

American Government Branches of Government: A Closer Look

The Constitution of the United States established three separate branches for our nation's federal government. This separation was intended to ensure that no one part of government would ever become too strong. These three branches divide the work of creating, interpreting, and enforcing the laws of the United States. What role does each branch play?

Legislative Branch

The legislative branch is Congress. This branch *makes* the laws. Congress is made up of two **chambers**,¹ the Senate and the House of Representatives. Every state elects officials to both chambers. Each state elects two members of the Senate, called senators. However, the number of representatives that a state sends to Congress is based on that state's population. For example, Wyoming has a small population and only has one representative. New York, which has a larger population, has 27 representatives. Senators serve six-year terms, and representatives serve two-year terms.

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**² their right to run a country from their family, the president is elected by the people of the states. 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 executive departments and agencies. They handle the daily work of administering **federal**³ laws and programs. The president is also **commander in chief**⁴ of the

¹ **chambers** – halls or rooms where lawmakers or other officials meet

² **inherit** – to get or have after someone dies

³ **federal** – relating to 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

army. The president is elected to serve for a four-year term. The 22nd Amendment limits a president to two terms, so a person cannot be elected president more than twice.

Judicial Branch

The judicial branch is the third 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 of the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court's most important role is to judge whether a law is unconstitutional. If a law is unconstitutional, the Court has the power to overturn it. The president appoints **justices**⁵ to the U.S. Supreme Court, but they have to be confirmed by the Senate. They can serve from the time they are approved until they die or retire. Federal judges make important decisions that affect everyone, so it is important that they are trustworthy and dependable.

The United States government is based in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital. Congress meets in the Capitol Building, and the president lives in the White House. The United States Supreme Court justices meet in the Supreme Court Building. These buildings have come to symbolize, or stand for, the government.

⁴ **commander in chief** – the person who has complete command of a country's armed forces

⁵ **justices** – judges

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is the number of representatives a state has in Congress based on?
 - a. the number of senators the state has in Congress
 - b. the state's population
 - c. the state's number of square miles
 - d. the state's number of cities

2. What are the three branches of government described in the passage?
 - a. congressional, executive, judicial
 - b. congressional, executive, legislative
 - c. judicial, legislative, professional
 - d. executive, judicial, legislative

3. Which of the following details is LEAST important to an understanding of the three branches of government?
 - a. The highest court in the nation is the United States Supreme Court.
 - b. The president is elected to serve for four years.
 - c. Each state has two senators.
 - d. New York has 27 representatives.

4. Read the following sentence: "These three branches divide the work of creating, interpreting, and enforcing the laws of the United States."

In this sentence, the word **enforcing** means

 - a. ruling a country
 - b. creating laws
 - c. make sure laws are followed
 - d. getting rid of laws

5. What is the passage mainly about?
 - a. the importance of the separation of powers in government
 - b. the origins of the three branches of American government
 - c. the roles of the three branches of American government
 - d. the tension among the three branches of American government

6. What is the U.S. Supreme Court's most important role?

7. What does it mean for a law to be unconstitutional? Use evidence from the passage to support your answer.

8. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Senators serve six-year terms, _____ representatives serve two-year terms.

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

9. Read the following sentence.

During his or her time in office, the president enforces laws with the help of executive departments and agencies.

Answer the questions below based on the information provided in the sentence you just read. One of the questions has already been answered for you.

1. Who is the main subject of the sentence? the president

2. What does the president do? _____

3. When? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** administer: to manage.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
