Democracy for Cadettes

Whether you realize it or not, you probably have some political issues you're passionate about. Maybe you're determined to spread the word about climate change, or maybe you want to improve the lives of your city's homeless veterans. If you want to make a difference, start by fully understanding how your government works. Informed citizens are change makers!

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 learned new things about my government—how each branch works, how they work together, and how each piece makes a difference in society.

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.

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

STEP 1

Find out about local government

When most people think of "government," their first thought is of the president and other elected officials in Washington, D.C. They usually know a lot less about their local government. Get to know yours in this step!

CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Visit your town hall, city hall, or mayor's office.** Take a trip with your friends or family and talk to someone in one of these places about your local government. Have them explain all the jobs that are done in your local government and talk to you about local elections. Ask any questions you can think of.

OR

- ☐ **Talk to an expert.** With help from an adult, find an expert who can talk to you about your local government. This could be a teacher, a lawyer, a judge, or someone elected to local office. Have them explain all the jobs that are done in your local government and talk to you about local elections. Ask any other 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 (or livestream one online) 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

State governments and the United States government are all made up of three parts. These parts are called the branches of government. You can picture the government like a tree with three branches on it: legislative, executive, and judicial. Before doing the rest of the steps in this badge, read about the three parts at the bottom of this page.

CHOICES—DO ONE:

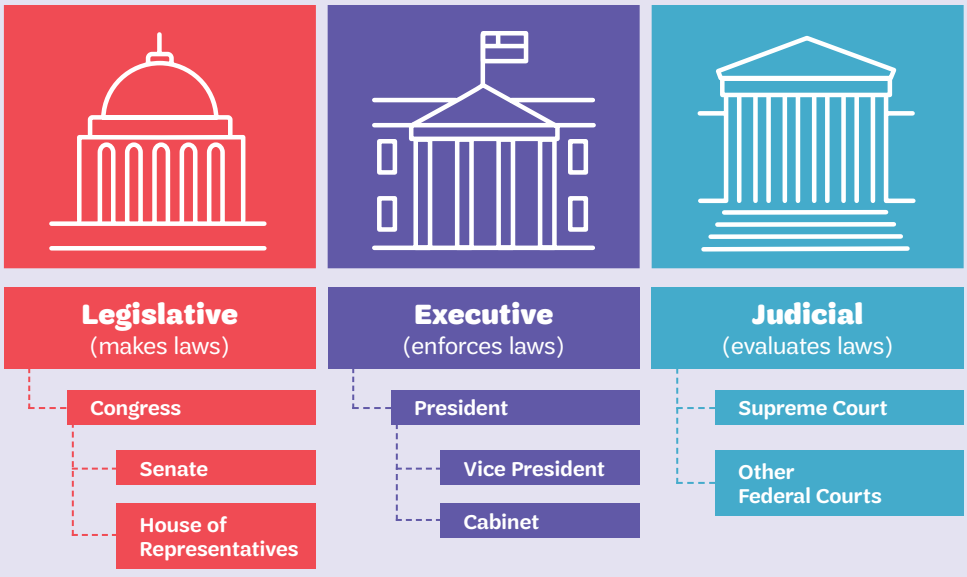
- [ ] **Visit your state capitol building.** Take a field trip with your friends or family and talk to someone there about how your state government works. How do the three branches of government work together? Ask any other questions you can think of.

