

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Let's see what Magda Dusseck, a student from Stanford University in California, has to say about the US system of government and US politics. After reading what she says, and maybe listening to the questions and answers, join a partner in your class and ask each other the 13 questions, and try to answer without looking in the textbook.

Thirteen Questions about Politics in the USA

1. Why is the USA a republic, and not a monarchy?

When the original thirteen colonies rebelled against England, they not only said “good-bye” to king George III but also to the very thought of ever having a king again. In the Constitution they built a political system where no person, individually, could decide too much, and where the head of state, the president, should be elected – a republic, not a monarchy. That was the beginning of the USA. Later on, millions of immigrants came to the USA to escape from political persecution, usually from kings, princes or emperors, and supported a republic wholeheartedly.

2. What is the relationship between the states and the central government?

This is a good question because it focuses on one of the special features of US government! The Constitution says that central government (or “federal government” as it is called) should have quite a lot of power but not too much! The writers of the Constitution made a list of what the federal government could do – things like organising defense, foreign policy, trade and America's currency – and said that all other things should be decided by the states, or by cities and counties. In fact, federal power has increased in the last 200 years, but there are still very many important big decisions made at state level, such as education. This balance between federal and state authority is called “federalism”, and you'd better bear it in mind if you want to understand US politics!

3. I have heard about “the separation of powers”. Could you explain what it is?

Ah, another good question. You remember I said no one should get too much power? Well, back in 1787 the Constitution divided power between three branches. You have the president, elected by the people. Then you have Congress, which is also elected. Thirdly you have the Supreme Court. Each of these three branches has some control over the other two. So power is divided between them. It is sometimes called a system of “checks and balances.” This is on the federal level – that is, for the whole USA. Now each of the fifty states has its own Governor and its own Congress and its own courts – the same separation of powers. Of course, the president in the White House carries more prestige than anyone else, so perhaps you should concentrate on the presidency in the next few questions.

constitution grunnlov
persecution /ˌpɜːsɪˈkjuːʃn/ forfølgelse/forfølgning
wholeheartedly helhjertet/heilhjarta
currency /ˈkʌrənsi/ valuta
branch grein

4. Who can become President?

To join the race, or “run for president” as we call it, you have to be born an American citizen, to have lived at least 14 years in the USA and be at least 35 years old. And of course to be president you must win the presidential election! This means that you first have to be chosen as the candidate of one of the two major parties, because independent candidates have no real chance.

5. How do you become a party's candidate?

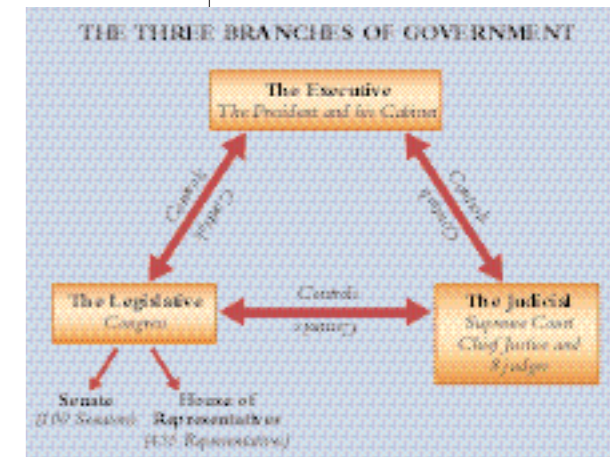
The two big parties are the Democrats and the Republicans – and each chooses its presidential candidate every four years for the presidential election. For all those in the race it is an exhausting time: weeks and weeks of making speeches, giving interviews, visiting different states, shaking thousands of hands and kissing hundreds of babies. You have to smile and look attractive and seem trustworthy. The focus on personalities is strong. You also need a lot of money to pay for buying television time for your advertisements. So you spend a great deal of time raising funds for your own campaign. Each party organises its own elections, called primaries, and the person who wins the most primaries is chosen at the party's national convention – a huge meeting – as its presidential candidate.

6. Television is important, then?

All the media are important. A candidate has to travel all over the country – and traveling to, say, Seattle gets him into the Seattle media. But the real test is certainly to do well on national television. There are usually two or three debates between the main candidates, and it is vital to do well in these. You must look good, and sound good.

7. What about the Vice-President?

Each candidate picks his own “running-mate” – that is, the person who joins him on the ticket, and becomes vice-president if they win the election. Most candidates choose a running-mate who can spread their popularity. For example, if you are a lawyer and come from the west coast you would probably choose someone who isn't a lawyer and who doesn't come from the west coast!



exhausting /ɪgˈzɔːstɪŋ/ anstrengende, utmattende / anstrengjande, utmattande
primaries primæervalg/primæerval
vital livsviktig

The election is on “the first Tuesday after the first Monday” in November – in other words, the first Tuesday unless it falls on November 1, in which case the election is on November 8. This way the election avoids All Saints Day, November 1.

Every ten years the number of electoral college votes for each state can be changed if there have been big changes in population. It is possible to win a majority of electoral college votes without a majority of the national vote (as George W. Bush did in 2000), but this does not happen often.

In 1984 Geraldine Ferraro, a woman, was the Democrats’ vice-presidential candidate in the election that Republican Ronald Reagan, a man, won. In 2006 there is a lot of talk of Hilary Clinton, a woman, trying to become the Democrats’ presidential candidate in the 2008 election, and of Condoleezza Rice, an African-American woman, going for the Republicans’ top spot. Time will tell.

electoral college valgmannsforsamling/valmannsforsamling
appoint utnevne / nemne ut
national assembly nasjonalforsamling
chamber kammer

8. What about the actual election?

I was afraid you might ask that question! It is a bit complicated. The election is on the first Tuesday after November 1st, and all US citizens aged 18 or over can vote. The election has two stages. In the first stage there are really 50 elections, one in each state, and in each state there is one winner. Each state has a number of “electoral college votes” – how many depends on its size. For example California has 55 and Wyoming has 3. The candidate who wins most electoral college votes wins the whole election and becomes the next President. If you are already President, you can be re-elected, but only once.

