representatives are chosen through direct election. Members are usually affiliated to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party, and only rarely to a third party or as independents. Congress has 535 voting members: 435 Representatives and 100 Senators. The members of the House of Representatives serve two-year terms representing the people of a single constituency, known as a "district". Congressional districts are apportioned to states by population; each state has at least one congressional representative. Each state, regardless of

population or size, has two senators. Currently, there are 100 senators representing the 50 states. Each senator is elected at-large in their state for a six-year term.

Article 1 of the Constitution sets forth most of the powers of Congress, which include numerous explicit powers enumerated in Section 8. Constitutional amendments have granted Congress additional powers. Congress also has implied powers derived from the Constitution's Necessary and Proper Clause. Congress has authority over financial and budgetary policy through the enumerated power to "lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States".

Congress has an important role in national defense, including the exclusive power to declare war, to raise and maintain the armed forces, and to make rules for the military. Some critics charge that the executive branch has usurped Congress's constitutionally defined task of declaring war. While historically presidents initiated the process for going to war, they asked for and received formal war declarations from Congress for the War of 1812, the Mexican–American War, the Spanish–American War, World War I, and World War II, although President Theodore Roosevelt's military move into Panama in 1903 did not get congressional approval. In the early days after the North Korean invasion of 1950, President Truman described the American response as a "police action".

Congress can establish post offices and post roads, issue patents and copyrights, fix standards of weights and measures, establish Courts inferior to the Supreme Court, and "make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof." Article Four gives Congress the power to admit new states into the Union.

One of Congress's foremost non-legislative functions is the power to investigate and oversee the executive branch. Congress oversees other government branches, for example, the Senate Watergate Committee, investigating President Nixon and Watergate, in 1973–74.

Among the powers specifically given to Congress in Article 1 Section 8, are: to lay and collect taxes, duties, impost and excises, to pay the debts and provide for the common defense and general welfare of the United States; to borrow money on the credit of the United States; to regulate commerce with foreign nations and among the several states; to coin money, regulate the value thereof, and of foreign coin, and fix the standard of weights and measures; to establish post offices and post roads; to constitute tribunals inferior to the Supreme Court; to declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water; to raise and support armies; to provide and maintain a navy; to make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces.

Other congressional powers have been granted, or confirmed, by constitutional amendments

All 50 states have legislatures made up of elected representatives, who consider matters brought forth by the governor or introduced by its members to create legislation that becomes law. The legislature also approves a state's budget and initiates tax legislation and articles of impeachment. The latter is part of a system of checks and balances among the three branches of government that mirrors the federal system and prevents any branch from abusing its power.

Except for one state, Nebraska, all states have a bicameral legislature made up of two chambers: a smaller upper house and a larger lower house. Together the two chambers make state laws and fulfil other governing responsibilities. Nebraska is the one state that has just one chamber in its legislature. The smaller upper chamber is always called the Senate, and its members generally serve longer terms, usually four years. The larger lower chamber is most often called the House of Representatives, but some states call it the Assembly or the House of Delegates. Its members usually serve shorter terms, often two years.

Judicial Branch. State judicial branches are usually led by the state supreme court, which hears appeals from lower-level state courts. Court structures and judicial appointments/elections are determined either by legislation or the state constitution. The Supreme Court focuses on correcting errors made in lower courts and therefore holds no trials. Rulings made in state supreme courts are normally binding; however, when questions are raised regarding consistency with the U.S. Constitution, matters may be appealed directly to the United States Supreme Court.