

1. US Constitution

a) Origins:

- oldest written constitution in force → model for lots of younger constitutions
- created in 1787, replacing an older version of 1781 which had only created a loose confederation between the 13 former British colonies (Delaware, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, North&South Carolina, Georgia)

b) Basic ideas:

- sovereignty lies with the people → emphasizes fundamental rights of people as laid down in Amendments 1-10 (= “Bill of rights “of 1791); amendment = addition to the constitution)
 - establishes representative democracy and a federal system: power divided between central government and states
 - based on principle of separation of powers: legislative (Congress, 2 houses), executive (President), judicial (Courts, Supreme Court) branch
 - system of checks and balances (3 branches limit and control each other)
 - flexible: can be changed through an amendment (and decisions taken by judges) → initiated by 2/3 of congress or by 2/3 of the states; ratification if 3/4 of the states agree
- in the 1780s lots of discussions about the shape of the new US Parliament lead to the “Great compromise”: legislative branch consists of two houses (one representing the people, one representing the individual states)

c) Bill of rights, 1791: includes first ten amendments to the constitution

- guarantees the basic rights of the citizens: freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, petition, equal justice, freedom/security of citizens (right to bear arms, no unlawful search of house)

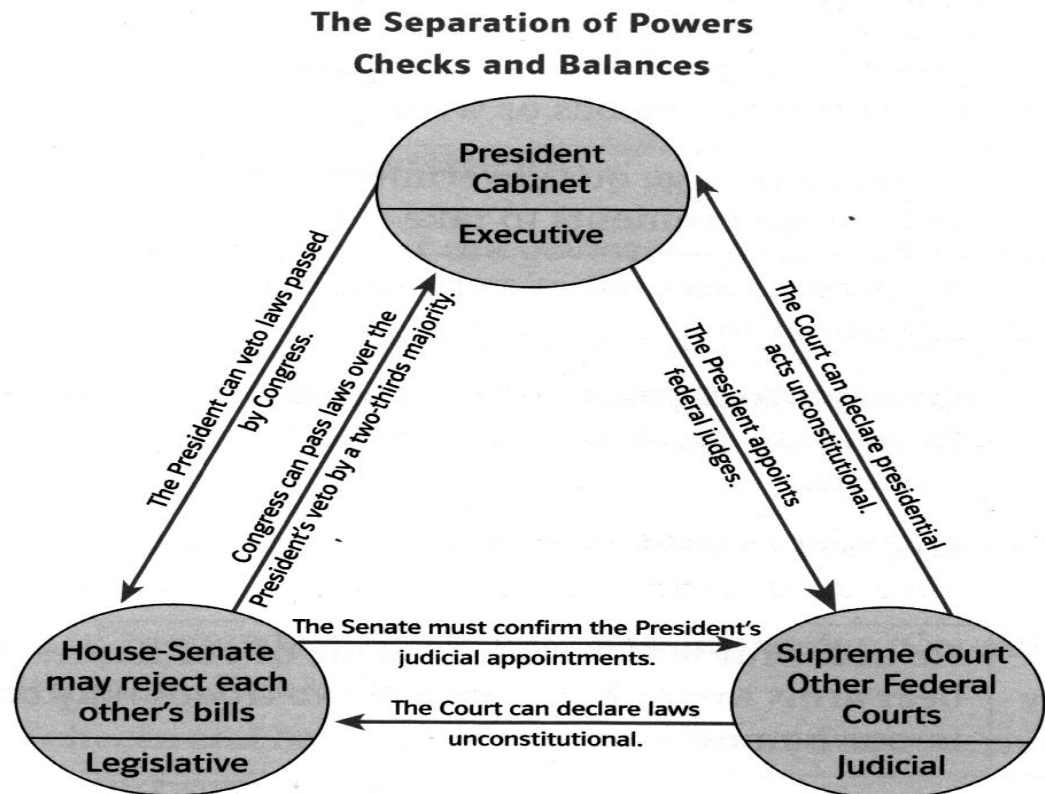
d) Importance:

- source of patriotism and identification → has shaped modern American political identity (weapons)
- symbol of stability (it has survived for nearly 240 years!)
- ideals it expresses have served as a model for the western world (government is to serve, not to rule, equality etc.)

e) Checks and balances:

