

The Role of the U.S. Congress

In the United States we have a democratic government that is composed of three branches: the Executive Branch, the Judicial Branch, and the Legislative Branch. The President and Vice President make up the Executive Branch; the Supreme Court is the Judicial Branch; and the Legislative Branch is composed of the U.S. Congress. Legislative means that the Congress has the power to legislate, that is, make laws for the country.

When the U.S. government was first defined by the U.S. Constitution, which was written in 1787, the authors of the document wanted checks and balances in the new government. Each of the three branches has power to keep the leaders of the other two branches from seizing more power in the government than the Constitution allows. One important role of the Congress is to make sure that the President and the Supreme Court perform their duties.

The Congress makes laws at the federal level, laws that affect everyone in the country. States also enact laws that affect just the citizens of that state. Under the Constitution the President cannot create a new law or change existing laws. Only the Congress has that power.

The U.S. Congress has two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate. All members of Congress are elected by the people of the state they represent. Every state has two Senators but the number of Representative it has depends on the state's population. Larger states have more Representatives. Senators serve for six years and Representatives serve for just two years. For a law to be enacted it has to be passed by both the Senate and the House of Representatives and be approved by the President. Should the President veto a law, Congress can override the veto if two-thirds of the members vote to do so.

Congress has a long list of duties. An important duty is to handle the country's finances. Congress creates the budget that says how much money goes to each department of the government, like for roads and National Parks. Congress also controls how taxes are levied to pay for everything. Congress is responsible for maintaining the U.S. military and is the only part of the government that can declare war on another country. Other duties include regulating dealings among businesses in different states and other countries.

