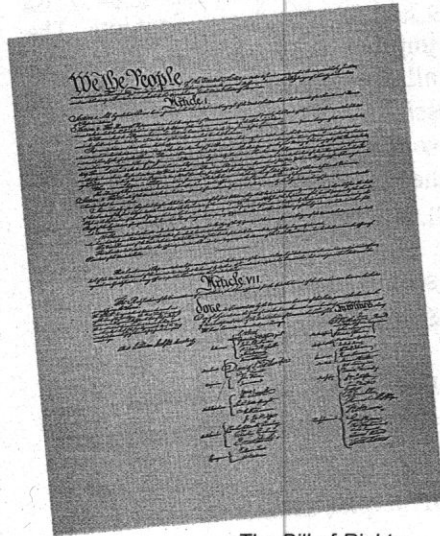


## United States constitution and government

The United States has a written constitution which sets out the principles of government. It was drawn up in 1787 and has so far been changed or **amended** twenty-six times. The first ten amendments, known together as the **Bill of Rights**, set down such basic rights as the freedom of speech, of religion and of the press.

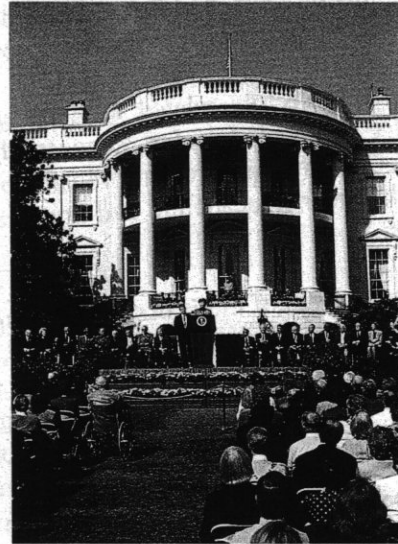
To ensure that no individual or group has too much power, the constitution shares power between three groups, the **executive** (the President), the **legislative** (Congress) and the **judicial** (the courts), in such a way that each has a certain authority over the others (a **system of checks and balances**).



The Bill of Rights

**The President** represents the country as **Head of State** but also has real political power. Elections for President are held every four years and no President may **hold office** for more than two **terms**.

**Presidential candidates** are chosen by the political parties either through **Primaries** (direct elections) or at state **conventions** or **caucuses** (meetings of party representatives), depending on the state.



The President in front of the White House

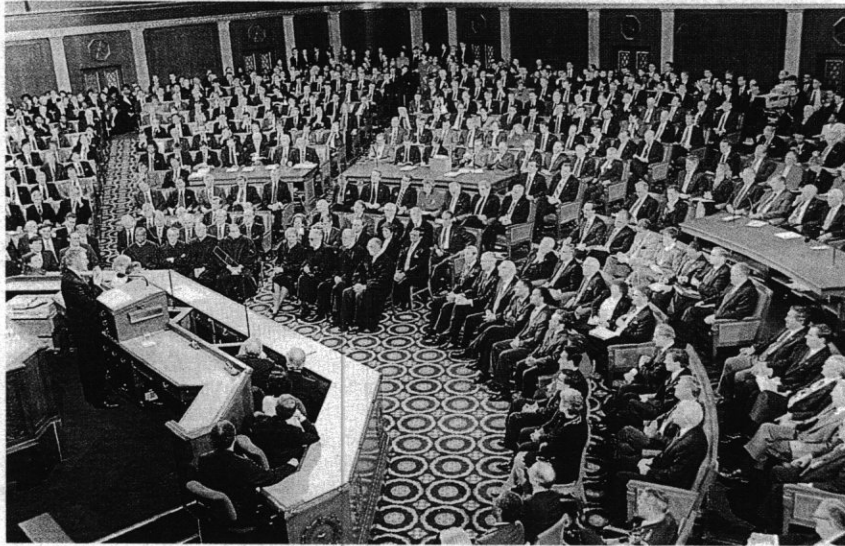
When a candidate has been chosen by a party, he or she will **campaign** to win the election. The President is not elected directly by the people but by an **electoral college**. Voters in each state select a list of electors. The party in each state whose list receives the most votes wins the state and those electors then vote for their party's presidential candidate.

The President proposes new laws and changes in policy but Congress must agree before they are passed. The President is not a member of Congress and so cannot personally introduce bills there.

Bill Clinton campaigning for election



*The House of Representatives*



**Congress** consists of two houses, the **Senate** (to which each state elects two **senators** for a period of six years) and the **House of Representatives**, in which the number of **representatives** from each state depends on its population. Bills cannot become law until they have been passed by both houses, and if they are not passed by a two-thirds majority they can still be vetoed by the President. Bills must not conflict with the constitution.

The Federal government is responsible only for matters of national importance, such as foreign affairs, trade and defence.

The governments of the individual states are responsible for all other matters.

**The Courts** (⇨ D7) Federal judges are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

The highest court, the Supreme Court, has the power to judge whether a law passed by the government conforms to the constitution and whether the President has acted constitutionally. If it judges that the President's behaviour has been unconstitutional, he or she may be **impeached** (accused of a crime against the State).

*The Capitol*



A.S. HORNBY, 1995: "OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY", FIFTH ED., OXFORD, OUP.