

- Share some excerpts from the speeches of Presidents throughout the history of the United States. See *Speeches of the American Presidents*, edited by Janet Podell (H.W.Wilson, 2001) or [www.ipl.org/ref/POTUS](http://www.ipl.org/ref/POTUS) for copies of speeches. Then encourage students to imagine that they are at the head of the executive branch. What are some of the ideas they would like to share with the American people? They can draft speeches that present their main ideas.
- Students can create a visual representation of how the powers of the three branches are shared but separate. On their poster, they should show what checks the executive branch has on the other two branches and how the legislative and judicial branches check the executive branch.
- Imagine what George Washington, the nation's first President, would say if he could comment on the functioning of the executive branch today. Students can present Washington's thoughts in the format of a newspaper article, journal entry, letter or television news segment.
- In the presidential election of 2000, Al Gore won the popular vote but lost the election to George W. Bush. Keeping these events in mind, hold a class debate about the efficacy of the electoral college and whether or not it should be changed. Following the debate, students can also write proposals with their ideas of how the electoral college could be redesigned.
- Encourage students to select a presidential election from the history of the United States and compare it with the election of 2000 in a Venn diagram.
- Students can select a President from American history and write a biography in the format of a children's picture book, complete with illustrations. Students can then share their picture books with a younger class.
- Have your class write a letter to the President (The President, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20500) or send an email ([president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov)). Students might write a letter of encouragement or a persuasive letter about a certain issue.

### Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our Web site at [www.LibraryVideo.com](http://www.LibraryVideo.com)

- [americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/home.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/presidency/home.html)  
"The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden" is a Web page sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution. This site includes an interactive time line of Presidents throughout the history of the United States and information about the history of the presidency and the rights and responsibilities of U.S. Presidents. Interesting activities for students are also provided.

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- [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)  
For information about the presidency directly from the source, see the White House Web site. Details about current events, public policies and transcripts of major presidential speeches are offered.
- [www.umkc.edu/imc/prestriv.htm](http://www.umkc.edu/imc/prestriv.htm)  
Interesting presidential trivia is offered on this site, which details little known facts about the chief executive, starting with America's first President, George Washington.
- [bensguide.gpo.gov](http://bensguide.gpo.gov)  
"Ben's Guide to U.S. Government for Kids" is a wonderful site with grade-specific material (from kindergarten through 12th grade) on the character and history of American government including information about the executive branch.

### Suggested Print Resources

- Davis, Todd, and Marc E. Frey. *New Big Book of U.S. Presidents — A Young Reader's Guide to the Presidency*. Courage Books, Philadelphia, PA; 2000.
- Grossman, Mark. *Encyclopedia of the United States Cabinet*. ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, CA; 2000.
- Krull, Kathleen. *Lives of the Presidents: Fame, Shame and What the Neighbors Thought*. Harcourt Brace & Co., San Diego, CA; 1998.

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#### COMPLETE LIST OF TITLES

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| • THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE    | • RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES OF U.S. CITIZENSHIP |
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## THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

### Grades 5–12

This guide is a supplement designed for teachers to use when presenting programs in the video series *United States Government*.

**Before Viewing:** Give students an introduction to the topic by relaying aspects of the program overview to them. Select pre-viewing discussion questions and vocabulary to provide a focus for students when they view the program.

**After Viewing:** Review the program and vocabulary, and use the follow-up questions and activities to inspire continued discussion. Encourage students to research the topic further with the Internet and print resources provided.



## Program Overview

The executive branch, one of the three branches of United States government, is responsible for carrying out, or executing, federal law. At its head is the President, who manages the entire executive branch and has the job of appointing heads of various departments such as the Department of Defense. The heads of these executive departments are called secretaries and are members of the cabinet, a group that gives advice to the President. Independent agencies, like the Environmental Protection Agency, also function within the executive branch to implement the federal government's many programs.

The President's job is more than just overseeing the functioning of the executive branch. The President is also commander in chief of the Armed Forces, a position that rises in importance during wartime. The President is chief of state, or a symbolic representative of the nation as a whole. As the chief diplomat, the President is a major force in setting and carrying out the nation's foreign policy, and meeting with foreign leaders. In addition, the President is the leader of his or her political party and guardian of the nation's laws, including the U.S. Constitution. The Founding Fathers, fearful of a strong executive, established in the Constitution numerous checks against the power of the President, one of which is impeachment. A President who commits wrongs termed by the Constitution as "treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors" is liable to be impeached by the House of Representatives and tried in the Senate. If convicted, he or she is removed from office.

