
Important Documents

The government of the United States is based on specific values. The values of our nation are defined in legal, political, and historical documents. Documents written during our nation's history are visible outcomes of rules and laws. They protect the rights of citizens. We find these documents on local, state, and national levels.



On a national level, important documents include The Declaration of

Independence, The Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights. Laws, treaties, and trade agreements are also considered important national documents. These documents outline our rights and responsibilities as citizens. On a state level, important documents include the state constitution, state laws and codes, voter registration, and documents that protect animals and land.

Checks and Balances

The writers of the U.S. Constitution wanted the new nation's government to be strong and lasting. To achieve this, they had an idea. The government would use a system of checks and balances between the three branches of government. This means that each branch of the U.S. government has the power to check on the other two.

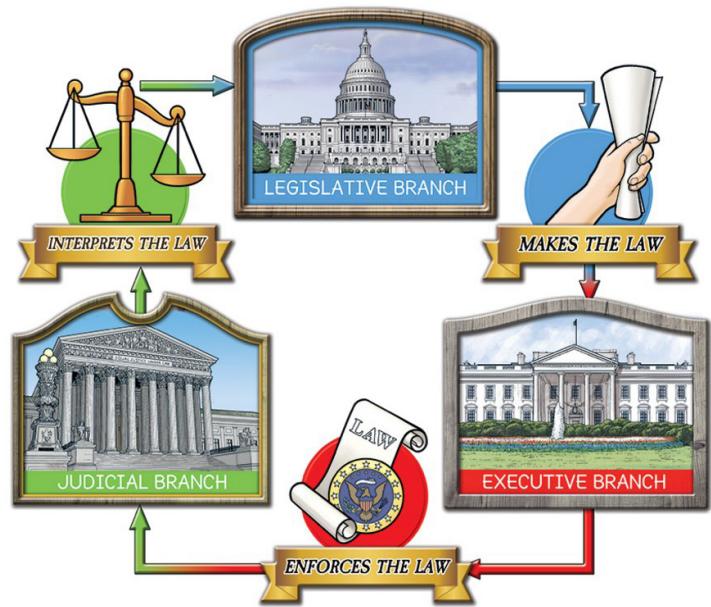
Each branch has the power to stop certain actions of another branch. This happens if a branch believes those actions are unconstitutional or not in the best interest of the country. The system of checks and balances helps make sure that no branch of government becomes too powerful.

Congress can pass a law, but the president must approve it. Congress can also override the president's decision to veto, or reject, a law. The Supreme Court has the power to strike down a law that has been approved by both Congress and the president if it believes the law is unconstitutional. The president appoints justices to the Supreme Court, but Congress must approve the choices. Because of the system of checks and balances, U.S. citizens can be sure their rights are always protected.

Three Branches of Government

To keep any one person or group from having too much power, the Constitution divides the government into three branches. We call this a system of checks and balances. Each branch was designed to address specific issues and concerns. Each branch has its own structure, processes, and leaders. These leaders use different processes as checks to protect individual liberties. Individual liberties are rights that the government cannot take away. For example, the president may veto legislation passed by Congress. A veto stops a bill from becoming law. Congress also has checks on the president. For example, the Senate must confirm executive ap-

pointments. The courts can check Congress by declaring laws unconstitutional. This basic structure of the national government is also used to guide the development of state and local governments.



The three branches of government are the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The executive branch of government enforces our country's laws. It also is in charge of the military. The head of the executive branch is the President of the United States. The president is chosen by voters. The president and vice president are elected together for four years. They may serve two terms, for a total of eight years. The president chooses members of the cabinet to advise him or her. Cabinet members are often experts in their fields. They help run the executive branch by leading departments. For example, the Department of Defense is in charge of the military. At the state level, the executive branch includes the governor, departments, and agencies that enforce state laws.

The legislative branch makes the laws and sets taxes. Congress is the legislative branch of our national government. It is divided into two parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Two senators are elected from each state. A state's number of representatives depends on how many people live there. Larger states send more representatives. Smaller states send fewer. Today, there are 100 senators in the Senate and 435 representatives in the House. All of them were elected by the people of their states.

The judicial branch interprets the laws, or decides what they mean. It also determines whether the laws follow the Constitution. The judicial branch is headed by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is made up of judges called justices. They are chosen by the president and voted on by senators. State supreme courts are similar to the U.S. Supreme Court. They decide whether laws go against their state's constitution. The judicial branch also includes other federal courts and local courts. Local courts decide whether someone is guilty of a crime. The judicial system's role is to make sure the law is followed and all citizens' rights are protected.

The Constitution

In the summer of 1787, the Founding Fathers met to create a new government for our young nation. After months of conflicting views and heated debates, they finally compromised.

The Founders of the Constitution were delegates appointed by state legislatures to represent each state's welfare. The Founders' purpose was to revise the Articles of Confederation. The Articles of Confederation was our nation's first constitution. It was written in 1777, after the Revolutionary War with Great Britain. The Constitution was the result of our Founders' hard work and dedication.



The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of our country and the blueprint for our government. Its purpose is to describe the duties of the government and the rights of the people being governed. The Constitution establishes our government with specific principles, or basic truths, in mind. It defines the basic responsibilities of the federal, or national, government. The Constitution organizes the three branches of government. It also guarantees our individual rights, which cannot be denied or taken away by the government.

The Constitution establishes the principle of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty means that people should be in charge of creating the government. It means that the government must listen to the will of the people, or what the majority of the people want. The Constitution is informed by the unique foundation of protecting individual rights and giving power to the people.

Our country has been governed by the Constitution for over 200 years. It's the world's oldest written constitution still in effect.