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Social Studies

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Meet the United States Government

by Joshua Nissenbaum



Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Main Idea and Details• Generalize• Summarize	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Captions• Glossary• Diagram

Scott Foresman Reading Street 4.2.5



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Vocabulary

Constitution

howling

humble

politics

responsibility

solemnly

vain

Meet the United States Government



Word count: 1,173

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Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.



Editorial Offices: Glenview, Illinois • Parsippany, New Jersey • New York, New York
Sales Offices: Needham, Massachusetts • Duluth, Georgia • Glenview, Illinois
Coppell, Texas • Ontario, California • Mesa, Arizona

Did you ever think about how the United States runs? You'll learn that it's all about **politics**.

Let's start with the President of the United States. It is the President's **responsibility** to make sure that the country runs smoothly. But the President doesn't do it alone.

Our government is divided into three branches. They are the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Each branch has its own responsibilities and powers. The President is the head of only one branch, the executive branch.



The Presidential Seal

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ISBN: 0-328-13440-6

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How was this government created? Well, the United States began as a group of thirteen British colonies in the 1600s. Life in the colonies was different from life back in Britain. There, the King of England and the English government still made all the laws. The colonists thought that many of those laws were unfair.

On July 4, 1776, the colonies declared independence from Britain and King George III. They fought against the British in the Revolutionary War. By 1783, the colonies had won the right to create their own government.

It took the colonists about eight years to decide on a form of government. They were afraid of giving the government too much power.

The leaders of the colonies were known as the “founding fathers” of the United States. They created a new system of government, which they outlined in the **Constitution**. By 1788 the colonies accepted the Constitution, and George Washington, a **humble** man, became the first President in 1789.



A system of checks and balances on the three branches of government make it hard for one branch to get too powerful.

The legislative branch has to do with lawmaking. This branch makes laws and collects taxes, and it can declare war. It is known as Congress.

The Congress is split into two groups, or houses. The first house is called the Senate. It is made up of one hundred senators. They are elected every six years.

The second house is the House of Representatives. It is made up of 435 representatives. They are elected every two years.

The Capitol building, where the Senate and House of Representatives go to work



Senators and representatives are elected by the citizens of a state. They make sure that the government takes care of the people in their state.

Congress must work with the other two branches of government to do its job. This is part of the system of checks and balances. When the President names people for certain important jobs, the Senate approves or rejects those people. The legislative branch has that power over the executive branch.

Senators and representatives often have to attend hearings.



Senators and representatives make new laws. The President can sign these new laws into effect or veto—reject—them.

The President isn't the only one who makes sure the legislative branch doesn't gain too much power. The judicial branch also helps preserve the system of checks and balances.



Congress in session

Leading the judicial branch of the government is the Supreme Court. It is the most powerful court in the country. The Supreme Court has nine judges known as justices. It is their job to make sure that the laws of the United States agree with the Constitution.

The Supreme Court justices hold their positions for life. The President chooses the justices, but the Senate decides whether to accept or reject them. In this way, the executive and legislative branches both keep check on the power of the judicial branch.

The members of the Supreme Court in 2010



The executive branch of the government is what most people think of when they say “the government.” This branch enforces the laws Congress makes and upholds the Constitution. The executive branch is so large that it is divided into departments. The President acts as the head of all these departments. The directors, or secretaries, of each department form a group called the Cabinet.

Maybe you have heard of some of these departments. There is the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, and the Department of Defense. Over the years these departments have grown, and new departments have been added. Now there are fifteen executive departments.

Some of these departments are further divided into agencies, which include the military and the FBI.

The President is in charge of many departments and agencies.



Executive departments are responsible for everything from printing money to making sure the food we buy at our supermarket is safe. These departments employ millions of people.

The secretaries of each department are chosen by the President and are very powerful. They make important decisions. The secretaries help the President understand what each department is doing. The President relies on their advice to make decisions and lead the country.

The Department of Homeland Security is the newest executive department. It was created in 2002, following the attacks on the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Its job is to protect the United States from future terrorist attacks.



President Bush meets with his Cabinet in 2003.

President George W. Bush created the Department of Homeland Security to protect the United States from terrorism.

The President is elected by the citizens of the United States. Once elected, the President serves in office for a term of four years. The Constitution does not allow a President to be elected to more than two terms.

Any presidential candidate must be at least thirty-five years old and have been born in the United States. The same requirements apply to the job of Vice-President.

**President
George W. Bush**



The President has the power to lead the country. The President also represents the United States to the rest of the world.

The founding fathers were very careful to limit the powers of the President. The legislative and judicial branches have power to review the actions of the President. For example, the President is allowed to make agreements with other countries, but the Senate must approve those agreements.

President Bush speaks with dignitaries from other countries.



Why limit the powers of the President? To understand why, we have to go back to when the colonies were ruled by King George III.

The king was a very **vain** man. He placed what he wanted above the good of the colonists. To pay for his war against the French, the king expected the colonists to pay taxes. The colonists were **howling** in protest at this. To make sure no President could do the same, the Constitution says that any of the President's decisions must be reviewed by the other branches of government. The colonists wanted to make sure a power-hungry leader couldn't gain control.



King George III of England ruled the colonists according to his needs, not theirs.

