
How the Government Is Built: Three Branches, One System

Bloom's Level: Understand

Standard:

NCSS.D2.Civ.2.6-8 — Understanding Government Functions

C3.D2.Civ.6.3-5 — Evaluating the Role of Government

TEKS §113.44(d)(7)(E) — Understanding Branches of Government

STUDENT EDITION



The U.S. Capitol is home to Congress — the legislative branch — where senators and representatives debate and vote on proposed laws.

How the Government Is Built: Three Branches, One System

Why Does Passing a Law Take So Long?

Imagine you have a brilliant idea to fix a real problem — maybe you want cleaner air in your city, or better funding for public schools. You'd think: just write it into law, right? But in the United States, turning an idea into a law can take years, involve hundreds of people, and still get blocked at the last minute. That's not a bug in the system. It's actually the point.

The United States government was designed by people who had just escaped a king. They were terrified of power being concentrated in one person's hands. So they built something unusual: a government that argues with itself on purpose. The foundation for all of this is the **Constitution** — the supreme law of the land, written in 1787, which establishes the structure of the government and the rights it must protect. Understanding how that structure works — and why — is one of the most useful things you can learn as a citizen.

The Three Branches: A Quick Overview

The U.S. federal government is divided into three separate branches, each with its own job and its own power. The Constitution defines and limits what each branch can do.

The Legislative Branch: Congress Makes the Laws

Congress is the lawmaking body of the federal government. It has two parts: the **Senate** (100 senators, two from each state) and the **House of Representatives** (435 members, based on each state's population). Together, they write, debate, and



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vote on bills — proposed laws. If both chambers pass the same bill, it goes to the president.

Think of Congress as the branch closest to the people. Representatives are elected every two years, which means they have to answer to voters frequently. When you see heated debates on the news about a new spending bill or immigration policy, that's Congress doing exactly what it was designed to do: argue, negotiate, and compromise.

The Executive Branch: The President Carries Out the Laws

The president leads the executive branch, which includes the vice president, the Cabinet, and millions of federal workers across agencies like the Department of Education or the Environmental Protection Agency. The executive branch's main job is to enforce the laws that Congress passes.

But the president also has independent powers. One of the most talked-about is the **executive order** — a directive the president can issue without Congress's approval. Executive orders have been used to desegregate the military, establish immigration policies, and respond to national emergencies. They're powerful, but they can also be challenged or reversed by courts or future presidents.

The Judicial Branch: Courts Interpret the Laws

The judicial branch is headed by the **Supreme Court**, which consists of nine justices appointed for life. Below it are federal appeals courts and district courts spread across the country. The judicial branch doesn't make laws or enforce them — it interprets them.

When someone argues that a law violates the Constitution, the case can eventually reach the Supreme Court. If the Court agrees, it can strike the law down entirely — even if Congress passed it and the president signed it. This power is called **judicial review**, and it's one of the most significant checks in the entire system. A landmark example: in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated public schools violated the Constitution, overturning laws that had existed for decades.

How Each Branch Checks the Others

Here's where it gets interesting. Each branch has specific tools to limit the power of the other two. This is called the **system of checks and balances**.

- **Congress checks the President** by controlling the budget, overriding vetoes with a two-thirds vote, and removing the president through impeachment.
- **The President checks Congress** by vetoing bills — refusing to sign them into law.
- **The President checks the Courts** by nominating Supreme Court justices.
- **Congress checks the Courts** by confirming or rejecting those nominations, and by writing new laws in response to court decisions.
- **The Courts check both** by ruling laws or executive actions unconstitutional.

Notice that no single branch can act completely alone. Every major decision runs into resistance from somewhere. That's intentional.

Why the System Is Designed to Be Slow

The Founders studied history and saw what happened when governments moved too fast — or when one leader had too much unchecked power. They built in friction deliberately. Passing a major law requires agreement across the House, the Senate, and the White House. Major court decisions require years of cases working through the system.

This slowness frustrates people — and understandably so. When a community needs help now, waiting years for policy change feels unacceptable. But the same slowness that delays good ideas also makes it harder for harmful ones to take hold quickly. The system forces negotiation, compromise, and broad agreement before major changes happen.

