

The Executive Branch

A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,279

Connections

Writing

Why is it important to limit the powers of the president? Write an essay using evidence from the book to support your answer.

Social Studies

Choose a president to research. Write a magazine article about the president's life, including the major things this president accomplished.

LEVELED BOOK • U

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Focus Question

Who leads the executive branch, and what are the jobs of this branch of government?

Words to Know

abroad	impeachment
ambassadors	overrides
cabinet	pardon
Congress	Supreme Court
executive	trade agreements
federal	veto

Cover: In 1800, John Adams became the first president to live in the White House. The president lives *and* works there.

Page 1: President George W. Bush takes the oath of office for his second term in January 2005. His wife, Laura, stands beside him.

Page 3: President Harry Truman (left) meets with Defense Secretary George Marshall in 1951.

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Correlation

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President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Introduction

President Lyndon B. Johnson looked into the cameras. “My fellow Americans,” he said, “I am about to sign into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” Johnson explained that the act called for Americans of every race to be treated equally.

Johnson finished his remarks and signed the bill using many different pens. He gave the pens as gifts to people in the room, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

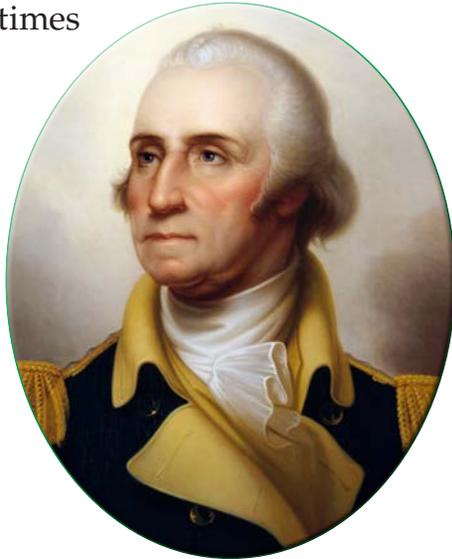
The signing of the Civil Rights Act was an important day in United States history. However, for the president of the United States, even less important days are still busy days. In one day, the president might attend meetings, make a speech, visit a school or hospital, sign a bill into law, and host leaders from other countries. This is the **executive** branch at work.

The Executive Branch in the U.S. Constitution

In 1788, American leaders adopted the Constitution. It laid out a system of laws to help govern the young country—a system that has changed over time but is still used today. Under the U.S. Constitution, the executive branch carries out the laws of the United States. The president of the United States is the head of the executive branch.

The Constitution divides the U.S. government into three branches, or parts. The executive branch manages most government business and departments. The legislative branch, which consists of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, makes laws. The judicial branch watches over the U.S. justice system through its system of courts. Sometimes the different branches cooperate and compromise. At other times, they oppose each other.

George Washington was the first U.S. president. He served two terms, from April 1789 to March 1797. He was also one of thirty-nine men who signed the Constitution.



The Constitution gives the president broad powers. However, the president is not a king. The presidency is an elected position. Many of the president's actions are overseen by **Congress** and the **federal** courts.

The Constitution lists three requirements for the presidency. The president must be thirty-five or older, must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, and must have lived in the United States for fourteen years or more.



President John F. Kennedy was forty-three years old when he was elected. To date, he is the youngest U.S. president.

How Americans Choose a President

The United States is not a simple democracy in which all citizens make decisions together. Instead, it is a representative democracy. The people elect leaders who make decisions for them. Presidential elections are a good example of how this works. When the citizens of the United States cast their votes for president, their votes do not make the final decision. Instead, the president is chosen by electors from each state.

Electors usually follow the popular vote in their states. The person who wins the national popular vote almost always wins the presidency. However, that is not always the case. When the popular vote is close, a person with fewer total votes can sometimes win enough electoral votes in key states to carry the election. As of 2016, the United States has had five presidents who lost the popular vote but won the electoral vote.

Presidential nominees Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton shake hands during a 2016 debate. Clinton went on to win the popular vote by close to three million votes, but Trump won thirty more electoral votes and the election.



Organizations in the Executive Branch

Many people in the executive branch help the president. For example, the executive branch includes a vice president. The vice president is elected along with the president. He or she is expected to take over if the president cannot continue with the presidency.