When a new President is elected, his first action is to take the following oath:

“I do **solemnly** swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

The Vice-President is also required to take an oath. This oath begins, “I do solemnly swear that I will defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies. . .”

President George W. Bush is sworn into office.



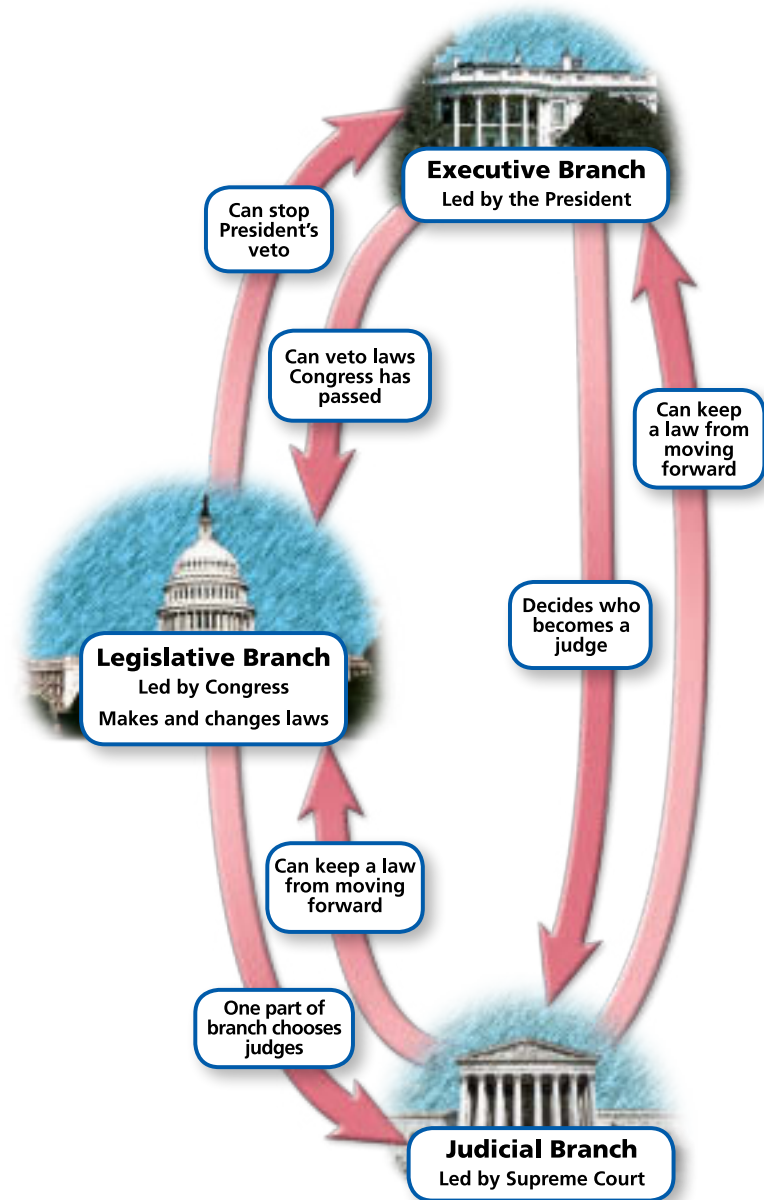
The Constitution gives the President enough power to lead the country. The Constitution also gives the country enough power to lead the President! By splitting power among three branches of government, the founding fathers made sure that no one person could take control of the country.

So far there have been forty-two different Presidents. Each one of them has been guided by the Constitution.

Our first President, George Washington



Our System of Checks and Balances



Glossary

Constitution *n.* the written set of fundamental principles by which the United States is governed.

howling *v.* making loud noises of distress.

humble *adj.* modest, not arrogant.

politics *n.* the work of government; public business.

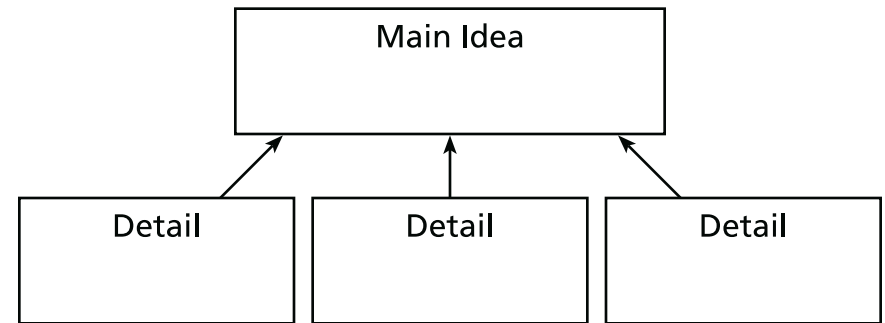
responsibility *n.* obligation.

solemnly *adv.* seriously; earnestly.

vain *adj.* proud; inflated.

Reader Response

1. Why is the concept of three branches of government a main idea of this book? Use a graphic organizer like the one below to show how the three branches function as supporting details to the main idea.



2. Reread pages 10–13 and summarize what the Cabinet does.
3. The Latin word *constitution* means “established.” It comes from *com* and *statuere*, which mean “set up.” Explain why Constitution is an appropriate name for the document that outlines our government.
4. Two requirements for the President and the Vice-President are that they be at least thirty-five years old and born in the United States. Tell whether you think these are good requirements and why you think as you do.