

3.8 The Political System of the USA

Why the USA? The United States of America are viewed positively by many: as the land of Hollywood, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Facebook, Bill Gates, Google, etc. There are elements of the **American way of life** found all over the world.

The American Way of Life

This refers to a way of life that is seen as typical for the United States. This includes the idea that everyone - regardless of background - can improve his standard of living by hard work and striving for success. The lifestyle is characterized by the love of freedom, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness and prosperity.



Figure 1: Billboard advertisement for the "American Way of Life" in California in 1937

At the same time there is also a negative attitude towards American politics and culture (= anti-Americanism). Prejudices are prevalent among critics: "Americans are intruding everywhere", "They are far too fat", "They have no education", "They create havoc with their unbridled capitalism all over the world."

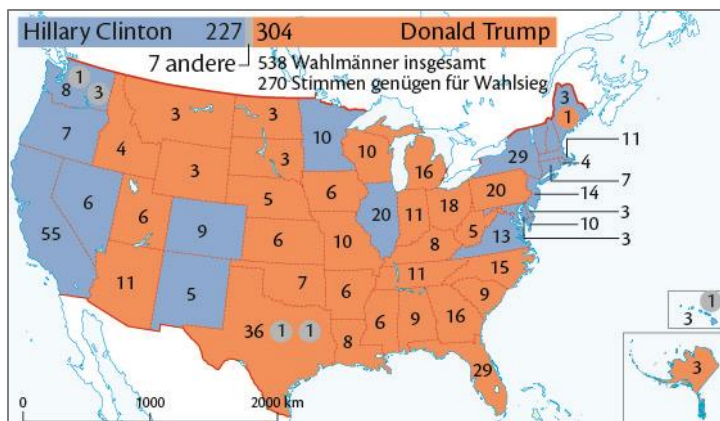
The United States have risen to a superpower since the end of World War II. Their foreign policy practices are globally influential. This influence is felt mainly in the areas of energy and military policy. "World police USA"? What examples of global US-influence do you know?

Taking this background into account, the American political system has special significance. Domestic political decisions are not limited to the United States, and presidential elections in the USA always have global importance.

Is the United States a democracy?

The USA is considered to be the first country of modern Western democracy. The constitution dates back to 1787 (at that time in Europe, absolutism prevailed) and has been a model for the constitutions of many other countries. The principles of democratic voting for all citizens, however, took time to become properly established in the United States. Until the mid-19th century, the right to vote was limited to the middle and upper class white men. In 1920 women also gained the right to vote. Native and Black Americans, however, were excluded until the 1960s.

The electoral system in the United States follows the rules of a majority voting system. The entire country is divided into constituencies, which correspond to the 50 US states. In the presidential election, every constituency is allocated a certain number of electors according to its population. For example, California has 55, while the small state of Delaware has only 3. The President is not elected directly, but by the Electoral College. In each state, a relative majority (even less than 50%) of votes is sufficient to get the votes of all electors. All state - posted electors belong to the candidate with the most votes. This is 'The winner takes it all' principle. The relative majority vote applies to elections to congress, too. Smaller parties have almost no chance of winning a mandate at all.



The Constitution of the United States

The principles of the constitution have hardly changed since 1787. The major institutions are:

- ▶ the Office of President (the first President was George Washington)
- ▶ Parliament (= Congress), which is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate
- ▶ the Supreme Court, comprising of nine federal judges

In contrast to Austria, the United States is a presidential system. This means the government is not politically responsible to the Parliament, and the President has significantly more power than the Austrian President. At the centre of this system are the elections. In addition to the election of the President, there is an election for Congress. The representatives of the House of Representatives and the Senate are directly elected every two years (not the parties). Here, the majority rule also applies.

An essential element of the political system in the USA is the principle of "checks and balances". In order to maintain the separation of powers, there is a mutual control of state institutions. The different centres of power (President, House of Representatives, and Senate) have a system of checks, which gives them the opportunity to prevent a concentration of power. The President can, for example, veto legislation from Congress. Congress can initiate impeachment against the President and the Chief Justice. The Supreme Court reviews the laws to see if they are constitutional.

The United States is a federalist state. The principle of separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial branches exists in each state. The governor is like the president directly elected by the people.

The judicial system is distinguished by the special position of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The nine judges are appointed to this lifetime position by the President, with the consent of the Senate. They make decisions about significant socio-political issues, for example, questions of racial segregation, the possibility of same-sex marriage, abortion or capital punishment. This gives the courts great political power.

