



# Democracy for Seniors

**H**ow much do you know about how your government works? In one 2019 survey, only 39 percent of adults were able to name all three branches of government. In this badge, you'll learn all about those branches—and more. Get ready to wow the adults in your life!

## Steps

1. Find out about local government
2. Find out about state government
3. Find out about the federal legislative branch
4. Find out about the federal executive branch
5. Find out about the federal judicial branch

## Purpose

When I've earned this badge, I will have expanded my knowledge about how my local, state, and national government works.



## STEP 1 Find out about local government

Every step has  
three choices. Do ONE  
choice to complete  
each step. Inspired?  
Do more!

We all know at least a little bit about the government in Washington, D.C.—but how much can you say about how things are run locally? Explore the government of your city or town in this step.

### CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Visit your town hall, city hall, or mayor's office.** Take a trip to talk to someone in one of these places about your local government. (If you can, make an appointment to talk to your local representative or someone in their office.) Have them explain all the jobs that are done in your local government and talk to you about local elections. Have they seen voter turnout rates in elections change in recent years and, if so, how? Ask any other questions you can think of.
- OR**
- ☐ **Talk to an expert.** Find an expert who can talk to you about your local government. This could be someone elected to local office, a teacher, a lawyer, or a judge. Have them explain all the jobs that are done in your local government and talk to you about local elections. Have they seen voter turnout rates in elections change in recent years and, if so, how? Ask any questions you can think of.
- OR**
- ☐ **Go to a city or town hall meeting.** See democracy in action! Make a plan to go to a meeting when a vote will be held. Before you go, talk about what will be voted on and decide how you would vote if you could. If possible, attend a meeting when the public is given time to speak, and share your thoughts. See how the vote turns out, then talk about your experience with family or friends.

## THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

The United States government—and the government for all of the states—is broken into three parts, or branches. The Constitution of the United States divided the government in this way to make sure that no one person or group has too much power.

**Legislative—  
makes laws**

**Executive—  
enforces laws**

**Judicial—  
evaluates laws**

A system of “checks and balances” helps to keep power evenly distributed between the three branches. Each branch “checks” the power of the other. For example, the legislative branch makes laws, but the president (or executive branch) can veto laws, and the judicial branch can declare a law unconstitutional.



## STEP 2 Find out about state government

Your state government looks a lot like the government of the United States. State governments and the United States government are all made up of three parts, or branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. Before doing the rest of the steps in this badge, read about the three branches of government at the bottom of this page.

### CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Visit your state capitol building.** Take a trip with your friends or family and talk to someone there about how your state government works. How do the three branches of government work together? Ask any other questions you can think of.

OR

- ☐ **Compare your state.** Research your state government and find out everything you can about how it's run. Then, compare it to another state nearby. How are they alike? Can you find any differences? Talk about your findings with family or friends.

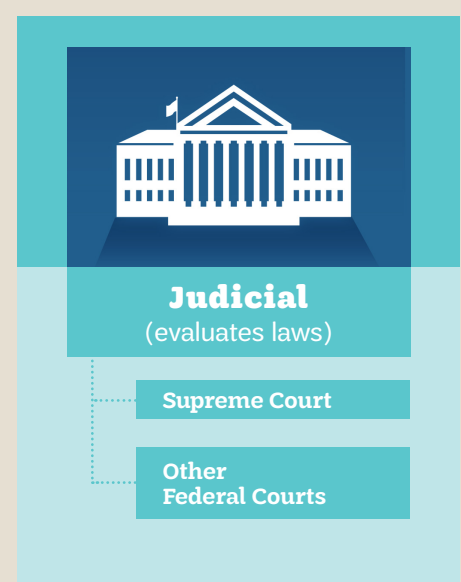
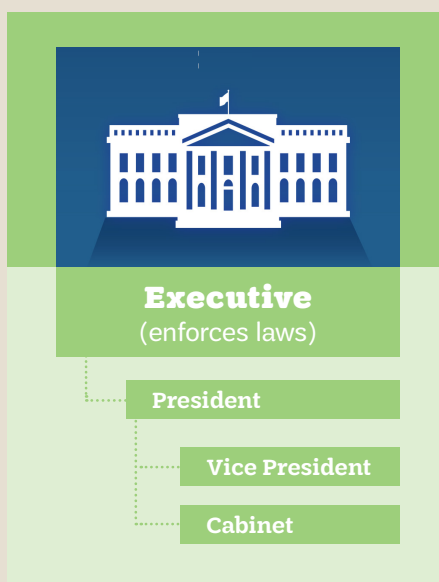
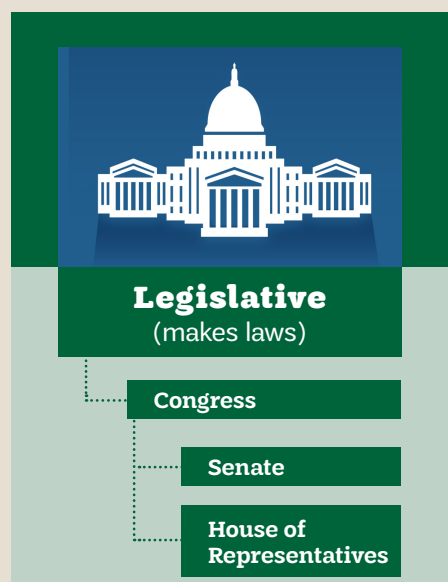
OR