The executive branch also includes departments of people who oversee American schools, the military, and taxes, among other things. The leaders of these departments make up the president's **cabinet**. The cabinet has grown since the United States' early history. President George Washington's cabinet had only four members. Now, the cabinet has more than a dozen.

Follow the Leader

Sometimes the president dies or must leave office for some other reason. When this happens, the order of succession—who will replace the president—is as follows:



- Vice President
- Speaker of the House of Representatives
- President Pro Tempore of the Senate
- Department heads, starting with the Secretary of State

Vice President Gerald Ford replaced Richard Nixon as president in 1974.



The U.S. ambassador to India (seated, center) and his wife perform service at a community kitchen during their visit to India's Golden Temple in 2016.

What the President Does

The president has many powers. For example, the president commands the American military. She or he can send the military anywhere in the world. The president also has the power to **pardon** criminals who are guilty of federal crimes.

The executive branch is responsible for the United States' relationships with other countries. The president chooses **ambassadors** who represent the United States **abroad**. He or she also has the power to create **trade agreements** with other countries. The president can send armed forces to help other countries and sign treaties—agreements of peace between nations. However, the U.S. Senate must approve the terms of the treaties. The president chooses **Supreme Court** justices, cabinet members, and agency leaders. Many of these choices must be approved by the Senate.



President Bill Clinton talks with Nevada legislators in 2000 after vetoing a bill that would have sent nuclear waste to their state.

The president has an important role in making laws. Though the executive branch does not write laws, the president has the power to approve or deny the laws that Congress makes. When both houses of Congress pass a bill, it is then sent to the president. If the president signs the bill, it becomes law. The president can instead turn down a bill with a **veto**. In this case, the bill does not become law unless Congress **overrides** the veto. Congress can only do this if two-thirds of its members (in both houses) vote for the bill.

Seventy Thousand Decisions

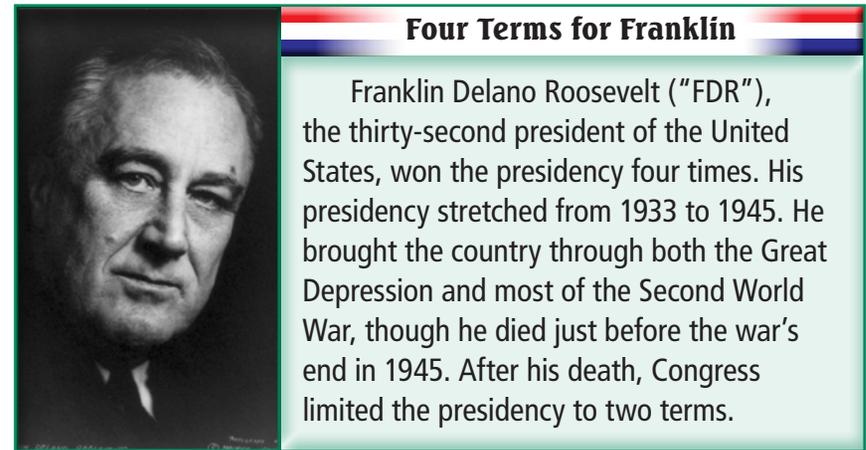
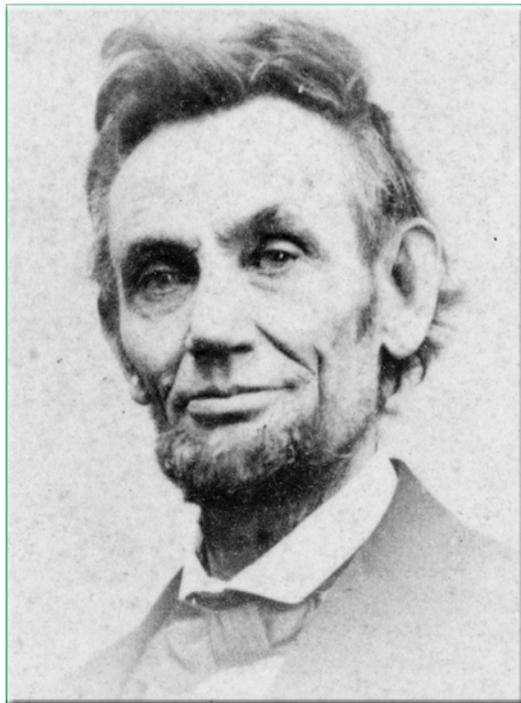
During each two-year term of Congress, the president nominates people for nearly seventy thousand jobs. These include the president's choices for federal judges, U.S. attorneys, cabinet members, ambassadors, and others. The Senate approves most of the president's choices quickly, but this is not always the case. Supreme Court nominees, for example, almost always undergo long examination by the Senate before they are confirmed.

