



# NEWS IN EDUCATION

NIE 4-Week Lesson Series: All About Elections & Government - Week 1

## Week 1: Government Basics: Why You Should Care

You may be asking the question, “Why should I care about politics?” After all, what happens in Washington, D.C. doesn’t really concern you.

But did you know that everything that happens in our government streams down to affect the lives of every American citizen? It may not occur instantly, but eventually, each one of us will see the consequences of the laws our leaders set - the legislation that governs our nation, states, counties and communities - sometimes in very personal ways.

You should care about politics because the government affects your life. It has in the past, it is now, and it will tomorrow. The government applies to your life, the lives of your family and friends, and it will apply to future generations - your children and their children after that.

Let’s start by introducing the basics. In this lesson, we’ll talk about the branches of federal government, explore state and local government and learn about some of the issues they handle, and find out a few of the ways the government affects our lives.

Let’s start with the three main branches of national government.

### NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

#### Government Branches

The Constitution of the United States separates the government into three branches. This is done to ensure that no individual or group holds too much power. Each branch works with and relies on the other branches to carry out legislation.

The Legislative Branch makes and drafts laws. This branch is comprised of:

- Congress
  - **The Senate** - Each state in America has two elected Senators. There are 100 total senators in the country. Each term is six years long, and there is no limit to the number of terms a senator can serve.
  - **The House of Representatives** - America has 435 elected Representatives. These individuals are divided among the 50 states according to each state's total population. Each term is two years long, and there is no limit to the number of terms a representative can serve.
- **Special agencies and offices that support Congress**

The Executive Branch executes and enforces the laws made by the legislative branch. This branch is comprised of:

- **The President** - The President is the head of the country. The President's term is four years long, and is limited to two terms, being elected no more than two times.
- **The Vice President** - The Vice President acts as the President's right hand. The Vice President's term is four years long, and there is no limit to the number of terms he or she can serve, even under a different President.
- **The Cabinet** - This group is comprised of the Vice President, heads of executive departments, and other government officials. They serve as advisors to the President. The President nominates cabinet members and each must be approved by the Senate.
- **Other Departments, Agencies, Boards and Committees**

The Judicial Branch interprets the meaning of laws, applies them to individual cases, and determines if they violate the Constitution, like America's court. This branch is comprised of:

- **The Supreme Court** - There are nine members who make up the Supreme Court - A Chief Justice, and eight Associate Justices. The President nominates the supreme court members and each must be approved by the Senate. There are no terms for Justices. Each will serve until their death, retirement, or removal in exceptional circumstances.

- **Other Federal Courts & Judicial Agencies** - According to the Constitution, other federal courts established by Congress are appointed to handle cases involving federal laws.

The national government handles many issues on behalf of the entire country. It leaves other issues to the state government to handle. Your specific state may handle an issue differently than other states. Additionally, a state may have rules pertaining to a specific issue, yet these rules may further differ by county, and city.

For example, the state of Colorado recently legalized the use of marijuana for recreational and medical purposes in their state. Yet, cities and counties in the state of Colorado may set their own rules and regulations pertaining to marijuana use. This means that residents of the state of Colorado will need to verify their individual county and city regulations before they buy, sell, or use marijuana.

## STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Each **state government** is set up in the same way as the national government. State governments are also made up of the three branches: Legislative, Executive, and Judicial.

State governments share power with the federal government in many ways. On the other hand, each municipal (local) government must be granted its power by the state.

**Local governments** are made up of two tiers: **counties**, and **municipalities** (towns).

Here are some of the responsibilities of **municipal governments**:

- police and fire departments
- emergency medical services
- housing services
- transportation services
- parks and recreation services
- municipal courts
- public services (streets, sewers, public signage, etc.)

Mayors, city council members and other governing individuals are elected by the people.

### Why Should I Care?

The government establishes the laws regarding health insurance, which affects which doctor you see, how much you pay to go to the doctor, how soon you can be treated for an emergency, how much you'll pay for procedures, medications and medical services, or if you can even afford health services at all.

The government establishes tax regulations, which affects why there is always a percentage of money taken out of your paycheck, where that money goes and what its used for, why you have to pay taxes when you make purchases, and how those taxes are based on which state you live in and what county.

The government establishes laws regarding highways and roads, which affects how you get to the places you need to go, how long it takes to travel, and how much traffic you will encounter.

The government establishes legal age, which affects when you can drive, drink alcohol, vote, or get married and in what ways you'll be penalized for doing any of these things before you're old enough.

The government establishes when our country will engage with other countries and how we will do so, which affects our safety, whether or not we will send troops to fight, when we will send them, and the future of our nation.

National, state and county governments set these and many other laws for every American citizen. Everything that the government does will ultimately trickle down and affect the individual lives of Americans, including you and your family.

You should care about what happens in government, because you care about yourself, your friends and family, and your fellow American citizens.

In next week's lesson, we'll talk about political parties and their differing stances on issues.

Source: <https://www.usa.gov>