- ☐ **Explore an election.** Find out everything you can about the most recent election in your state. Who were the candidates? Were there any questions on the ballot? How close were the outcomes? How many people voted? On your own or in small groups, come up with ways you might increase voter turnout in your state. Share your thoughts with family or friends.

## CONGRESS

The legislative branch of the United States government—the part of the government that makes laws—is also called Congress. Congress has two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Big or small, every state in the country is represented by two people in the United States Senate. The House of Representatives is a little more complicated. There are currently 435 House members, and the number for each state is decided by the size of its population.



# HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

The House of Representatives' most important job is creating laws. A bill becomes a law through these steps. Do you see any examples of checks and balances in this process?

**1. Someone has an idea.** This idea can start with anyone, even girls like you! If an elected official likes the idea and wants to make a law, they write a bill.

**2. The bill is introduced.** Bills are officially introduced in the House of Representatives when they are placed in a special box called "the hopper."

**3. The bill goes to committee.** A group of committee members (senators and representatives) meets to work on the bill and revise it, if necessary. Then, they take a vote to reject or accept the bill.

Depending on the outcome, the bill goes to a subcommittee for additional work or to the House or Senate floor for debate.

**4. Congress debates and votes.** During the debate, members of the House or Senate can suggest changes to the bill. Then, they take a vote. If it passes, the bill is sent to the other house of Congress to go through this process again. If both houses receive a majority vote on the same version of the bill, it goes to the president.

**5. The president takes action.** Now it's the president's turn. They can:

★ **Approve and pass.** The bill is law!

★ **Veto.** The president rejects the bill and sends it back to Congress. Congress can then take a vote. If the bill receives a two-thirds majority vote from the House and Senate, they can override the veto. The bill becomes law.

★ **Choose no action.** The president does nothing. After ten days with no action, if Congress is in session, the bill becomes law.

★ **Pocket veto.** If Congress adjourns—or goes out of session—within ten days after the president receives the bill, the president can choose not to sign it. The bill does not become law.



## STEP 3 Find out about the federal legislative branch

The branch of the United States government that creates laws is the legislative branch, or Congress. The two groups that make up Congress are the House of Representatives and the Senate. Find out more about the federal legislative branch in this step. (Federal is another name for national.)

### CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Write a letter.** Pay close attention to the news for a few days. Is there an issue rising to the surface that's important to you? Do you think there's something more that lawmakers can do to help? Write a letter to a representative about why the issue matters and what action you'd like to see from them.

OR

- ☐ **Build a budget.** One responsibility of Congress is creating the federal budget. Spend some time researching the big buckets of spending in the United States. What percentage of the budget is typically spent on the military? What about health care? Then, create your own pie chart showing how you'd recommend allocating funds if you were a member of Congress.

