

## THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT

American government has three levels: federal, state and local. And within each level, there are three branches: legislative, executive and judicial.

The U.S. Constitution established the structure and basic functions of the federal government, including its three branches. Congress, which includes the Senate and the House of Representatives, is the legislative branch. It makes laws that apply to the whole country, establishes the federal budget, authorizes federal taxation and spending, decides whether to approve presidential nominees to key positions in the federal government, has the power to declare war and decides whether to approve treaties with other countries that the executive branch has negotiated.

The Senate has 100 members. The voters in each state elect two of them. The House of Representatives has 435 members, each elected by and representing the voters in one of the country's 435 Congressional districts.

The executive branch includes the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet and other senior administrative officials and more than four million federal employees, including the members of the military. Under the direction of the President, the executive branch enforces the laws and administers the programs that Congress has established and manages the country's diplomatic relationships with other countries. The President also serves as the military's Commander in Chief.

Voters make just one choice with regard to the executive branch: which pair of Presidential/Vice-Presidential candidates to vote for. The total number of votes cast for each pair of candidates doesn't determine who becomes President. Instead, each of the states has the

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same number of electoral college votes as it has U.S. senators and representatives. In addition, the District of Columbia has three. The electoral college votes are awarded to candidates based on the popular vote totals within each state and the District. With 538 electoral votes in all, the presidential candidate who wins 270 or more is elected.

The federal judicial branch has three levels of courts. U.S. district courts oversee trials involving federal laws. U.S. courts of appeal decide whether to uphold or overturn the outcome of any U.S. district court case that has been appealed. The Supreme Court chooses which cases to hear that have been appealed after a U.S. court of appeals or state court decision and its decision is final. No positions in the federal judiciary are elective. Instead, the President nominates and the U.S. Senate approves all appointees.

Each state's constitution lays out the structure of its government. Every state government has a legislative, executive and judicial branch. A state legislature functions much like Congress, but its authority extends only within the state. Every state legislature has a Senate and a House of Representatives or Delegates, sometimes called the Assembly. The one exception is Nebraska, whose legislature has only one body. Voters within legislative districts elect the members of their state legislature that represent their district.

A state's executive branch is headed by a governor, whom voters elect. In most states, voters also elect other executive leaders, including a lieutenant governor, a secretary of state, an attorney general and a variety of auditors and commissioners.

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Every state has a judicial branch with multiple levels, including trial courts, appeals courts and a Supreme Court. In most states, the voters elect judges and Supreme Court justices. In some states, those officials are appointed jointly by the executive and legislative branches.

Local government includes counties (sometimes called boroughs or parishes) and cities or towns. The legislative branch may be called the board of supervisors or commissioners, the city council or some other name. The executive may be called the county superintendent, the mayor or another title. In most localities, voters elect legislators, the senior executive and some other members of the executive branch, such as the sheriff and the district attorney or prosecutor.

Local governments also have a judicial branch, with different types of courts and judges. In many areas, voters elect these judges.

There are also a variety of local government districts with special functions, such as school districts, fire protection districts and hospital districts. Typically the voters elect members of a governing board for these districts and the governing board hires and supervises the district's senior executive.

Across the different levels and branches of government, there are a wide variety of elective offices whose occupants are chosen by the voters. As many as 37 of these offices may appear at one time or another on a ballot. As a voter, your role in government is to research, evaluate and choose (or rank) your preferred candidate(s) for each position that appears on your ballot.