

Follow-up Activities

- Invite a U.S. Congressperson or a staff member for a class visit to discuss the operations of Congress and to take questions from the class. Prepare questions with your class prior to the visitor's arrival, including what an average day in the life of a Congressperson is like, and how members of Congress cope with their large workloads.
- Have the class role-play the three branches of government, with the legislature and the President each playing their part in creating a law on some important issue. Then have the U.S. Supreme Court review the law to see if it is constitutional.
- The process of making a bill into a law has many steps. Encourage students to learn more about this complex process. Then students can create a comic strip that illustrates how a bill becomes a law.
- Select a famous person from one of the three branches of American government to research, such as a Supreme Court justice, a secretary of an executive department or a member of Congress. Students can learn about this influential person through Internet and print resources. Then students can present their information by portraying the person in costume for the class.
- The people who make the three branches of American government run smoothly are very busy! Based upon what students have learned about the functioning of U.S. government, they can write a diary entry as if it was taken from a day in the life of a public official in one branch of government.

Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our web site at www.LibraryVideo.com

- www.usdoj.gov/usao/eousa/kidspage/
The U.S. Department of Justice sponsors this "Justice for Kids and Youth" Web site that provides information for students from kindergarten to fifth grade about the judicial branch. The "Inside the Courtroom" link offers a helpful discussion of how the U.S. court system functions. Useful resources for teachers and parents are also provided.
- www.senate.gov
This site, offered by the U.S. Senate, presents details about how the Senate works. This site is text-heavy, but it does offer a helpful glossary. Students also can take an interesting U.S. Capitol Virtual Tour on this site.

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- www.whitehouse.gov/kids/whlife/index.html
The Web site of the White House has a special section for kids, which includes a tour of the White House, information about the President's family and an American History interactive quiz. A helpful guide for teachers and parents is also provided.
- bensguide.gpo.gov
"Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids" is a wonderful site with grade-specific material on the character and history of American government. Details about each of the three branches, in addition to the system of checks and balances, are provided.

Suggested Print Resources

- Kishel, Anne Marie. *What is Government?* Lerner Publications Company, Minneapolis, MN; 2007.
- LeVert, Suzanne. *Congress*. Benchmark Investigative Group, Tarrytown, NY; 2002.
- St. George, Judith. *So You Want to Be President?* Philomel Books, New York, NY; 2004.

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COMPLETE LIST OF TITLES

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|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP | • A HISTORY OF THE PRESIDENCY |
| • FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT | • THE THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT |
| • THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT | • WHAT IS GOVERNMENT? |

Teacher's Guides Included
and Available Online at:

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THE THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

Grades K-4

This guide is a supplement designed for teachers to use when presenting programs in the video series *American Government For Children*.

Before Viewing: Give students an introduction to the topic by relaying aspects of the program overview to them. Select pre-viewing discussion questions and vocabulary to provide a focus for students when they view the program.

After Viewing: Review the program and vocabulary, and use the follow-up questions and activities to inspire continued discussion. Encourage students to research the topic further with the Internet and print resources provided.



Program Overview

The federal government is composed of three main parts: the legislative, executive and judicial branches. The powers of United States government are shared among these three branches. The idea of this division, called separation of powers, is that no branch of government should have so much power that it could be used for the wrong reasons. Instead, the plan of American government is to split up power and give each branch the means to keep an eye on the others through a system of checks and balances.

The main job of the legislative branch is making laws. Laws are special kinds of rules saying what we should and should not do. Laws are made by the citizens' representatives in Congress, which is made up of two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate. To make laws, proposed laws called bills are written, numbered and assigned to a committee of the House or Senate, which considers them. If the committee approves the bill, it is sent to the full House or Senate, which then votes on it. If a bill is passed by both houses of Congress, it goes to the President for signing. When Presidents sign bills passed by Congress, they become law. The U.S. President is the leader of the executive branch of government, which is responsible for putting laws into action. Presidents supervise the people who work in the many executive departments; they oversee foreign policy and play the role of commander in chief of the armed forces. The third branch of government is the judicial branch, which is responsible for interpreting laws, or figuring out what they mean, and applying them to individual cases. At the top of the federal judicial system sits the U.S. Supreme Court, composed of nine men and women appointed for life by the President.