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

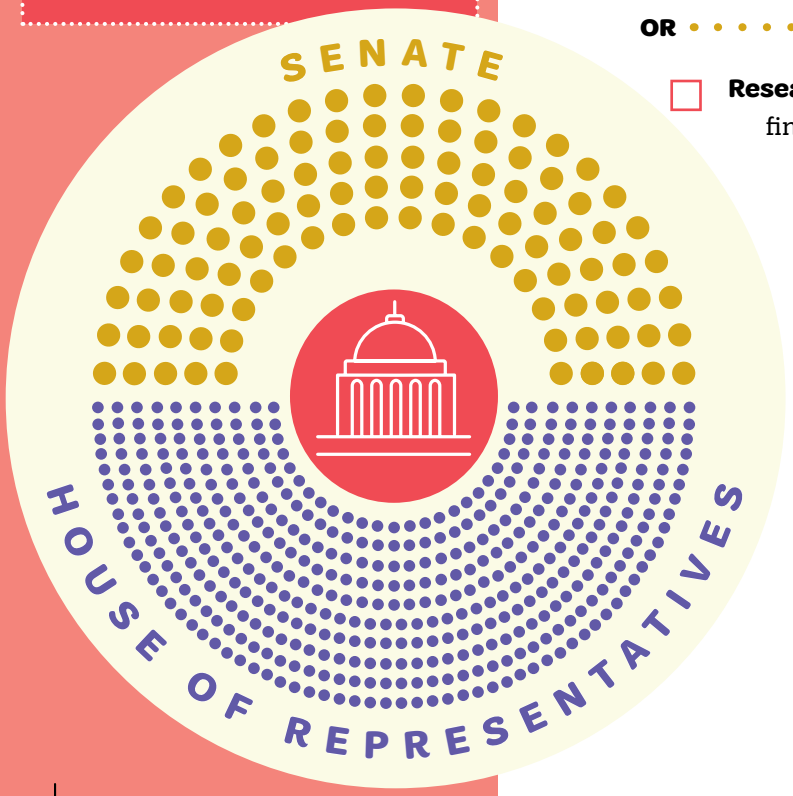
- [ ] **Explore an election.** Find out everything you can about the most recent election in your state. Who were the candidates? How close were the outcomes? Were new laws decided upon? How many people voted? On your own or in small groups, come up with ways you might encourage voting in your state. Share your thoughts with family or friends.



Congress

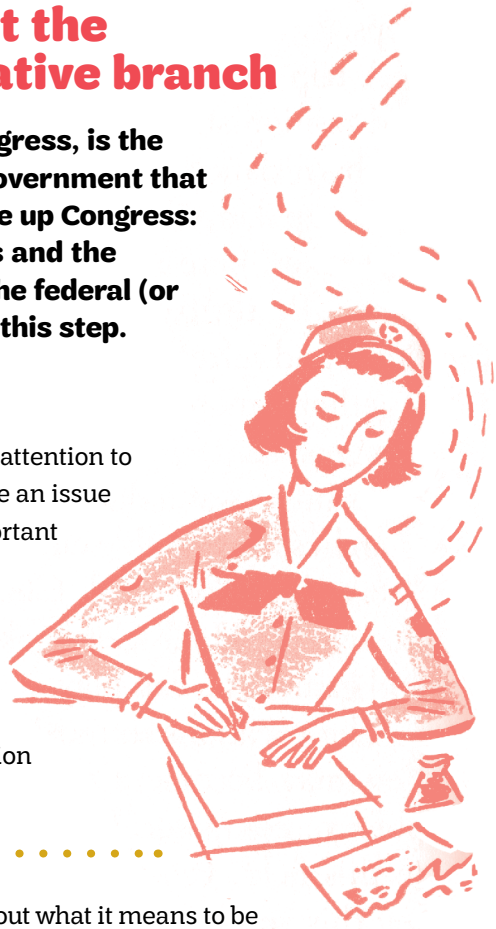
The legislative branch of the United States government—the part of the government that makes laws—is also called Congress. Congress has two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

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.



STEP
3 Find out about the federal legislative branch

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



CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Write a letter.** Pay extra 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 one of your representatives about why the issue matters and what action you'd like to see from them.

OR

- ☐ **Explore territories.** Learn about what it means to be an American territory and how they are represented in Congress. Do you think the system is fair? Why or why not? Share your thoughts with family or friends.

OR

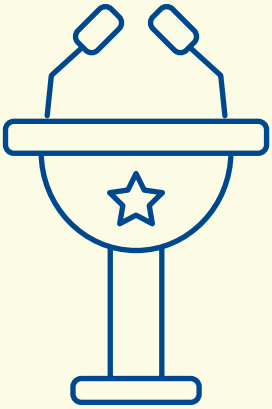
- ☐ **Research representation.** With help from an adult, find out how many women are currently serving in the United States Senate and House of Representatives. Compare this year to previous years. How have things changed? Come up with ideas to further increase the number of women serving in Congress.

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?