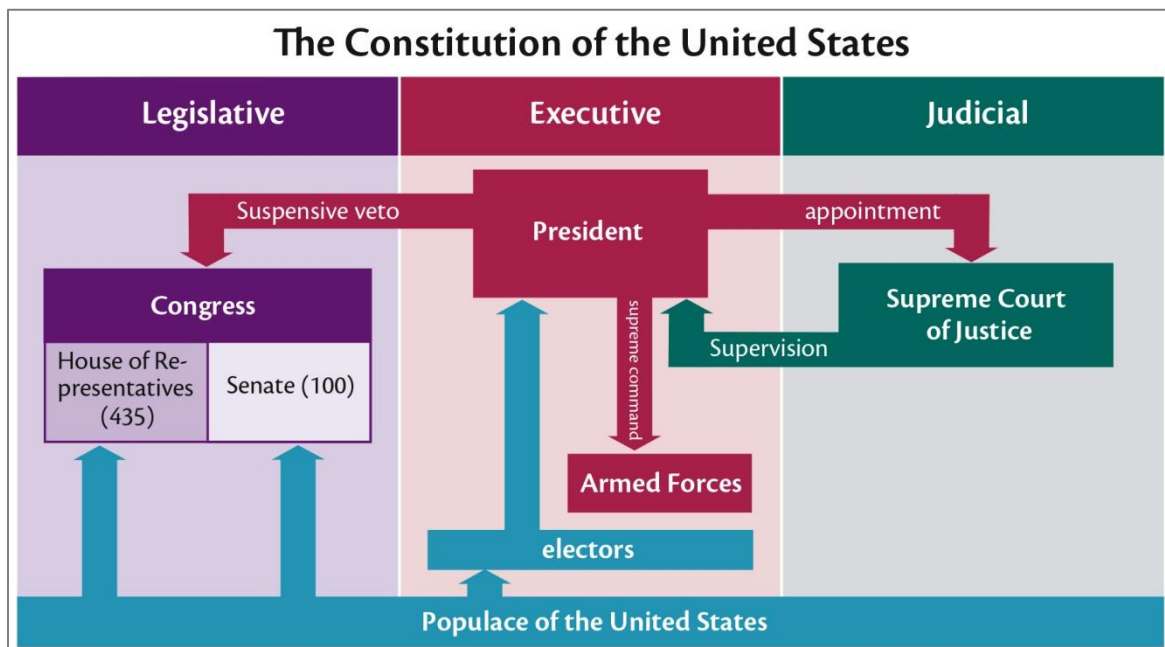


Figure 3: The United States political system

The President - a special role

On a national level, the president is comparatively powerful, and at the same time has enormous external importance. He or she is elected every four years, and an immediate re-election is possible. The president is at the same time head of state, commander in chief of the army, party leader and responsible for American foreign policy. As Chief Executive, he is head of the State Administration. As head of the government, legislative initiatives come from him. His office is endowed with high prestige. He is also expected to lead the country economically and act as a crisis manager when necessary.

Democrats and Republicans

The President is either Democrat or Republican. The US American system is a true two-party system. Other parties do exist, but because of majority voting, they have not been able to assert themselves to this day. The Republicans identify themselves as conservatives. They stand for American

entrepreneurship, and traditional values such as national pride, religion and family. The Democrats can be described as liberal. They represent the rights of minorities and are committed to the socially disadvantaged. A strong state is important to them.

Issue	Democrats	Republicans
Ideology	liberal, progressive	conservative
State	centralized; more duties for the Federal Government in Washington	federalist; more self-government in the Federal States
Business	tax increases for the rich	tax cuts mainly for the rich
Social Welfare	strong state with social security	self-responsibility of the individual; market principle
Society	abortion rights, same-sex marriage; equality for all sections of the population	against abortion; tough criminal sentences; pro death penalty; right to bear arms; against same-sex marriage.
Environment	emphasis on environmental policy; emphasis on alternative energies	doubt about climate change; environmental concerns harm economic interests
Supporters	working class, ethnic minorities, middle class	provincial town dwellers, active Christians and white Protestants, strong support from the military and the economic bourgeoisie
Strongholds	populous States on the Pacific coast; Northeast; Great Lakes Region	small towns; smaller States inside the United States; the Southern states

Figure 4: A comparison of Democratic and Republican Political Culture in the United States

Political Culture in the USA

The political system is based on individualism and liberalism. Therefore, state intervention in economics and private life is not typical, and goes against the self-image of the United States. This can be seen in, amongst other things, the lack of a state social welfare system. Liberalism is also the basis for the economic system, which is characterized by a market economy, or capitalism. Although the general public's acceptance of the political system is very high in the USA, the voter turnout is low compared to Europe. Political culture in the United States includes pronounced patriotism and national pride.

