

LESSON 17



# Researching Your State's Government

## *How does your state's government work?*

### Introduction

Do you see things that you would like to change in your state? Perhaps you would like to see schools get more money to fix their buildings. Maybe you would like to see somebody take better care of your state parks. Or maybe you would like to see your government support more small businesses and make your community a safer place to live.

There are always problems to worry about. Governments try to solve problems that are bigger than people can solve on their own. When our country was created, its founders had a deep fear of governments being too powerful. The country had just won independence from the too-powerful British king. The founders favored a government with limited power, so they chose a system where power would rest with different levels of government, not just one. This led to the creation of state governments, like your own.

You can have a big effect on what your state government does. But first you need to know how your state government works. In this lesson, you will learn about how power is divided within your state government and who leads our government. You will also learn how laws are created as well as rights and responsibilities that you have in your state.

### Social Studies Vocabulary

bill

citizen

federal government

legislator

local government

republic

state constitution

state government

system of checks and balances

- ◀ The state capitol building is home to your state's government. This building is the state capitol building of Texas.



Civics



Local governments provide many different services. Fire protection is one service that protects the community

**federal government** our national government that deals with issues that affect the entire country

**state government** the government of an individual state that deals with issues that affect that state

**local government** city, town, and county governments

## 1. The Federal System

Citizens of individual states are also citizens of the United States. That is because we have a federal system of government. In this system, the power of government is divided between different levels. The federal system is set up to protect our rights. It ensures that no level of government gains too much power over the people.

Our national government is called the **federal government**. It is concerned with problems that affect the whole country. The federal government makes laws for the entire United States. **State governments** deal with problems that affect their state. Your state government makes laws for your state. It also makes sure people obey these laws. In the federal system, the federal government holds some powers while the state governments hold most of the rest.

The United States has one other level of government. This is **local government**. Your city, town, or county government is your local government. State governments create local governments to meet local needs. For example, local governments run schools. They pick up trash or run garbage dumps. They offer fire protection. They provide police services to help protect people and property. They do many things for the people in their community.

## 2. The Separation of Powers

State governments work the same way as the federal government. They are divided into three parts, or branches. The legislative branch writes the laws. Just as Congress makes laws for the United States, your state legislature makes laws for your state. Most state legislatures have two houses. What are the houses called in your state?

The executive branch carries out the laws. In the federal government, the president is in charge of the executive branch. In each state, the governor is in charge of the executive branch. Who is the governor of your state?

The judicial branch makes sure that justice is done, or that people are treated fairly. In the federal government, this branch includes the Supreme Court and other federal courts. In the states, the judicial branch is made up of state courts and judges.

Having three branches creates a separation of powers. The **system of checks and balances** makes sure no branch will have too much power. Each branch's power is limited by the other two branches. For example, the governor of a state may veto, or stop, a law passed by the legislature. But in most states, two-thirds of the members of the legislature can agree to overrule the veto and pass the law.

**system of checks and balances** a system set up in the U.S. Constitution to allow each branch of government ways to limit the power of the other two branches

Your government is broken up into three different branches. Each branch has different responsibilities.

### The Three Branches of State Government

#### Executive



- The executive branch enforces state laws.
- The leader of the executive branch is the governor.

#### Legislative



- The state legislature makes the laws.
- Most state legislatures have two houses.

#### Judicial



- The judicial branch makes sure people are treated fairly.
- The judicial branch includes the state courts and judges.

### 3. The Importance of Leadership

The United States is influenced by the democratic form of government. The word *democracy* means “rule by the people.” This means that in our country, and in our states, the people rule. The people have the power, and the government serves the people.

Even though the people rule, they do not typically create or write laws themselves. They also do not directly decide what the government will do about many everyday decisions. This is because the United States is a republic. In a **republic**, people choose leaders to act for them. These men and women do the day-to-day work of government.

The leaders in our states have many important responsibilities.

A good leader sets examples for others to follow and inspires people. He or she helps people put aside differences to solve problems together and also helps people make decisions. A good leader also makes decisions that benefit the most people.

We have leaders in the federal government who act on our behalf. The president, members of Congress, and federal judges represent us. Each leader in the federal government has an important job to do.

The state government works the same way. Have you heard your governor speak? Do you know who represents you in the state legislature? These are some of your state’s leaders.

**republic** a type of government in which people choose leaders to act for them

A governor leads the executive branch. This man became the governor of the state of California in 2011.





Candidates campaigning for office meet voters at rallies like this one. Here, this man is running for senator of Pennsylvania.

#### 4. Choosing Our Leaders

We use elections to choose many of our leaders. In an election, citizens choose by voting.

In elections in the United States, a **citizen**, or a person who by law has a right to live in a community, chooses candidates based on many factors. Voters want a fair and honest leader whose views they agree with. They often vote for candidates who have shown wisdom or courage. To learn about candidates, people can listen to what the candidates say—in person, on the radio, on television, or on the Internet. People can also read about candidates' views, and listen to what others say about the candidates. What would you look for in a leader?

