
The
United States
Political and Institutional System
HISTORY • CONSTITUTION • INSTITUTIONS
FEDERALISM • STATES • POLITICAL PARTIES

The United States of America

The United States is a **federal constitutional republic**

It consists of **50 states** and the **District of Columbia**

Power is divided between:

- the **federal government**
- the **state governments**

The political system is based on the **separation of powers**

From Independence to the Constitution

1776 — Declaration of Independence

- Adopted on **July 4, 1776**
- The thirteen colonies declared their independence from Great Britain
- Key principles: **equality, natural rights, government by consent**

1787 — U.S. Constitution

- Created the basic structure of the federal government
- Entered into force in **1789**
- Still the supreme law of the United States

The Constitution and the Bill of Rights

The Constitution establishes a system of **limited government**

It divides federal power into **three branches**

Checks and balances prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful

The first ten amendments form the **Bill of Rights (1791)**

They protect fundamental individual freedoms and rights

Three Branches of Government

Separation of powers and checks and balances



Legislative Branch
CONGRESS

makes federal laws

Congress can limit presidential powers (e.g. by law, control of spending, impeachment)

The President can veto legislation

Congress can influence the courts (e.g. by passing laws, controlling the budget, confirming justices)

The courts can declare laws unconstitutional



Executive Branch
PRESIDENT

enforces federal laws

The courts can limit presidential powers (e.g. by declaring actions unconstitutional)

The President appoints federal judges (with Senate confirmation)



Judicial Branch
FEDERAL COURTS

interpret laws and the Constitution

Each branch can check the powers of the others.

Three Branches of Government

Legislative → Congress
makes federal laws

Executive → President
enforces federal laws

Judicial → Federal Courts
interpret laws and the Constitution

- Each branch can **check the powers of the others**

Congress: The Legislative Branch

The U.S. Congress is **bicameral**:

- **House of Representatives** (2-year terms)
- 435 voting members
- Representation based on state population
- **Senate** (6-year terms)
- 100 senators
- 2 senators per state

Congress passes federal legislation and controls federal spending

The President: The Executive Branch

The President is both **head of state and head of government**

Elected for a **four-year term**

Maximum of **two elected terms**

Major powers include:

- enforcing federal laws
- commanding the armed forces
- conducting foreign policy
- vetoing legislation
- appointing federal judges and senior officials

The Judicial Branch and the Supreme Court

The federal judiciary is **independent** of Congress and the President

At its top is the **U.S. Supreme Court**

It consists of **nine Justices**

Justices are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate

They normally serve **for life**

The Court can determine whether laws and government actions are **constitutional**

Federal Government vs. State Governments

Federalism: power is divided between two levels of government

Federal powers

- foreign policy and defense
- immigration and citizenship
- interstate and international commerce
- currency
- federal taxation and spending

State powers

- education
- policing and public safety
- elections
- family and property law
- many areas of health and local government

The 50 States

Each state has its own:

- **constitution**
- **legislature**
- **governor**
- **court system**

State laws can differ considerably; however, states are subject to the **U.S. Constitution and valid federal law**

The Constitution establishes the **supremacy of federal law** within the federal government's constitutional sphere


WASHINGTON
OREGON
CALIFORNIA
IDAHO
NEVADA
MONTANA
WYOMING
UTAH
COLORADO
ARIZONA
NEW MEXICO
NORTH DAKOTA
SOUTH DAKOTA
NEBRASKA
KANSAS
OKLAHOMA
TEXAS
MINNESOTA
IOWA
MISSOURI
ARKANSAS
LOUISIANA
WISCONSIN
ILLINOIS
MICHIGAN
INDIANA
OHIO
KENTUCKY
TENNESSEE
MISSISSIPPI
ALABAMA
GEORGIA
FLORIDA
SOUTH CAROLINA
NORTH CAROLINA
VIRGINIA
WEST VIRGINIA
PENNSYLVANIA
NEW YORK
MAINE
VERMONT
NEW HAMPSHIRE
MASSACHUSETTS
RHODE ISLAND
CONNECTICUT
NEW JERSEY
DELAWARE
MARYLAND
HAWAII
ALASKA
ALASKA & HAWAII
WEST COAST
ROCKY MOUNTAIN
SOUTHWEST
GREAT PLAINS
MIDWEST
SOUTH
MID-ATLANTIC
NEW ENGLAND

Political Parties

The United States has a **two-party-dominated system**

Democratic Party

• generally associated with the center-left / liberal tradition

Republican Party

• generally associated with the right / conservative tradition

Other parties exist but have limited electoral representation

The two major parties are **broad coalitions**, not ideologically uniform organizations

Political Parties: A Brief History

1790s–1820s
Federalists → strong federal government
Democratic-Republicans → Jefferson and Madison; greater emphasis on states' rights

Federalists disappear; Democratic-Republicans split

1820s–1850s
Democratic Party → emerges around Andrew Jackson
Whig Party → formed in opposition to Jackson

The Whigs collapse, largely over divisions concerning slavery

From the 1850s
Republican Party → founded in the 1850s; opposed the expansion of slavery into the western territories
Democratic Party → remains the other major national party

Since the Civil War:
Democrats and Republicans have remained the two dominant parties
Both parties have **changed profoundly over time** in ideology, constituencies, and regional support

Third parties have existed throughout U.S. history but have rarely challenged the two-party system

1790s–1820s

Federalists

Strong federal government.



Alexander Hamilton

1790s–1820s

Democratic-Republicans

Greater emphasis on states' rights.



Thomas Jefferson

1820s–1850s

Democratic Party

Emerges around Andrew Jackson.



Andrew Jackson

1820s–1850s

Whig Party

Formed in opposition to Jackson.



Henry Clay

From the 1850s to today

Republican Party

Founded in the 1850s; opposed the expansion of slavery.



Abraham Lincoln



Democratic Party

Generally associated with the center-left / liberal tradition.

- Historic support from diverse coalitions (e.g. working-class voters, minorities, urban voters).
- Often emphasizes social equality, government intervention, and civil rights.
- Ideology and constituencies have changed significantly over time.



Republican Party

Generally associated with the right / conservative tradition.

- Historic support from different constituencies over time (e.g. business interests, rural voters, religious conservatives).
- Often emphasizes limited government, individual liberty, and a strong national defense.
- Ideology and constituencies have also changed significantly over time.

Other parties

- Several other parties have existed (e.g. Free Soil, Know-Nothing, Populist, Progressive, etc.).
- They have rarely challenged the long-standing two-party system.



The United States has a two-party-dominated system.

Both major parties are broad coalitions, not ideologically uniform organizations.

U.S. parties are generally less centralized than many European political parties.