An essential aspect of American political culture is **lobbying**. It is an integral part of the legislative process. The gun lobby, for example, is committed to ensuring that weapons may continue to be sold

to private individuals without limitations. Powerful industrial lobbies, such as the tobacco, automobile, or nuclear industries, employ lucrative agencies to enforce their individual interests in the Act of Congress.

Lobbying

This refers to the representation of special interest groups in society and politics. It is an attempt to influence political decisions in advance (lobby = the Parliamentary entrance hall).

The influence of religion in society and politics is enormous, too. In the Bible Belt, which extends over the Southern United States, Protestant fundamentalism is widespread. The population in this region predominantly vote conservative.

Tasks:**3.8.A The American Way of Life**

*In this unit you will learn about the political system of the USA. **In groups of four** do some brainstorming: What do you associate with the American Way of Life? What do you think of it? Write three positive aspects on the three green post-its and three negative aspects on the three red post-its separately. Appoint a speaker to present your points.*

3.8.B Key lexis

*There are topic-specific words you have to know before we move on. **Form groups of four** and do the memory. See who gets the most pairs.*

3.8.C Anti-Americanism

Obviously, Anti-Americanism is not about a fact-based, critical-scientific study of the United States of North America, not even a specific criticism of concrete political decisions of a particular American government. It is not a critical comparison of the ideological foundations of the American Republic with its political reality, either. By Anti-Americanism, I rather understand a mood borne by a wider public mood – a somewhat diffuse mood that is more emotionally determined than seriously informed, a mood that is not aimed at better understanding, but one that wants to build a bogeyman in order to serve a particular current political purpose.

(Klaus Schwabe: *Archaeology of Anti-Americanism: Lecture University of Erfurt*, 24.6.2003)

Assess the phenomenon of anti-Americanism using the ideas from 4.5.A and the text as a source.

3.8.D.1 The political system of the USA (1)

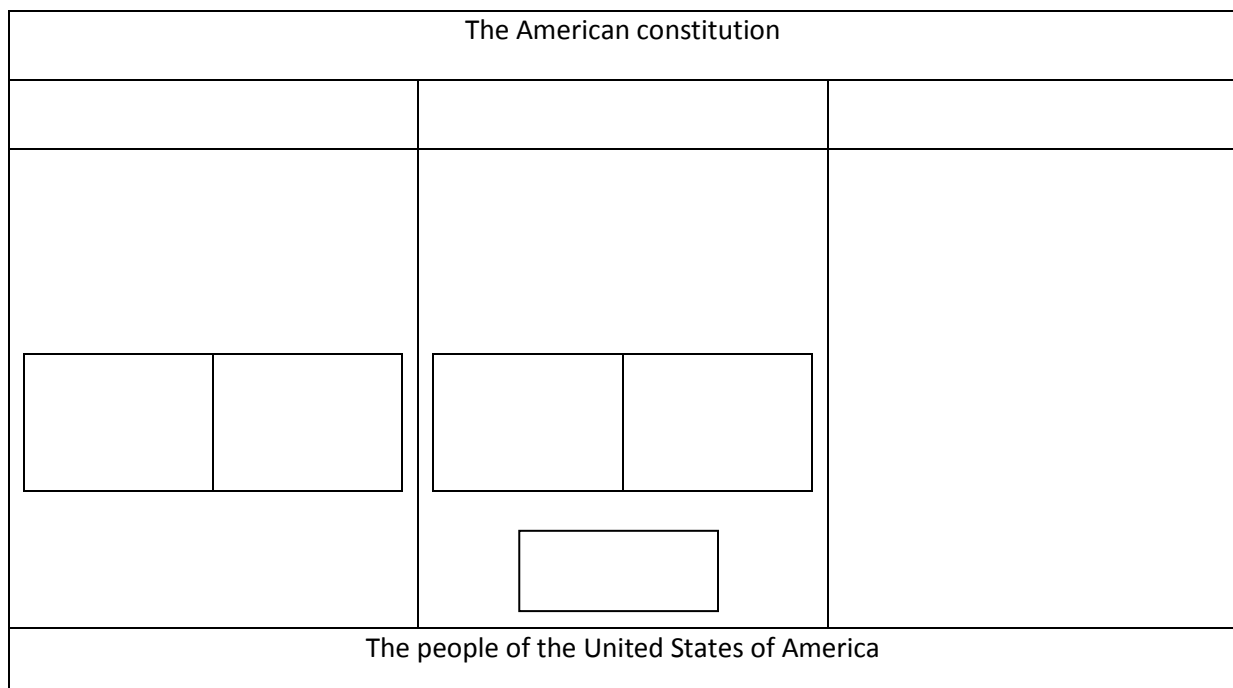
In pairs: Fill in the graph of the political system of the United States below:

The separation of powers: there is a legislative, executive and judiciary power.