Real-World Connections

You can see all three branches in action every day. When Congress debates a new climate bill, that's the legislative branch at work. When the president signs an executive order on student loan policy, that's the executive branch acting. When the

Supreme Court rules on voting rights or healthcare, that's the judicial branch interpreting the Constitution.

Understanding these roles helps you make sense of the news — and helps you understand where you fit in. Citizens vote for members of Congress and for the president. Public pressure influences court nominations. Civic engagement isn't separate from how government works; it's part of the design.

Summary

The U.S. government is built on three branches — legislative, executive, and judicial — each with distinct responsibilities and the power to limit the others. The Constitution is the foundation that defines and governs all three. Congress makes laws, the president enforces them, and the courts interpret them. The system of checks and balances ensures that no single branch becomes too powerful. It's a structure built for tension, debate, and compromise — because the people who designed it believed that a government which moves carefully is safer than one that moves fast.

Lesson Objective

In this lesson, you will explore how the United States government is organized into three branches — legislative, executive, and judicial — and explain the specific role each branch plays in making, enforcing, and interpreting laws. You will also describe how the system of checks and balances prevents any one branch from gaining too much power, and connect these structures to real-world examples you encounter in the news and in your community.

Standard: NCSS.D2.Civ.2.6-8 — Understanding

Government Functions; C3.D2.Civ.6.3-5 — Evaluating the Role of Government; TEKS §113.44(d)(7)(E) — Understanding Branches of Government

Bloom's Level: Understand

Bloom's Goal: Students will demonstrate understanding by explaining the functions of each branch of government and describing how checks and balances keep power in balance across the system.

Explanation: The 'understand' level of Bloom's Taxonomy asks students to go beyond memorizing facts and instead make sense of ideas — explaining them in their own words and connecting them to examples. In this lesson, students move from simply naming the three branches to genuinely explaining what each branch does, why the system was designed with built-in friction, and how these structures affect citizens' everyday lives.



A bill must pass both chambers of Congress and receive the President's signature before it becomes law — a process designed to require broad agreement.

Application Questions

Read each question carefully, think about what you learned in the article, and write a thoughtful response in your own words.

1. Explain why the Founders divided the U.S. government into three separate branches instead of giving all power to one person or group.

Think about: Think about what the Founders had just experienced before writing the Constitution and what they were afraid of happening in the new country.

2. Describe how the system of checks and balances works by giving at least two specific examples of one branch limiting the power of another.

Think about: Look back at the section called 'How Each Branch Checks the Others' and think about what tools each branch has to push back against the others.

3. The article says the government was designed to be slow on purpose. In your own words, explain why that slowness can be both a problem and a benefit for citizens.

Think about: Consider a situation where slow government action might hurt people, and then consider a situation where moving too fast could also cause harm.

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Primary Source Analysis (DBQ)

Read the primary source excerpt below carefully. Then answer the four questions that follow. For each question, use evidence from the source and your knowledge of how the U.S. government works to support your response.

Federalist No. 51: The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments [Essay]

To what expedient, then, shall we finally resort, for maintaining in practice the necessary partition of power among the several departments, as laid down in the Constitution? The only answer that can be given is, that as all these exterior provisions are found to be inadequate, the defect must be supplied by so contriving the interior structure of the government as that its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places. In order to lay a due foundation for that separate and distinct exercise of the different powers of government, which to a certain extent is admitted on all hands to be essential to the preservation of liberty, it is evident that each department should have a will of its own. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government.

— James Madison, Federalist No. 51, published February 8, 1788

1. Who wrote this document, and what was his purpose in writing it? How might his role as one of the architects of the Constitution influence the argument he is making?

[Sourcing]

2. This essay was written in 1788, shortly after the Constitutional Convention. What historical circumstances help explain why Madison and other Founders were so concerned about preventing any one branch of government from gaining too much power? [Context]

3. Madison writes that "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." In your own words, what does he mean by this? How does this idea connect to the system of checks and balances described in the lesson? [Close Reading]

4. How does Madison's argument in this document support what the lesson article says about why the U.S. government was designed to be slow and to argue with itself? Use at least one specific example from the lesson to support your answer. [Corroboration]

Civic Action Scenario

Read the civic scenario below carefully. Identify the stakeholders involved and answer all three questions using what you have learned about the three branches of government and the system of checks and balances. Write your answers in complete sentences.

