

# US Institutions: Checks and Balances

The United States of America is a Federal Union of fifty states and the District of Columbia. The federal government is based on the Constitution and has three branches: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. Each of these branches has some authority to act on its own but it is also regulated by the other two to guarantee democracy (the "checks and balances" principle). The Constitution also limits the powers of the federal government, and it provides a great authority to the individual states. The seat of the federal government is in the federal district of Washington, D.C.

## The Executive branch: The President



The President of the U.S.A. resides in the White House and is the Head of State, the Head of Government, the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, and he carries out the decisions taken by Congress. He may originate legislation which must then be approved by Congress, but in times of emergency and in foreign affairs he can act on his own. A number of Secretaries, each in charge of a Department, assists the President in the administration of the nation. The best known of

them is the Secretary of State, who deals with foreign affairs. The President is elected for a four-year term, at the end of which he can be re-elected.

## The Legislative Branch: The Congress

The American Congress, like most parliaments, consists of two houses: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The House of Representatives consists of 435 members, each serving for a two-year term. Representatives are elected with regard to population of the states. In contrast, each state elects two Senators, regardless of population, so in the Senate there are 100 senators for a six-year term.

The House of Representatives is presided over by the Speaker and Congress meets in the Capitol in Washington, DC.



## The Judicial Branch: The Supreme Court



The Supreme Court is the judicial body of the federal system and deals with problems between states, and interpretation of the Constitution.

U.S. judges are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Each State has also its individual court systems separate but not entirely independent from the Supreme Court.

Now answer these questions:

1. How many States are there in the U.S.A?
2. What is the "Checks and Balances" principle and what does it guarantee?
3. What is the role of the American Constitution in the US federal system?
4. What is Congress and where does it meet?
5. Who is the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces and where does he live?
6. Which Secretary is best known and what does he deal with?
7. What is the role of Secretaries?
8. How many people sit in the Senate and why in such a number?

9. Who is the Speaker?

10. Which are, in your opinion, the main differences between the American and the Italian institutional systems? Give examples.