- President: veto, appoints judges
- Congress: passes laws over Presidential veto by 2/3 majority; confirms judges
- Federal Courts: can declare Presidential acts and laws unconstitutional;

2. The President:



a) basics:

- native-born, at least 35, resident of US for at least 14 years
- usually white Protestant, JFK first Catholic in 1960, Obama first black

b) election:

- indirect: voters vote for electors in individual states (number of electors per state equals the number of congressmen + Senators of the respective state) → 535 electors form the Electoral college (= body that formally elects President)
- election according to winner-takes-it-all principle: majority in a state → wins all elector votes
- voters must be registered
- campaign begins ca. 1 ½ years before election day: Candidates of party travel country and raise funds, establish connections with local party members
- in each state either primaries (= elections in which people decide which candidate of each party they favour) or party conventions (meetings of party members)
- Candidate of each party is nominated at national party congress in summer of election year
- election (of the electors) takes place on the first Tuesday after first the Monday in November
- after election old President is called a “lame duck”, new one = “President Elect”

- electors of each state meet 41 days after election and cast their votes in Washington – they are obliged to act according to voters' will
- inauguration of new President takes place in Washington on Jan. 20, when new President takes an oath on the constitution in front of the Capitol (= Congress)

current problems:

- campaigns are very expensive → fund-raising may bring candidates under influence of rich individuals or groups/companies/lobbies
- media are very influential– looks/image more important than competence/content etc.
- indirect system outdated: modern voters have the means to get the info they need to decide for themselves
- Trump/Republicans seem to be about to considerably damage democracy in the USA (fight against free press; gerrymandering; dismantling of US administration, customs barriers, flirting with authoritarian/totalitarian leaders like Putin etc.)

c) powers:

- head of state
- Head of government (= chief executive): proposes laws/programmes to Congress, appoints Federal judges, informs Congress on state of the nation and economy, prepares federal budget, approves of bills passed by Congress (suspensive veto can only be overruled by 2/3 majority in Congress);
- conducts foreign policy
- CiC of armed forces (decides about troop deployments, but only Congress can declare war)
- Leader of his party (not important)
- chooses members of Cabinet

d) Cabinet

- 14 departments, not responsible to Congress but to President
- President only responsible to Constitution, can only be removed by impeachment in Congress (= trial against President)
- cannot dissolve Congress
- President cannot count on majority on Congress (often the other way round)

3. Congress:

- consists of two houses, so there is a bi-cameral system of legislative; this is to reflect will of both the American people + individual states
- Senate: consists of 2 Senators per state (at least 30 yrs. old), 6 years term of office, 1/3 elected every two years
- 100 Senators

- House of Representative: 435 Congressmen (at least 25 years old), 2 years term of office, elected in individual constituency of USA (of approximately same size: ca. 500.000 constituents; but considerable gerrymandering in states dominated by Republicans)
- main powers: propose bills, pass laws, impeach President
- majority party chooses leader of the House (=Speaker)
- most work is done in committees

Advantages of bi-cameral system:

- obstacle against too fast legislation
 - reflects will of people + interest of states
- ➔ constant struggle between President and Congress: (e.g. Trump threatened to veto the federal budget for 2019 if he didn't get enough money for his border wall - and without a federal budget all the agencies, departments etc. have to close down)

4. Judicial branch:

- system of federal courts and state courts
- federal courts deal with cases concerning the US as a whole (e.g. terrorism, organized crime etc.)

a) Supreme Court:

- highest court of US, court of final appeal
- 9 justices appointed for life by President, confirmed by Senate
- decisions must be unanimous
- political influence rather high: the term "Judicial Review" refers to the fact that the Supreme Court has the authority to declare laws unconstitutional ➔ guards and interprets constitution

4. Party system:

- Over the years a two-party system has developed (though lots of others exist, but are meaningless, e.g. Communist Party, Green Party, NSDAP-AO)
- Since 19th century constant fight between Democrats and Republicans
- Democrats: donkey as emblem: supporters mainly in big cities, South, along the East and West Coast; represent the poor, working-class (though part of them follows Trump today), immigrants, minorities
- Republicans: Elephant as emblem; strongholds are Northeast, suburbs, countryside; represent middle class, the rich, WASPs, businesspeople, change over the last 15 years: has become more radical, populist (Matt Gaetz, Marjorie Taylor-Greene etc.); support Trump without asking critical questions