Scenario: The city of Riverside has been struggling with dangerously high levels of air pollution from a nearby industrial plant. A group of concerned students and parents has been pushing for stricter environmental regulations for two years. Congress recently passed the Clean Air Improvement Act, which would require the plant to reduce its emissions significantly. However, the president has vetoed the bill, arguing it would hurt the local economy and cost thousands of jobs. The plant's owners have also filed a lawsuit claiming the original regulations already in place are unconstitutional. Meanwhile, residents in the surrounding neighborhoods — many of whom have children with respiratory illnesses — are demanding immediate action from their elected representatives.

Stakeholders: Riverside residents and parents of children with respiratory illnesses | Members of Congress who passed the Clean Air Improvement Act | The President of the United States who vetoed the bill | Federal judges reviewing the plant owners' constitutional lawsuit

1. Explain what options Congress has after the president vetoes the Clean Air Improvement Act. What does this process tell you about how the system of checks and balances works between the legislative and executive branches?

2. The plant owners have filed a lawsuit claiming existing environmental regulations are unconstitutional. Which branch of government will ultimately decide whether those regulations are constitutional, and what power allows that branch to make this determination?

3. Residents are frustrated that it has taken years to address the pollution problem. Using what you know about how the three branches of government function, explain why the process of creating and enforcing new environmental laws takes so long, and describe at least one way citizens can participate in this process.

Hypotheticals

Read each scenario carefully, then answer both questions using what you know about the three branches of government and how they work together.

Scenario 1: Congress passes a bill that would require all public schools in the country to extend the school day by one hour. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives vote in favor of the bill, and it is sent to the president. The president believes the bill is a good idea but is concerned that it does not include enough funding for schools to actually make the change. The president decides to veto the bill and send it back to Congress.

a) Which branch of government is exercising a check on another branch in this scenario, and what is the name of the tool being used?

b) What options does Congress have after receiving the president's veto, and what would need to happen for the bill to still become a law?

Scenario 2: A state passes a law that bans students from wearing certain types of clothing to school, claiming it improves safety. A group of students and parents argue that the law violates their constitutional rights. After working through lower courts, the case reaches the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court agrees to hear the case and must decide whether the state law is constitutional.

a) What power is the Supreme Court using when it decides whether this state law violates the Constitution, and which branch of government does this power belong to?

b) If the Supreme Court rules that the state law is unconstitutional, what happens to that law, and why does the Court have the authority to make that decision?

Reflection Questions

Answer each question in your own words, using what you learned from the article to support your thinking.

1. In your own words, explain why the Founders divided the government into three separate branches instead of giving all the power to one person or group.

Think about: Think about what the Founders had just experienced before writing the Constitution and what they were afraid of happening in the new country.

2. Describe how the system of checks and balances works by explaining at least two specific examples of one branch limiting another branch's power.

Think about: Look back at the section called 'How Each Branch Checks the Others' and think about how these limits prevent any one branch from acting completely alone.

3. The article says the government was designed to be slow on purpose. Explain why that slowness can be both a strength and a frustration for citizens.

Think about: Consider a situation where slow government action might protect people, and another situation where it might cause real harm to a community that needs help quickly.

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Multiple Choice

Choose the best answer for each question about the three branches of the U.S. government and how they work together.

1. What is the primary purpose of the U.S. Constitution in relation to the federal government?
 - A. It establishes the structure of the government and the rights it must protect.
 - B. It gives the president the authority to make all major decisions.
 - C. It lists the laws that Congress must pass each year.
 - D. It describes how citizens should vote in elections.
2. Which branch of the U.S. federal government is responsible for writing and passing new laws?
 - A. The executive branch
 - B. The judicial branch
 - C. The legislative branch
 - D. The Cabinet
3. Why are members of the House of Representatives elected every two years?
 - A. So they can serve longer terms than senators
 - B. So they must answer to voters more frequently
 - C. So the president can replace them when needed
 - D. So the Supreme Court can review their decisions regularly

4. What is an executive order?

- A. A law passed by both chambers of Congress
- B. A Supreme Court ruling that overturns a previous decision
- C. A directive the president can issue without Congress's approval
- D. A budget proposal submitted by the Senate