Historic Actions of the Executive Branch

While the executive branch does not make laws, the president can write executive actions. These are instructions from the president to the government. Some of these decisions change Americans' lives.

During the Civil War, for example, President Abraham Lincoln ordered that slaves "shall be . . . forever free." And in 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which gave thousands of Americans jobs. WPA workers made roads, built schools, and planted trees.

President Abraham Lincoln led the United States through the American Civil War. It was the nation's bloodiest conflict and greatest test as a country. Today, many consider Lincoln to be the most beloved president of all.



Some executive orders have been harmful, however. One example happened after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941. This attack brought the United States into the Second World War (1939–1945). After the attack, President Roosevelt signed an order that let the U.S. government force Japanese American citizens from their homes and imprison them in camps. There, they were treated as enemies of the government.



Japanese Americans eat together at a California camp in 1942.

Checks and Balances

Under the Constitution, each of the three branches of government—the executive branch, legislative branch, and judicial branch—serves as a “check” on the others. This prevents any one branch from getting too much power.

The president’s veto power, for example, is a check on the legislative branch. Normally, Congress needs a president’s signature to pass a bill into law. To date, U.S. presidents have vetoed more than 2,500 bills. Congress checks the president through the power to override a veto.

Congress also checks the president by approving or blocking the people chosen by the president to serve on the Supreme Court and the cabinet. Though the president is commander of the armed forces, only Congress can officially declare war. Congress also has the power to remove a president from office through a process called **impeachment**.

Try, Try Again

While it can be hard to override a veto, Congress can sometimes save a bill through a different process: revision. If Congress removes or changes aspects of the bill the president dislikes and manages to pass it again, the president may approve it on the next go-round.



To avoid impeachment, President Richard Nixon resigns from office in 1974. He is the only U.S. president ever to resign.

Finally, the executive branch is a check on the judicial branch because the president chooses federal judges. The judicial branch checks both the executive and legislative branches by making sure that both Congress’s laws and the president’s orders are constitutional.

The writers of the Constitution gave more power to the legislative branch than the executive branch. However, the power of the executive branch has grown over time. For example, one of Congress’s checks on the executive—the power to declare war—has faded into the background. Congress last declared war in 1942. All military action since then, including the Vietnam War and the Iraq Wars, has been taken by the executive branch without action from Congress.



A painting depicts the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, where the U.S. Constitution was drafted. It features Ben Franklin (in brown) and George Washington (in black), two of the thirty-nine actual signers.

Conclusion

So far, the Constitution has worked as its writers meant it to work, even though the powers of the executive branch tend to change over time. The executive branch has been able to carry out the nation's laws. At the same time, the legislative and judicial branches check the president's power. The government of the United States, therefore, is balanced between its executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The Constitution ties the three together. As for the presidency, it is likely to continue to change as the needs of the country change.

Glossary

abroad (<i>adj.</i>)	in or to a foreign country (p. 9)
ambassadors (<i>n.</i>)	officials who travel to or reside in a new location to represent their country or population (p. 9)
cabinet (<i>n.</i>)	a group of advisers to a president or other leader of a country (p. 8)
Congress (<i>n.</i>)	the highest lawmaking body of the U.S. government, which includes the Senate and the House of Representatives (p. 6)
executive (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the branch of government that leads a nation and carries out the laws of the land (p. 4)
federal (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to a central government that shares power with separate states or regions (p. 6)
impeachment (<i>n.</i>)	a charge of wrongdoing brought against a leader or official that may remove him or her from office (p. 13)
overrides (<i>v.</i>)	takes over or cancels out another (p. 10)
pardon (<i>v.</i>)	to forgive for wrongdoing (p. 9)
Supreme Court (<i>n.</i>)	the highest court of law in the judicial system of the United States (p. 9)
trade agreements (<i>n.</i>)	agreements between different countries on how to exchange goods and services (p. 9)
veto (<i>n.</i>)	the act of refusing to approve a bill so it does not become a law (p. 10)