What are the requirements for becoming President? Presidents must be 35 years old, native-born citizens and residents of the United States for at least 14 years. To take office, Presidents must win a majority of the electoral college. In the absence of a majority, presidential elections are decided by the House of Representatives, each state having one vote. Presidential elections take place every four years; no one can hold office for more than 10 years.

As the branch that enforces U.S. law, the executive branch is the mover and shaker of American government!

## Vocabulary

**executive branch** — The branch of American government that carries out, or executes, the law.

**President of the United States** — The highest official of the executive branch of American government.

**legislative branch** — The branch of American government that makes the law.

**judicial branch** — The branch of American government that interprets and applies the law.

**U.S. Constitution** — The written plan of American government and the highest law of the land. The Constitution empowers and limits U.S. government.

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**checks and balances** — The system of sharing powers among the three branches of the national government so that no branch can abuse its powers.

**U.S. Congress** — The law-making body for federal government, made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

**cabinet** — The President's advisory group composed of the heads of executive departments.

**executive departments** — Groups within the executive branch headed by a secretary, each of which is concerned with a particular subject matter such as agriculture, national defense, foreign relations, etc.

**independent agencies** — Organizations of the federal government that are not part of any of the executive departments and whose heads are appointed by the President.

**inauguration** — The ceremony at which a public official is sworn in to office.

**impeachment** — A formal charge brought against a public official by the House of Representatives. The official is then tried in the Senate, and if convicted, removed from office.

**electoral college** — A group of representatives, known as electors, that is selected every four years to formally elect the President and the Vice President.

## Pre-viewing Discussion

- Encourage students to brainstorm a list of all the information that they already possess about the executive branch of U.S. government. What do they think are the responsibilities of this branch?
- Ask students to name various presidential roles and powers. Do they think the U.S. President has too much power? Why or why not?
- The executive branch consists of many executive departments and independent agencies. See if the class knows some of these important groups and how they affect the everyday life of the nation.
- The executive branch isn't the only branch of American government. Discuss with students the roles of other branches of government and how these branches interact.

## Focus Questions

1. What are the three branches of the federal government?
2. What does the executive branch do?
3. What is the cabinet?
4. Name some departments in the executive branch.
5. What is the Executive Office of the President, and what are some of its parts?
6. What is the National Security Council? When and how was it formed?
7. Name the different roles of the President.

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8. What is the President's oath of office?

9. Explain what impeachment means.

10. How long can Presidents serve in office?

11. What are the qualifications to be President?

12. What are the qualifications and the duties of Vice President?

13. How are Presidents elected, and what is the role of the electoral college?

14. Why was the presidential election of 2000 controversial?

## Follow-up Discussion

- Discuss with students how the executive branch is playing a role in current events. What activities of the executive branch are most prominent in the news today? How are these activities, such as those of the Departments of Defense and State, important to the public?
- Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution states that Congress shall have power to declare war. However, many undeclared wars have been waged since the 20th century. Do students think Presidents should be able to conduct a war without having Congress declare it? Why or why not?
- The system of checks and balances was designed to ensure that no one branch obtained too much power. Do students feel that this process is effective in balancing power across branches? Why or why not?

## Follow-up Activities

- Ask an official of a federal executive office in your area to come and speak to the class on the mission of the agency and the some of the most significant problems encountered in administering it. (Offices of the federal government are found in the front of telephone books.) Before the official arrives, have students do Internet research on the agency concerned and compose relevant questions.
- Organize a game among students by dividing most of the class into groups, each of which represent a major federal department. Reserve some students to be a panel of judges. The object of the game is for each department to get the largest budget that it can obtain for its responsibilities. Each group will research major department functions, what its budget has recently been and cooperate in creating arguments for its funding. Then have mock hearings before the panel of judges, who will award budget levels depending on the most convincing arguments. (See [www.loc.gov/global/executive/fed.html](http://www.loc.gov/global/executive/fed.html) for more information about executive departments.)
- Each student can select a President from the history of United States government. Based on the tasks of the President, give this President a report card on his/her successes and failures in accomplishing the roles and responsibilities of the U.S. presidency.

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