5. What is the main role of the judicial branch in the U.S. government?

- A. To enforce the laws passed by Congress
- B. To write new laws when Congress is not in session
- C. To interpret laws and determine whether they follow the Constitution
- D. To approve the president's Cabinet appointments

6. What is judicial review, and why is it significant?

- A. It is the process by which Congress approves new judges, giving lawmakers control over the courts.
- B. It is the power of courts to strike down laws that violate the Constitution, limiting both Congress and the president.
- C. It is the president's ability to review court decisions and reverse them if necessary.
- D. It is the annual review of all federal laws to check whether they are still needed.

7. How does Congress check the power of the president?

- A. By appointing Supreme Court justices
- B. By issuing executive orders on the president's behalf
- C. By controlling the budget, overriding vetoes, and impeaching the president
- D. By ruling presidential actions unconstitutional

8. In the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), what did the Court demonstrate about its power?

- A. That the president can use executive orders to change school policies
- B. That Congress can pass laws without the president's signature
- C. That the Court can strike down laws that violate the Constitution, even long-standing ones
- D. That the Senate must approve all education-related legislation

9. Why did the Founders design the U.S. government to move slowly when making major decisions?

- A. They wanted to make it difficult for citizens to participate in government.
- B. They believed a slow process requiring broad agreement would prevent harmful concentrations of power.
- C. They thought the president should have time to review every law before Congress voted.
- D. They wanted the judicial branch to have enough time to write new laws.

10. Which of the following best explains how the system of checks and balances works?

- A. Each branch of government operates independently without interference from the others.
- B. The president has final authority over both Congress and the courts.
- C. Each branch has specific tools to limit the power of the other two branches.
- D. Congress controls both the executive and judicial branches through the budget.

True / False

Read each statement carefully. Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false.

1. The United States Constitution, written in 1787, establishes the structure of the federal government and serves as the supreme law of the land.

True False

2. The Senate has 435 members, with the number of representatives from each state based on that state's population.

True False

3. The primary job of the executive branch is to enforce the laws that Congress passes.

True False

4. An executive order must be approved by Congress before the president can put it into effect.

True False

5. The Supreme Court has the power of judicial review, which allows it to strike down laws that violate the Constitution.

True False

6. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional.

True False

7. Congress can override a presidential veto with a simple majority vote of just over half of its members.

True False

8. The president has the power to nominate Supreme Court justices, but Congress must confirm or reject those nominations.

True False

9. The Founders deliberately designed the government to move slowly in order to prevent any one branch or leader from gaining too much unchecked power.

True False

10. The judicial branch is responsible for writing new laws and submitting them to the president for approval.

True False

Vocabulary

Review the following key terms and their definitions before reading the lesson. As you read, look for each term in context to deepen your understanding.

Constitution

The supreme law of the United States, written in 1787, that establishes the structure of the government and the rights it must protect.

Explain in your own words:

Legislative Branch

The part of the federal government, made up of Congress, that is responsible for writing and passing laws.

Explain in your own words:

Congress

The lawmaking body of the federal government, divided into two parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Explain in your own words:

Senate

One of the two chambers of Congress, made up of 100 senators — two elected from each state.

Explain in your own words:

House of Representatives

One of the two chambers of Congress, made up of 435 members whose numbers are based on each state's population.

Explain in your own words:

Executive Branch

The part of the federal government, led by the president, that is responsible for enforcing the laws passed by Congress.

Explain in your own words:

Executive Order

A directive issued by the president that carries the force of law without requiring approval from Congress.

Explain in your own words:

Judicial Branch

The part of the federal government, headed by the Supreme Court, that is responsible for interpreting laws and the Constitution.

Explain in your own words:

Judicial Review

The power of the Supreme Court to strike down laws or government actions that it determines violate the Constitution.

Explain in your own words:

Checks and Balances

A system built into the U.S. government that gives each branch specific tools to limit the power of the other two branches.

Explain in your own words:

Exit Ticket

Answer both questions in 1-2 sentences each using what you learned from today's lesson.