The three branches of government work together by making, executing, interpreting and applying laws. Power is separated but also shared in a system of checks and balances, which tries to ensure that no one branch abuses its powers.

Vocabulary

law — A written rule that is made and enforced by governments. Laws are also known as legislation.

checks and balances — A system that gives each branch of government power over the others so that no one branch becomes too powerful.

legislative branch — The part of American government that holds the power to make laws.

executive branch — The part of American government that holds the power to execute, or carry out, the laws of the nation.

judicial branch — The part of American government that holds the power to interpret laws to find out what they mean, and to apply them to individual cases.

separation of powers — The idea of giving different powers of government to different groups of people to make sure that no one group becomes too powerful.

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U.S. Congress — The law-making body for federal government.

U.S. House of Representatives — One of the two parts of Congress whose members are chosen from each state, based upon how many people live in the state. Members of the House of Representatives are called representatives.

U.S. Senate — One of the two parts of Congress composed of two elected members from each state. Members of the Senate are called senators.

congressional districts — Specific areas within a state that elect a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

constitution — A document that describes what government is allowed to do and what it is not allowed to do. The U.S. Constitution is the highest law in America.

bill — A proposed law.

congressional committee — A group of representatives or senators that deals with specific matters of Congress, such as examining proposed laws.

President of the United States — The highest official in the executive branch of American government.

Vice President — A member of the executive branch who helps to advise the President, and who takes over the presidency if something happens to the President while in office.

cabinet — The main people in the executive branch who advise the President. The cabinet is composed of the heads of the executive departments, who are called secretaries.

veto — The power of Presidents to reject a proposed law, sending it back to Congress. Only a two-thirds vote of both the House and Senate can overturn or override a veto.

unconstitutional law — A law found by the judicial branch to violate the U.S. Constitution.

U.S. Supreme Court — The highest court in the United States.

judges — Members of the judicial branch who interpret laws to find out what they mean, and apply them to individual cases to decide if the law has been broken.

appoint — To choose a public official by selection rather than by voting.

Pre-viewing Discussion

- Encourage students to brainstorm lists of what they know about each of the three branches of American government. Do students know what each branch does? Are they familiar with the people who help each branch of government to run? Which branch are students most familiar with, and why?
- Many public officials work in each of the three branches of American government. What characteristics do students think make someone a good President? How about a good member of Congress? Or a Supreme Court justice?

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- Discuss classroom laws with your students. How do these laws get decided in your classroom? Do you think this process is similar to national law-making practices? Why or why not?

Focus Questions

1. What is a law?
2. Describe the system of checks and balances. Why is this system important?
3. What does separation of powers mean?
4. What are the three branches of American government?
5. What are the names of the two parts of Congress?
6. How is the number of members of the House of Representatives from each state decided?
7. What is the length of the term for a representative?
8. How many members of the Senate does a state have, and how long are their terms?
9. What is a bill? How does a bill become a law?
10. What do congressional committees do?
11. What are some of the duties of the President?
12. Who in the executive branch helps Presidents perform their duties?
13. What is a presidential veto and what can Congress do about it?
14. What does the judicial branch do?
15. What is the U.S. Supreme Court and how do people become justices?
16. What does declaring a law unconstitutional mean? Who can declare a law unconstitutional?

Follow-up Discussion

- American government is designed to share power among three branches so that large amounts of power aren't concentrated in the hands of one person or group. Discuss this concept of separation of powers with your students. What do students think are the pros and cons of a system that shares powers among people and groups? Ask them what dangers might result from giving one person or group too much power. What problems do they think might arise from distributing the powers of government in different hands?
- One person, the President, has the power to veto laws made by over 500 representatives of the people in the U.S. Congress. Do students feel that this is a fair practice? Why or why not?
- Encourage students to discuss some of the laws that they are familiar with. Why do students think these laws are important? Ask students to brainstorm a list of laws that they think would make the world a better place. Do they think these laws could ever be passed? Why or why not?