The Three Branches of Government

The U.S. Constitution created a national government with three branches. Each branch has its own powers and can check (or limit) the powers of the other two. Read the diagram and answer the questions.

Legislative
Congress is made up of the two chambers below. Congress writes and passes bills (proposals for new laws). Bills that are passed by both chambers and then signed by the president become law.

Senate
100 Senators
- Senators are elected to six-year terms. Each state has two senators.
- The Senate approves or rejects top-level nominations, such as Supreme Court justices.

House of Representatives
435 Representatives
- Representatives are elected to two-year terms. The number of representatives per state is based on each state’s population.
- Bills that deal with raising revenue (money) for the federal budget begin in the House.

Executive
This branch handles the business of government, including the enforcement of federal laws. It is led by the president, who can sign (pass into law) or veto (reject) bills passed by Congress.

President
- The president is elected to a four-year term.
- He or she nominates Supreme Court justices, federal judges, Cabinet members, and other officials.
- The president submits a proposed federal budget to Congress.
- He or she is commander in chief of the military.

Vice President
- The vice president is elected to a four-year term on the same ticket as the president. The vice president takes over if the president dies or leaves office.
- He or she presides over the Senate, casting the deciding vote in the event of a tie.

Judicial
The federal court system is headed by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court’s nine justices review cases to determine whether laws violate the Constitution, and they can overturn laws that do.

Supreme Court
A Supreme Court justice’s term of office lasts for life. Justices serve until death, retirement, or their removal.

Other Federal Courts
The 94 U.S. District Courts are where federal cases are tried.

The 13 Courts of Appeals hear cases on appeal from District Courts.
The Three Branches of Government (continued)

Questions

1. Who can veto bills passed by Congress?

2. Which branch is responsible for enforcing federal laws?

3. How are the executive and legislative branches involved in selecting Supreme Court justices?

4. Explain how the judicial branch can limit the power of the other branches.
The framers of the U.S. Constitution realized that too much power can be dangerous. To prevent any part of the government from becoming too powerful, the Constitution created three separate branches of the federal government. The Constitution gives each branch its own powers. This separation of powers creates a system of checks and balances. Each branch can check (limit) the power of the other two. This helps maintain a balance of power among the three. Study the diagram to see how this works.

**Checks and Balances**

**Legislative Branch**
- Congress can override a veto by a two thirds vote of each chamber.
- Congress appropriates funds to run the government and approves programs.
- The Senate must approve treaties and presidential appointments.
- Congress can impeach and remove a president for crimes and misconduct.

**Executive Branch**
- The president can veto (reject) bills passed by Congress.
- Federal judges are appointed for life, freeing them from executive control.
- Federal courts may declare executive branch actions unconstitutional.

**Judicial Branch**
- Federal courts can declare laws passed by Congress unconstitutional.
- If the Supreme Court rules that a law is unconstitutional, Congress can revise the law, write a new one, or propose amendments (changes) to the U.S. Constitution. Changes must be ratified by three quarters of the states.
- Congress may impeach and remove federal judges from office.
- The Senate approves appointments of judges.

**Words to Know**
- appropriate (v): to set aside for a specific use
- impeach (v): to bring a charge of wrongdoing against a public official
Checks and Balances cont’d.

Questions

1. What does it mean to check the power of a branch of government?
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   __________________________________________________________________________

2. Who can veto legislation passed by Congress?
   __________________________________________________________________________

3. How can Congress override a presidential veto?
   __________________________________________________________________________

4. Which branch has the power to appoint Supreme Court justices and other federal judges?
   __________________________________________________________________________

5. How does Congress check that power?
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

6. How can federal courts check the president’s power?
   __________________________________________________________________________

7. How can federal courts check the power of Congress?
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

8. What limits the president’s power to make treaties with other countries?
   __________________________________________________________________________

9. Suppose a law has been declared unconstitutional. What can be done to try to make it constitutional?
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   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

10. What is meant by “separation of powers”?
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    __________________________________________________________________________
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