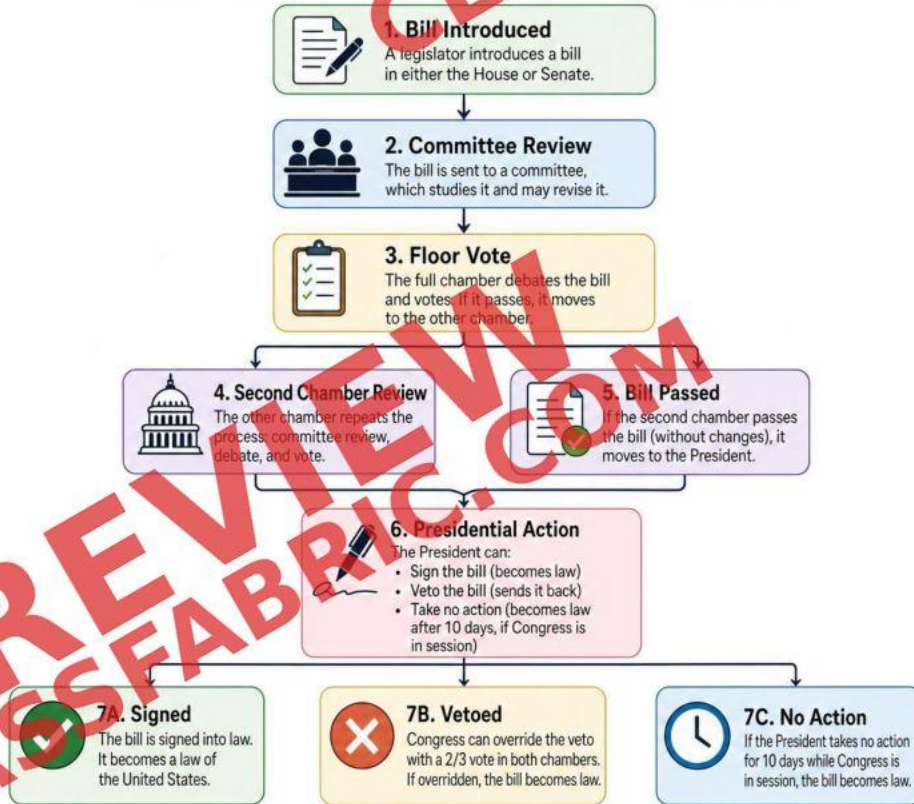
1. What is the main job of each of the three branches of the U.S. federal government?

2. Explain how the system of checks and balances prevents any one branch of government from becoming too powerful. Give at least one specific example.



The U.S. Capitol is home to Congress — the legislative branch — where senators and representatives debate and vote on proposed laws.