According to the US constitution the legislative power is the Congress, consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The executive power is the president. He is commander – chief of the army and head of government.

The judiciary power is the Supreme Court.



Continue by using red arrows:

The House of Representatives and the Senate are elected by the people of the United States of America.

The president is not elected directly, but by the electors. These electors are elected by the people of the 50 American states. The candidate with the most votes in a certain state gets all the electors of this state.

Continue by using green arrows:

The president appoints the Supreme Court.

He is commander – chief of the army and head of the executive he appoints his government.

As head of government, legislative initiative comes from him.

Complete by orange arrows, showing the system of “checks and balances”:

The President can veto legislation from Congress.

Congress can initiate impeachment against the President and the Chief Justice.

Congress can turn down the president’s legislative initiative.

The Supreme Court reviews the laws to see if they are constitutional and controls the president.

3.8.D.2: The political system of the USA (2)

Find a partner. Your teachers will give you sheets with questions and answers. One of you is A and one is B. Ask each other the questions on your sheets and correct your partner if necessary.

3.8.D.3 The position of the president

Discuss which definition of the position of the president of the United States is best:

A: The President of the United States is very powerful, but the system of “checks and balances” can delay his political intentions.

B: The position of the American president dominates American national and international politics.

C: As head of government the American president needs the legislative support of the House of Representatives and the Senate to carry out his policy.

3.8.E Compare contemporary political systems

Compare the political systems represented in the UN Security Council States (group work). Each group adopts a political system. Use the Internet to find information about the main features, principles and characteristics of that particular political system. Be able to state the source of your information. Create a poster or a graph. Then put the groups together so that each group has an expert on one of the systems. Take turns to explain the distinctive features of the systems. Then, combine your results in the table below. Which questions remain unanswered?

Country	Executive	Legislative	Judicial
USA			
United Kingdom			
France			
Russia			
China			

Glossary

checks and balances	gegenseitige Kontrolle	<i>Mutual checks and balances guarantee the separation of powers.</i>
chief executive	oberster Verwaltungsbeamter	<i>As the chief executive the president is the head of Administration.</i>
constituency	Wahlkreis	<i>Each state is a constituency.</i>
constitution	Verfassung	<i>democratic constitution</i>
to create havoc	Schaden anrichten	
domestic political decisions	innenpolitische Entscheidungen	
elections	Wahlen	
Electoral College	Wahlmännergremium	<i>The Electoral College consists of all state-posted electors.</i>
electoral system	Wahlsystem	
electors	Wahlmänner	<i>Each state has a certain number of electors related to its size and population.</i>
federal judge	Bundesrichter/in	
House of Representatives	Repräsentantenhaus	
impeachment	Anklage auf Amtsenthebung	
majority voting	Mehrheitswahlrecht	<i>The electoral system is characterized by a majority voting.</i>
presidential system	Präsidialsystem	<i>In a presidential system the president has much power and is not responsible to the parliament.</i>
prosperity	Wohlstand	<i>Everybody strives for prosperity.</i>
pursuit of happiness	Streben nach Glück	<i>The pursuit of happiness is a principle of the American way of life.</i>
right to vote	Wahlrecht	<i>The right to vote was limited to the white.</i>
Senate	Senat	<i>The House of Representatives and the Senate make up the parliament.</i>
separation of powers	Gewaltenteilung	<i>The separation of powers is the basic principle of modern western democracy.</i>

state-posted elector	von einem Bundesstaat entsandter Wahlmann	
state social welfare system	staatliches Sozial- und Wohlfahrtssystem	<i>A state social welfare system is often regarded as negative.</i>
Supreme Court	Oberster Gerichtshof	
unbridled capitalism	ungezügelter Kapitalismus	<i>They create havoc with unbridled capitalis.</i>
voter turnout	Wahlbeteiligung	<i>The voter turnout is fairly low.</i>