

# THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States of America is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world, with its total area of 9,372,607 square kilometers - including Alaska and Hawaii - and more than 270 million inhabitants.

The United States were formed from 13 colonies. This is also represented on the American flag by 7 red and 6 white stripes; the fifty-two 5-pointed stars represent the former number of states in the union.

## THE GOVERNMENT

The nation's governing documents are the Constitution of the United States, signed in 1787 and its first 10 Amendments<sup>1</sup> - also called the Bill of Rights - that were ratified in 1787. These documents encompass<sup>2</sup> fundamental democratic freedoms such as the freedom of speech, press, assembly<sup>3</sup> as well as the right to your own religion.

Altogether there have been 26 Amendments to the Constitution. For example the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment prohibits slavery<sup>4</sup> and grants black people the right to vote, the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment gives franchise<sup>5</sup> to women and the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment reduced the voting age to 18 years.

The United States has a federal form of government, where powers are divided between the federal government and the states. The legislative powers of the federal government belong to the Congress, which consists of the House of Representatives with its 435 members and the Senate with two representatives from each state.

A member of the House of Representatives must be at least 25 years old, must be a resident of the represented state and must have been a citizen of this state for at least 7 years. Members get elected for a term of two years every

even-numbered year.

The Senate consists of 2 senators from each state who are elected for a period of six years. Senators have to be at least 30 years old, must have residency in the concerned state and must have been citizens of the United States for at least 9 years.

The Congress issues laws dealing with taxes, borrowing, international and domestic business, bankruptcy, weights and measures, post offices and roads, courts inferior to the Supreme Court<sup>6</sup>, armed forces and similar related issues.

All bills passed by both houses are forwarded to the president, who has the right to veto them. If the president chooses to veto a bill however, it may still be passed by a two-thirds vote in both houses.

The president has to be a "natural born citizen" who is at least 35 years old and has been a US resident for at least 14 years. He is elected directly for a period of 4 years; this period can be renewed once. The president assigns<sup>7</sup> secretaries to lead executive branches of departments including (since 1997) agriculture, commerce, defense, education, energy, health and human services, housing and human development, interior, justice, labor, state, transportation, treasury and veterans' affairs.

## POLITICAL PARTIES

Since the 1960's there have been two major political parties in the United States - the Republican and the Democratic Party.

Traditionally, the Republican Party is more concerned with business interests and therefore is mostly supported by business entities. On the other hand the Democratic party is supported by so called blue-collar workers<sup>8</sup>, because it favors a decrease in working hours, for instance. In contrast, the Republicans favor the

enhancement<sup>9</sup> of the private sector of the economy, while the Democrats generally underline the need for greater government participation and regulatory authority especially at federal level.

### THE JUDICIARY

The judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, makes sure that laws are constitutional.

**The Supreme Court**  
Nine Supreme Court judges are appointed for life.

**The Federal Courts**  
There are twelve courts of appeal and ninety-one district courts.



### THE LEGISLATURE

Congress consists of:

**The House of Representatives**  
with 435 representatives elected for two years.

**The Senate**  
with 100 senators elected for six years.

Congress:

- proposes and approves federal laws.
- can declare war.
- approves the choice of federal judges and the cabinet.

### THE EXECUTIVE

#### The President

- is elected for four years with the vice president.
- chooses the fourteen cabinet members who head departments, such as Justice, Defense, or Education.
- chooses who will run as vice president.
- appoints federal judges.
- chooses heads of agencies such as the FBI and CIA.
- proposes laws, and approves federal laws after Congress has approved them.
- is advised by the cabinet about foreign and domestic affairs.
- chooses US ambassadors to foreign countries.
- is responsible for relations with foreign countries.
- is commander in chief of armed forces.

#### The Vice President

- leads the Senate and combined meetings of both houses of Congress.
- becomes president if the president must leave office.
- serves on special government committees.

#### The Cabinet

Together with the president, the cabinet members form the government. They advise the president on issues related to their departments.