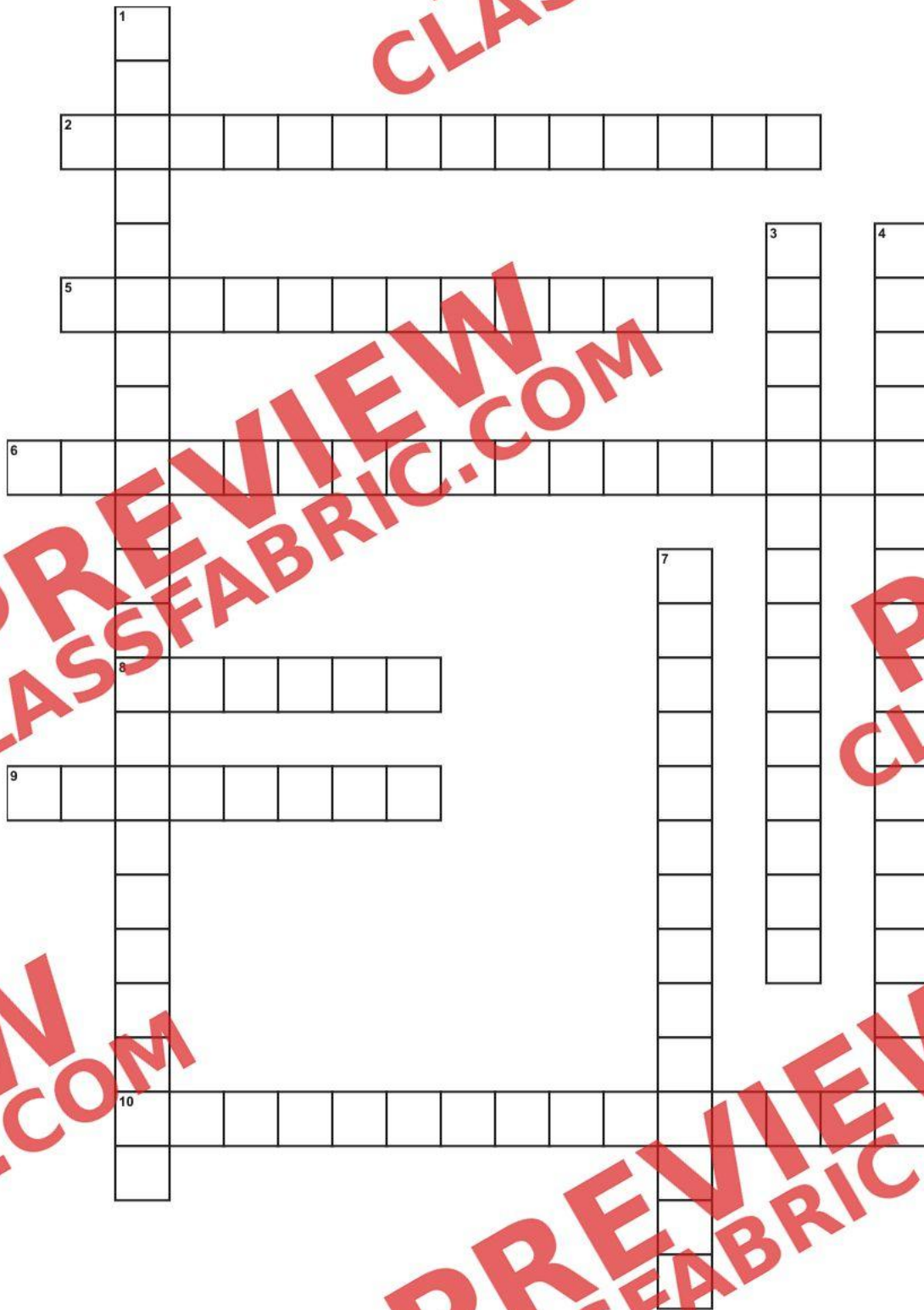
The Path a Bill Takes to Become a Law



A bill must pass both chambers of Congress and receive the President's signature before it becomes law — a process designed to require broad agreement.

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CROSSWORD PUZZLE



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CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

2. The power of the Supreme Court to strike down laws or government actions that it determines violate the Constitution.
5. The supreme law of the United States, written in 1787, that establishes the structure of the government and the rights it must protect.
6. A system built into the U.S. government that gives each branch specific tools to limit the power of the other two branches.
8. One of the two chambers of Congress, made up of 100 senators — two elected from each state.
9. The lawmaking body of the federal government, divided into two parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives.
10. The part of the federal government, led by the president, that is responsible for enforcing the laws passed by Congress.

DOWN

1. One of the two chambers of Congress, made up of 435 members whose numbers are based on each state's population.
3. The part of the federal government, headed by the Supreme Court, that is responsible for interpreting laws and the Constitution.
4. The part of the federal government, made up of Congress, that is responsible for writing and passing laws.
7. A directive issued by the president that carries the force of law without requiring approval from Congress.

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WORD SEARCH

K K H O U S E O F R E P R E S E N T A T I V E S
O O G D T O W Z U A K M B Q C I O V W J X A V B
E X J L R M A U M C F E F Y P V F Q K U B U P X
X U C O N G R E S S M E U M U Z Z L J D I B C L
E U A I O Z O X Y K F U W J E I T P L I T C P P
C K J G Q Z N O C V I W F I U I C X A C P H V W
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T F O T M J C P J A X Z O F O V F X E A F T Z E
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H C I S L B Q Y X W N M W Q N Z G Q W T I C J E
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A E M C W W J U Z U C G S W K A V Y N J J Y U H
W K C H E C K S A N D B A L A N C E S S V X X Q

FIND THESE WORDS

House of Representatives
Executive Order
Congress

Checks and Balances
Judicial Branch
Senate

Legislative Branch
Judicial Review

Executive Branch
Constitution