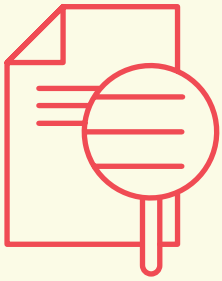
1. Someone has an idea.

This idea can start with anyone, even kids 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.

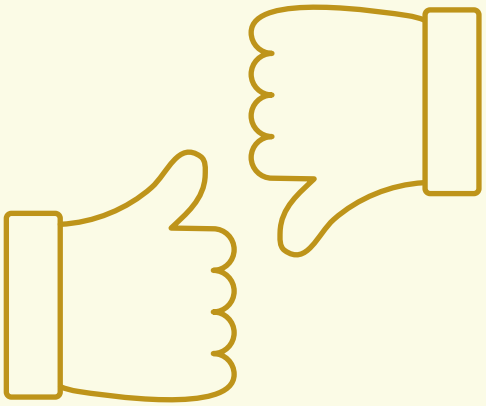
4. Congress debates and votes.

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
4 Find out about the federal executive branch

The head of the executive branch of the United States government is the president. This branch also includes the vice president and cabinet members. (The president chooses members of their cabinet, or advisors; they are approved by the Senate.) Members of the president's cabinet include the Secretary of Housing and Development and the Secretary of Transportation, for example. Find out more about the executive branch in this step.

CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Look into the cabinet.** The president's cabinet includes the heads of 15 different departments; these people advise the president on a variety of topics. Research the current presidential cabinet members. Find out who they are and some of the things they're responsible for in their roles. Talk about your findings with family or friends. Which role do you think is the most important? Why?

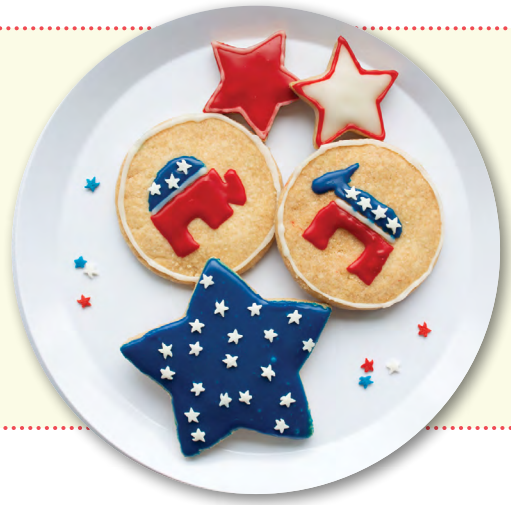
OR

- ☐ **Explore vice presidents.** Spend some time researching the role of the vice president throughout history. What does the vice president do? What are the times in United States history when the vice president has had to step up to fill the role of the presidency? Share your findings with family or friends.

OR

- ☐ **Create a presidential trivia contest.** How many presidents have won Grammy Awards? Which president was known for his love of jelly beans? Come up with fun questions and quiz your friends or family on a range of presidential topics. Make sure to have prizes for the winners!

FOR MORE **FUN:** Host a trivia night—you might serve themed snacks, decorate with historic campaign posters, or share videos of presidential speeches.



STEP
5 Find out about the federal judicial branch

The judicial branch of the government is made up of courts and judges. The system ladders up to the highest court in the country, the Supreme Court. In this step, you'll learn more about how the judicial branch works.

CHOICES—DO ONE:

- ☐ **Talk to a lawyer or judge.** Find out everything you can about what they do. Why did they choose their profession? What do they think are the most important cases in national and state history? How do the courts in your state work with the other two branches of government? Ask any other questions you may have.

OR

- ☐ **Investigate a case.** Take a closer look at a well-known Supreme Court case from history. (Some examples might be Miranda v. Arizona or Brown v. Board of Education.) Find out everything you can about the case and see what changes were made as a result, if any. Do you agree with the decision of the court? Why or why not? Talk about your findings with family or friends.

OR

- ☐ **Go to court.** One of the best ways to understand the legal system is to see it in action! With help from an adult, find a time 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, the best time for a student visit, and anything you should know before attending.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2009.

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!) 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:

- Helping a younger sibling write a letter to a representative about an issue they care about
- Creating a game to teach Juniors the three parts of the Constitution
- Talking to a parent or guardian about a historical Supreme Court case that's meaningful to them

I'm inspired to:

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