9. What does the President do?

Well, he’s the leader of the most powerful country in the world, and his job combines, in a way, the tasks of king and prime minister. It is an awesome responsibility! I can’t mention everything the president does – let me just say that he makes very important decisions on foreign policy and trade agreements, proposes new laws and changes in taxation, and appoints new members to the Supreme Court. He also speaks for America in every moment of national alarm or of national pride; he is a national symbol – he is the American everyone talks about.

10. You say “he” all the time. Can a woman become President? An African-American?

Yes, but they have to win the election! So they have to be seen to have a chance by the big parties, and so far, speaking in 2006, this has never happened. I think Americans are a bit conservative when they vote. But there are women and African-Americans (and African-American women) in lots of top jobs – in the president’s Administration (as his cabinet is often called), on the Supreme Court, and so on. Personally, I am really looking forward to seeing a woman president or an African-American president in the White House!

11. You’ve mentioned Congress several times. What is it?

Congress is America’s national assembly, a sort of parliament, with two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Senate has 100 members, called, not surprisingly, Senators: two from each state. They are elected for six years each. The House of Representatives has 435 members, usually simply called Congressmen and Congresswomen. Each is elected for two years: big states have a lot of them (California has 53); small states have very few (Wyoming has 1). The main task of



Congress is to pass new laws for the whole of the USA (called federal laws) and to pass the federal budget. However, it also has – you will not be surprised to learn – powers to control the President in various ways.

12. And the Supreme Court?

This is another very special part of the US system of government. The nine justices who sit on the Supreme Court have all been chosen by a President. When one justice dies or retires, a new one is chosen. But the Senate can say “No” to a particular person, and then the President must choose someone else. These nine justices have an extremely important function – if they decide that any law in the USA, or anything done by federal or local authorities, is against the Constitution, then it has to be dropped or changed.

13. You keep talking about the Constitution. Is it so important?

Yes, it’s mighty important, and always has a capital ‘C’! It was written way back in 1787, but of course it has new bits added to it – they are called amendments. The Constitution establishes how much power the branches of government have, and establishes the balance between federal and the states’ power. It also protects the rights of the individual. And because the Supreme Court can challenge *anything* in the name of the Constitution, the Constitution is brought into every major debate in America. And, believe me, there *is* a lot of debate in America.

Thanks for your questions: thirteen in all. And very good ones, if I may say so! One for each of the stripes in the American flag! Now I have a question for you. Why are there thirteen stripes in the flag, and fifty stars?

This power is called “judicial review”. If the Supreme Court decides that the death penalty, or abortion, or the imprisonment of suspected terrorists for long periods, is against the Constitution, then America must follow. In 1954 it ruled sending black children to one school and white children to another was not in tune with the Constitution, and this ruling was one of the key moments in the struggle for civil rights in the USA..

justice justitiarius (dommer) / justitiarius (dommar)
amendment tillegg (til grunnloven)

ACTIVITIES

1 Understanding the text

True or false?

After you have decided which statements are true or false, correct the false statements so that they become true.

- a The system of checks and balances refers to power sharing in the US.
- b A presidential candidate must have lived his entire life in the US.
- c There are only three important parties in American politics.
- d The Senate has 435 members.
- e There are 50 state governors in the US.
- f The Senate consists of two houses, Congress and the House of Representatives.
- g Supreme Court judges sit for a term of 6 years.

2 Improve your language

In English, *capital letters* are used a lot more than in Norwegian. For example, all titles for individuals require capital letters (President Carter, Professor Brown, Mr Jones). You must also use capital letters for:

place names, nationalities, languages, weekdays, months, holidays, religious names, events from history, organizations and political parties

In the text below, many capital letters have disappeared. Put them back in.

One fine day in november (it was a friday, actually), prime minister James Brown and president Otis Blackwell went on a boat trip on the thames. Brown was british, of course, and he didn't like Blackwell's american accent. 'I must say, england is great,' Brown said. 'This is where the industrial revolution began and the second world war was won.'

Blackwell, who was a republican and a catholic from texas, answered drily: 'Yes, but did you also invent god and the bible?'

3 Quiz

Who is this?

A

3 points: This president is said to have chopped down one of his father's trees.
2 points: He was the commander-in-chief of the American troops during the War of Independence.
1 point: The first president of the USA.

B

3 points: This president is famous for his radio speeches called "fireside-chats".
2 points: He launched a program called "New Deal" during the Depression in the 1930s.
1 point: The longest-serving president in the history of the USA. President during WW II.

C

3 points: This president is famous for a speech now known as the Gettysburg Address.
2 points: He was president during the Civil War.
1 point: He is known as the man who banned slavery and he was shot at the theater while watching an opera a few days after the Civil War was over.

D

3 points: This president chose his own brother as attorney general in his Cabinet.
2 points: He was known for his many affairs, for instance with Marilyn Monroe.
1 point: He was assassinated in Dallas, Texas in 1963.

E

3 points: This president was best man at his own mother's third marriage. (She was married five times in all)
2 points: He avoided being drafted to the Vietnam War and was criticized for it when running for president.
1 point: He was known as a notorious womanizer and this tendency in him almost led to an impeachment during his second term as president.