

THE PRACTICE OF POLITICS

Democracies are based on "rule of law." The Greeks are famous for practicing "direct" democracy, a system in which citizens meet to discuss all policy, and then make decisions by majority rule. But can direct democracy work in a large, diverse population spread over a vast geographical distance like the U.S.? Probably not. In its place, the American founders utilized "indirect" or "representative" democracy. In this system, representatives are chosen by the people to make decisions for them. The representative body, then, becomes a manageable size for doing the business of government.

The Constitution of the United States divides the federal government into three branches to make sure no individual or group will have too much power:

Legislative—Makes laws (Congress, comprised of the House of Representatives and Senate)

The Legislative Branch drafts proposed laws, confirms or rejects presidential nominations for heads of federal agencies, federal judges and the Supreme Court, and has the authority to declare war. This branch includes Congress (the Senate and House of Representatives) and special agencies and offices that provide support to Congress. American citizens have the right to vote for Senators and Representatives through free, confidential ballots. For a person to run for the House of Representatives they must be at least 25 years old, have been a U.S. citizen for seven years, and be a resident of the state (but not necessarily district) they represent. For the Senate, candidates must be at least 30 years old, be a citizen for nine years, and be a resident of the state they represent. House representatives serve for two-year terms and senators serve for six-year terms.

Executive—Carries out laws (president, vice president, Cabinet, most federal agencies)

The Executive Branch carries out and enforces laws. It includes the president, vice president, the Cabinet, executive departments, independent agencies and other boards, commissions and committees. American citizens have the right to vote for the president and vice president through free, confidential ballots. The president leads the country. They are the head of state, leader of the federal government, and Commander in Chief of the United States Armed Forces. The president serves a four-year term and can be elected for no more than two terms. To run for president, a candidate must be at least 35 years old, a natural born citizen, and have lived in the U.S. for at least 14 years.

Judicial—Evaluates laws (Supreme Court and other courts)

The Judicial Branch interprets the meaning of laws, applies laws to individual cases and decides if laws violate the Constitution. It is comprised of the Supreme Court and other federal courts. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. The Justices of the Supreme Court are nominated by the president and must be approved by the Senate. Nine members make up the

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Supreme Court—a Chief Justice and eight Associate Justices. Justices are appointed for life terms. They serve until their death, retirement or removal in exceptional circumstances.

Here's how government is supposed to work in the United States: the people elect representatives, representatives act on behalf of the people and they pass laws that reflect people's wishes. However, problems arise when elected representatives change their minds, exaggerate their commitment to an issue to get elected, or simply can't agree with the other representatives about certain laws. What recourse do people have when they feel they aren't being adequately represented? Every citizen has options that don't fully rely on their representatives. Chief amongst these options are:

- **Contact Your Representatives**

- Before a law ever graces the president's desk, it needs to be written and passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives. Three of those congresspeople—two senators and one representative—work for you. You and your neighbors elect them. You can tell them what to do. After all, they have to please their constituents if they want to keep their jobs.

- **Learn How Local Government Works**

- Most of the laws governing your life come from your state and local government— that's often where you can have the biggest impact. If you only receive news from national sources, you may miss out on the state and local issues that could most directly affect you.

- **Pay Attention to Issues That Matter to You**

- There is so much going on in government that it is difficult to keep track of everything. Pick the issues that you are most passionate about and set up custom Google Alerts for them. When your representative does something noteworthy about one of your core issues you can thank or rebuke them. And join up with groups, local and national, that care about the same issues.

- **Change the System**

- If you feel the government is not working the way it should, you can advocate for changing the overall system. For instance, you can join advocacy groups central to the voting process. One example is OneVirginia2021, which is a group committed to ending gerrymandering – the process where the representatives draw districts to heavily favor the party of those currently in power and dilute minority representation. Or, if you dislike the two-party system, you can connect with your local third party and support their candidates in local elections. Or you could change the Democratic or Republican party from the inside by getting locally involved in the party of your choice.

- **Run for Office**

- Voting and organizing are only part of the picture. You could also be the person in office. If you are interested in serving look for a group that trains people to run for

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office. For example, She Should Run and Emily's List focus on women, while the New American Leaders Project focuses on people from immigrant communities. Political parties and advocacy groups can also help you get the education you need to run for office.