

Federal Government

How It Works

The federal government of the United States is made up of three branches, the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch, and the Judicial Branch. According to USA.gov, it is the job of the Legislative Branch to make laws, the job of the Executive Branch to carry out laws, and the job of the Judicial Branch to evaluate laws.

Each branch is comprised of key parts. The Legislative Branch is the U.S. Congress. The Executive Branch is the President, Vice President, and Cabinet members. The Judicial Branch is the Supreme Court and other Federal courts.

The U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives together form the U.S. Congress which has the authority to enact legislation, declare war, confirm or reject certain Presidential appointments, establish an annual federal budget, levy taxes and tariffs, borrow money, regulate interstate commerce, and carry out many other duties and functions.

So let's break it down. What exactly is it that our elected officials do? What are their primary responsibilities? It's impossible to create a complete list, but here are some of the key functions some of our federal office holders execute.

President of the United States

- ♦ Serves as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces
- ♦ Negotiates international deals and treaties
- ♦ Appoints federal judges and justices of the Supreme Court
- ♦ Appoints ambassadors, Cabinet members, and other officials
- ♦ Acts as head of state
- ♦ Drafts legislation
- ♦ Develops foreign policy

U.S. Representatives

- ♦ Initiate revenue bills
- ♦ Impeach federal officials
- ♦ Create, debate, and vote on legislation
- ♦ Elect the President in the event of a tie in the electoral college

U.S. Senators

- ♦ Confirm certain Presidential appointments
- ♦ Ratify treaties
- ♦ Create, debate, and vote on legislation

Everyday Life

Does what the President do really affect your day-to-day life? Don't all his decisions still need approved by Congress? The answer might surprise you. The President has the power to nominate the directors and leaders of his Cabinet agencies. Those directors make and implement policies and procedures that affect us in more ways than we can count. Do some research and determine what the roles and responsibilities are of each of these Cabinet members:

- ♦ Secretary of Agriculture
- ♦ Secretary of Commerce
- ♦ Secretary of Defense
- ♦ Secretary of Education
- ♦ Secretary of Energy
- ♦ Secretary of Health and Human Services
- ♦ Secretary of Homeland Security
- ♦ Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
- ♦ Secretary of the Interior
- ♦ Secretary of Labor
- ♦ Secretary of State
- ♦ Secretary of Transportation
- ♦ Secretary of the Treasury
- ♦ Secretary of Veterans Affairs
- ♦ Attorney General

He also nominates the directors of the FBI and the CIA.

Executive Orders

U.S. Presidents also have the power to issue executive orders. These orders cover an extremely broad range of topics and areas. Choose a President to research and read at least six of his executive orders. Choose two and write a short report on how each of these has impacted or has the potential to impact your everyday life. You can find a great deal of information on Presidential executive orders at www.archives.gov/federal-register/executive-orders/disposition.html.

One More Appointment

The President has the right to appoint the justices who comprise the Supreme Court of the United States. We'll look more closely at the Supreme Court shortly, but it is important to mention during our study of Presidential powers that he appoints, with the consent of the Senate, these justices. These nine justices serve life terms. That means that the President we elect today can continue to have a direct impact on the interpretation of our laws for decades to come. Make a list of the nine current Supreme Court justices and note their current ages. You can find this information at www.supremecourt.gov/about/biographies.aspx. Keep this list for upcoming assignments.

On the Record

The best way to understand the jobs the President and legislators do is to take a closer look at what they have done. Look at the record of a U.S. President, a member of the U.S. Senate, and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives (choose either current office holders or a recent office holder). Write a 750-1,000 word report on each one, describing some of the decisions they have made, actions they have taken, and effects they have had on our nation.

Congress

Now let's turn our attention to the U.S. Congress. What types of bills and decisions have the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Congress been considering and debating lately? How do these have the potential to impact your everyday life? Choose a topic that interests you and find out what is or isn't being done to address it by the Congress. You can find some helpful information at www.house.gov/ and www.senate.gov/index.htm.

Big, Bigger, and Biggest

Do some research and find out:

- ♦ The area of the White House itself
- ♦ The area of the White House grounds
- ♦ The area of the U.S. Capitol

How do these compare to other famous landmarks in Washington D.C.? Choose at least three other structures such as the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the World War II Memorial, etc. to compare them to. Which is the largest? How many times larger is it than the others on your list?



Extension Activities

Art:

Create a poster, presentation, or display that illustrates the responsibilities of the FBI and the CIA. Be sure to include ways they are similar and ways that they differ.

Research the art on display in and the architecture of the White House. You'll find lots of helpful information to get you started at www.whitehouse.gov/about/inside-white-house/art.

Health:

Identify one health threat or potential health threat the FBI or CIA has responded to.

The health of our nation's leaders is often a topic that gets a great deal of media attention. See what you can learn about the health of our country's leaders. What illnesses, injuries, and challenges have they faced while in office? What happens when a President needs to undergo anesthesia?