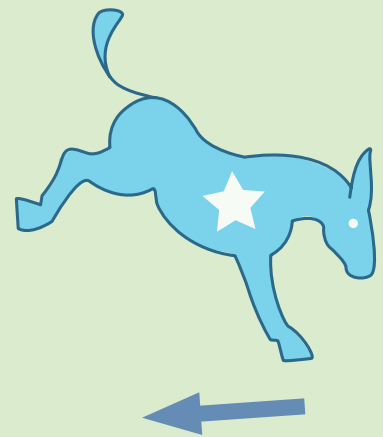
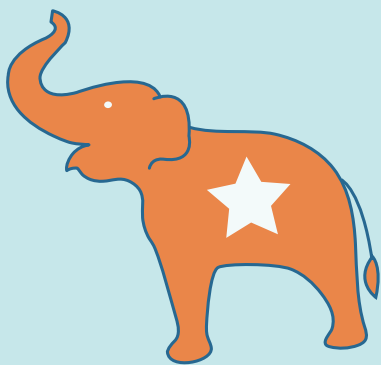
OR

- ☐ **Make a game.** Read "How a Bill Becomes a Law" on the previous page, then get creative! Make your own board game as a way to teach the process to others. (Maybe even younger Girl Scouts!)

## THE CONSTITUTION

The Constitution of the United States was signed by the country's Founding Fathers in 1787. It is one of the most important documents in United States history. There are three parts to the Constitution:

- ✪ A **preamble** that explains the purpose of the document. (It begins "We the People...")
- ✪ **Articles** that map out the structure of the government and explain how the Constitution can be changed.
- ✪ **Amendments**, or changes to the Constitution. The first ten amendments are called The Bill of Rights. There have been 27 amendments to the Constitution since it was written more than 200 years ago.



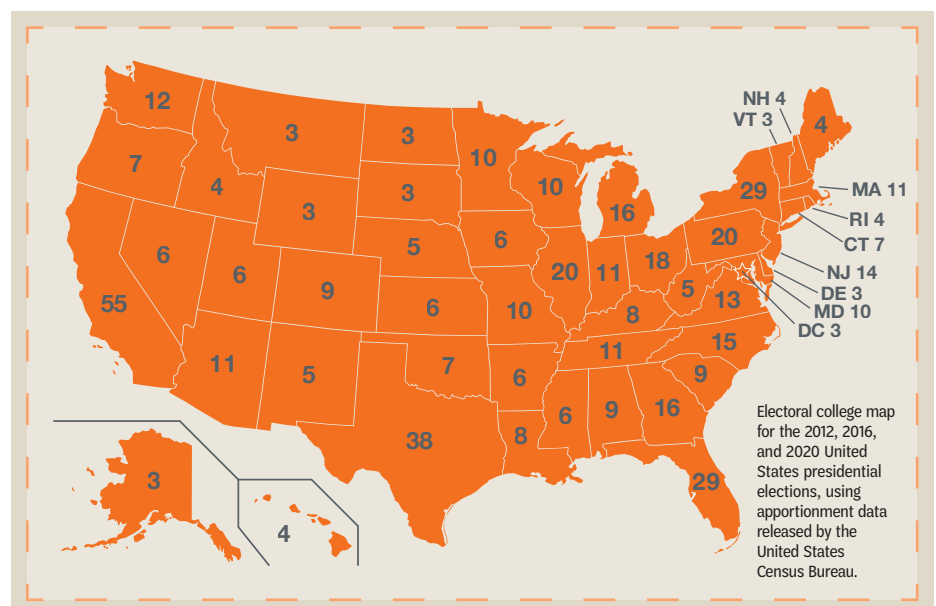


## STEP 4 Find out about the federal executive branch

**The executive branch of the United States government includes the president, vice president, and cabinet members. (The president chooses members of their cabinet, or advisors; they are approved by the Senate.) Find out more about the executive branch in this step.**

### CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Rethink an election.** Choose a historical presidential election and find out everything you can about it. Now, imagine you are the campaign manager for the losing candidate. What could you have done differently to bring your candidate to victory? Share your campaign strategy with friends or family.
- OR** -----
- ☐ **Compare governments.** Gather a group of friends or family members and break into smaller groups or pairs. Have each pair find out everything they can about one system of government. (Such as democracy, monarchy, and oligarchy.) Each pair will then create a presentation of what they've learned and share with the larger group. The presentation can take any form—keep it loose and be creative! After everyone has had a chance to share, talk about what you've heard. Which do you think is the best system? Why?
- OR** -----
- ☐ **Explore the electoral college.** Find out everything you can about its history and how it has affected recent presidential elections. With a partner, debate doing away with the electoral college or keeping it in place. After you've had a chance to argue both sides, talk about which side you agree with more.





