

AMERICAN POLITICS FOR DUMMIES CHEAT SHEET (UK EDITION)

The US Constitution, which was born not just of debate but of blood, sweat, and tears, created a unique system of government, one that can be difficult to grasp. This Cheat Sheet shows you an outline of that progress, the philosophy behind the system, and the structure of the government it created.

BECOMING AMERICA TIMELINE: FROM FIRST SETTLERS TO AN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT

Things had to get ugly between the British colonists who first settled in America and their ruling government overseas before the new nation could emerge. Here are some key dates within that process:

- 1607: Jamestown became the first permanent English settlement.
- 1620: English Separatists founded the Plymouth Colony in what is now Massachusetts; the Mayflower Compact is their governing document and a blueprint for colonies to come.

- 1774: The first Continental Congress convenes in Philadelphia to issue a declaration of grievances to the British government, including unfair taxation and trade restrictions.
 - 1775: British rulers responded with the “shot heard round the world,” seizing weapons from the colonists; Second Continental Congress convenes and appoints George Washington as general and commander in chief of the new Continental Army.
 - 1776: The Congress releases the Declaration of Independence, a statement of rebellion against the British; the Congress assumes the responsibilities of a government.
 - 1782: The Battle of Yorktown effectively ends the Revolutionary War; the Anglo-American Treaty establishes peace between the British and Americans.
 - 1783: England officially declares an end to hostilities; the Treaty of Paris recognizes America as a new nation.
 - 1789: After much debate and some false starts, the Constitution of the United States goes into effect.
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WHAT ARE THE LEVELS OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?

For good or ill, government is everywhere in America and functioning at local, state and federal layers throughout the length and breadth of the country.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE US

The state governments confer authority on the local governments to deal with specific issues through state-made legislation. Americans have more contact with the local government than with the state or federal governments. Local government is organised in four main layers:

- **County:** A county's function is to administer state laws within a particular geographic location. It has a number of responsibilities including managing most public services such as parks, hospitals, fire services, libraries, schools, courts, roads and law enforcement. Births, deaths and marriages are also recorded at the county level.
- **Townships:** These are traditionally rural geographic locations that are a subdivision of the county; sometimes they're just a different name for a town or city. Most townships have an elected board that includes supervisors who run local services such as rubbish collection and road maintenance; some even include the fire and police services.
- **Municipalities:** Similar in most states to townships, municipalities are usually a fancy name for an administrative area that's a city or a town. Municipal governments often have elected mayors serving as the executive and elected councillors serving as legislators. They're in charge of running most public services that an average person will come into contact with during their daily lives.
- **Special districts:** These subdivisions of government provide a specialist function within a particular geographic location. Functions include education, waste management and transportation. They're unique entities and even have tax-raising powers to provide the services they cover. School districts, for example, are run by school boards, which can be elected or appointed and are responsible for determining policy issues such as what textbooks the schools can purchase and the ratio of students per teacher.

STATE GOVERNMENT

The US Constitution designates all powers not given to the federal government to the states and the people, including those not even thought of yet. The United States is comprised of 50 states, so 50 state governments exist; however, there are also two state-level governments operating in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. State governments are modelled similarly to the federal government system and include three branches:

- **Executive branch:** The top executive official is the governor, who shares executive power with a number of other officials, including the lieutenant governor (second-in-command), secretary of state (business and election official), attorney general (chief legal officer who prosecutes those who violate commercial law), treasurer (runs the state's finances) and commissioner of agriculture (promotes state produce and ensures safety in the industry). All governors are elected through popular vote (typically every four years); the other positions are elected in some states and appointed in others.
- **Legislative branch:** Each state has its own legislature wherein the elected members can propose bills to become law, raise taxes and receive proposals for legislation from the governor. It plays the same role as does the legislature in the federal system.
- **Judiciary:** This system deals with state constitutional issues and statutes (laws made by the legislative assembly), as well as US constitutional issues and statutes. The kinds of cases heard by these courts include most criminal cases, personal injuries, family law (marriage, divorce and so on), and most contract and probate (wills and estates of dead people) cases.

US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Unlike the multiple numbers of local and state governments, only one federal government exists. And its role is to run, not just one small geographic location, but the entire country. It's a big task, and one carried out by five divisions:

- **Executive Office of the President:** Overseen by the president's Chief of Staff, this office provides the president with the support he needs to make executive decisions. Its remit ranges from promoting US trade interests throughout the world to providing advice on national security. Currently 11 principal offices exist, including the White House Office.
- **Executive departments:** These are cabinet-level offices headed up by a secretary who is appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Each of the departments concentrates on particular policy areas and has its own budget and staff. Examples include Department of Defense and Department of Education.

- **Independent executive agencies:** These agencies usually perform specialised functions, and are independent from executive control. They include the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which operates to protect the US from international threats.
 - **Independent regulatory agencies:** These agencies also perform specialised duties by administering laws and regulating important industries and businesses that affect the public. They're typically run by a board or commission of people, and are independent from presidential influence. They include the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which protects human health and the natural environment by making and enforcing environmental laws, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which regulates business practices and monopolies. It also includes the National Labor Relations Board detailed above.
 - **Government corporations:** These are legal entities established by the federal government to provide public services. They're commercial, for-profit enterprises completely independent from government, although they may receive federal funding as well as charge for services in order to operate. They include the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, otherwise known as Amtrak, which is the railroad service, and the US Postal Service.
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TYPES OF FEDERALISM, THE BASIS FOR AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Because the power to interpret the Constitution of the United States by the various branches and levels of government is a central component of the American political system, federalism has been defined in different ways at different periods in history:

- **Dual federalism (1790s to 1930s):** Also known as *layer cake federalism*, dual federalism refers to a system in which the two levels of government operate separately, and is pretty much the bog-standard definition of how the

framers intended it to be interpreted. The powers of government are split between the federal and state levels in order to preserve a balance between the two.

- **Co-operative federalism (around 1930 to 1960):** This system, also called *marble cake federalism*, implies that the federal and state governments share power equally in order to resolve common problems collectively and was popular all the way through the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War and up until the 1960s. During these testing times, the country needed the two levels of government to work together. Lines between the two governments' powers are blurred within this approach.
- **Creative federalism (approximately 1960 to 1980):** Also known as *picket fence federalism*, creative federalism allows the federal government to decide what the states need, and then provide them with the resources. It shifted power to the federal government, and is evidenced in the Johnson administration's social and welfare reforms in the 1960s, whereby federal funding to states was contingent on adopting a series of federally determined objectives.
- **New federalism (around 1980 to 2001):** In response to the states' loss of power during creative federalism, new federalism included a reassertion of powers going back to the state and local governments in order to create a new balance between the two. One principal vehicle for this shift was to remove the conditionality on federally provided block grants to enable states to choose how to prioritise what they should be spent on.
- **Bush federalism (2001 to 2008):** Although not technically a form of federalism, Bush federalism demonstrated an increasing level of federal interference in state issues. The drive for greater national security legitimised increasing federal powers over US citizens and states such as the passing of the Patriot Act in late 2001 (which strengthened federal powers to ensure US national security but also included giving the FBI the power to search the library records of American citizens).

- **Progressive federalism (2009 to present):** Claimed as a system by the Obama administration, progressive federalism provides states with greater control over issues previously reserved for the federal government, such as environmental and consumer protection. It supports state tailoring of federal regulations in these areas, such as the stricter regulations on vehicle emissions introduced by California. In effect, the federal government sets a benchmark with which the state has to comply and the state can then choose if it wants to go further.