## STEP

# 5 Find out about the federal judicial branch

The judicial branch of the government is a system of courts and judges that ladders up to the highest court in the country, the Supreme Court. Learn more about how the judicial branch of the United States works in this step.

### CHOICES—DO ONE:

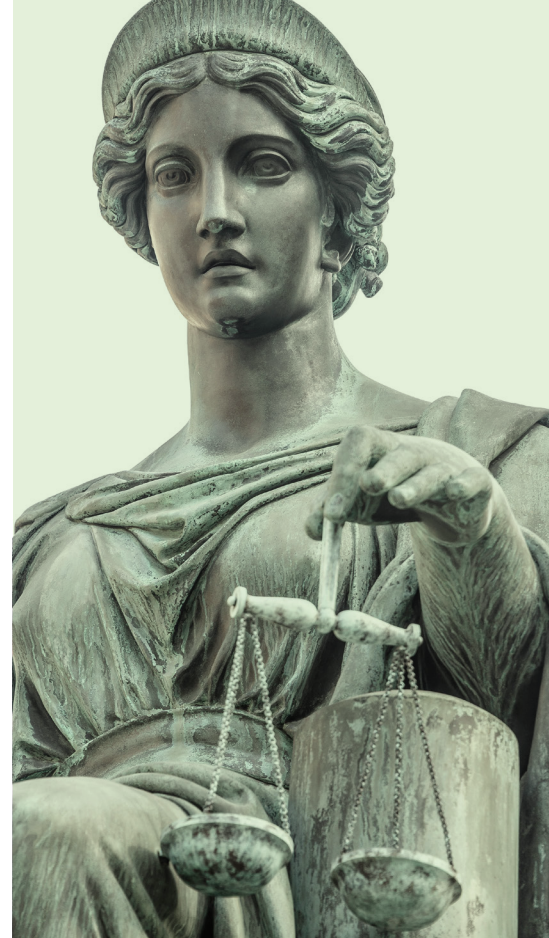
- ☐ **Judge a justice.** Choose one Supreme Court justice—past or present—and find out everything you can about their voting history. Which case do you think was most important and why? Do you agree with their vote? Share your findings with family or friends.

OR

- ☐ **Look into term limits.** Supreme Court justices are appointed, not elected, and serve lifelong terms. (That means they generally keep the job until they resign or pass away, though Congress does have the power to impeach justices in extreme cases.) Some people believe that this system needs to be changed. Team up with a friend and find out everything you can about the arguments for and against putting term limits in place for Supreme Court justices. Debate one side, then switch places and take the other position. Which side do you agree with? Why?

OR

- ☐ **Go to court.** One of the best ways to understand the legal system is to see it for yourself! Make a plan to attend a session in court. You can start by contacting your local United States District Court clerk's office to find out what cases are on the calendar, what time they'd recommend for a student visit, and anything you should know before attending.



## THE SUPREME COURT

The Supreme Court, which is sometimes called “The Highest Court in the Land,” is made up of nine people called justices. These justices were all men until 1981, when the first woman, Sandra Day O’Connor, joined the court. (She was a Girl Scout too!) She retired in 2006. Today the court is a mixture of men and women.

Justices are appointed, not elected, and they serve lifelong terms. That means they generally stay on the court until they pass away or retire, but the Constitution gives Congress the power to impeach—or try to remove—justices for “Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.” There go those checks and balances again!



## Now that I've earned this badge, I can give service by:

- Playing my “How a Bill Becomes a Law” board game with younger Girl Scouts
- Talking to an older family member about which historical presidential election was most important to them and why
- Sharing what I've learned about the electoral college with my friends and finding out their thoughts about doing away with it or keeping it in place

*I'm inspired to:*

Made possible by a generous grant from the Citi Foundation.

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First published in 2020 by GSUSA  
420 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10018-2798  
[www.girlscouts.org](http://www.girlscouts.org)

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Printed in the United States

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