Voters in your state elect leaders to the federal government. They can vote to elect the president and representatives to Congress. Voters in your state can also vote for your governor and elect representatives to the state legislature. In some states, citizens vote on judges for some courts. When is the next election in your state?

Voting is a key part of being a citizen. Elections let the people have their say. They allow us to choose leaders to settle conflicts and make decisions. Are people happy with their leaders? Do they want new ones? On Election Day, we find out.

**citizen** a person who is born in a country or who chooses to become a member of that country by law

**legislator** a member of the branch of government that makes laws

**bill** a proposal for a new law

**state constitution** a written statement of a plan for a state government

## 5. How Ideas Become Laws

Most laws begin in the legislature. Laws are made to protect people's rights and the common good. Suppose you have an idea for a new state law. How could you make your law a reality?

The first step is to get other people's support. When many people get behind an idea, state governments will listen to them. That is because citizens elect their governors and state **legislators**.

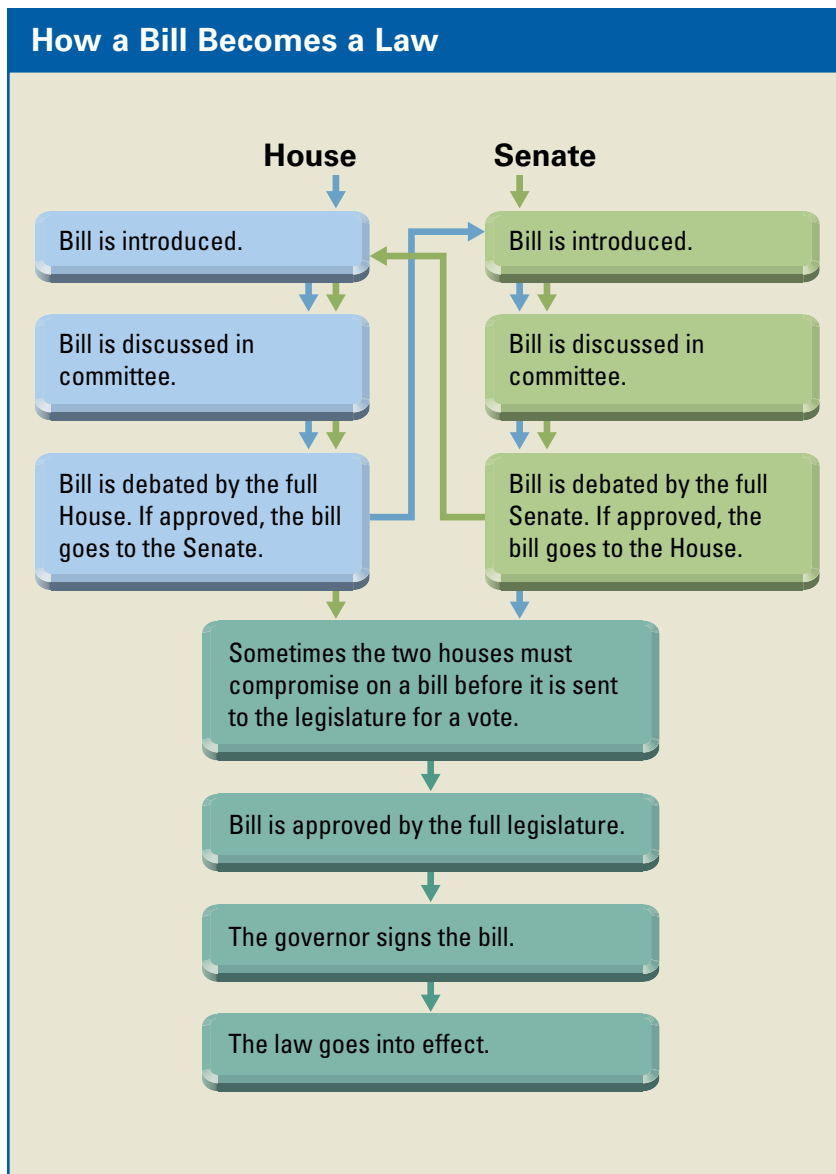
There are many ways to get people's support. For example, you could hang posters around town, or you could write letters to the newspaper. You could even speak

at town meetings or call up television or radio talk shows. You could also organize rallies and raise support on the Internet.

For an idea to become law, a state legislator must write it up as a **bill**. The entire legislature then debates the bill and often makes changes to it. Finally, the legislature votes on the bill. If the legislature approves the bill, the governor must agree to sign it. Otherwise, the bill does not become a law.

Sometimes people believe that a state law is unfair. When that happens, they might ask state courts to take a look at the law. Courts can overrule a law if it disagrees with the U.S. Constitution or with the **state constitution**.

There are many steps in the process of a bill becoming a law.





Voting in elections is a right and responsibility of citizenship. Citizens vote for leaders to represent them.

## 6. The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Citizens have many rights and responsibilities. One right is freedom of speech. All citizens are entitled to these and other rights. The government cannot take away a citizen's rights without a very good reason.

Citizens have responsibilities, too. These are things you must do to help support the government. One responsibility is paying taxes. Another is being on a jury. Most adult citizens share these responsibilities.

There are also many ways to be a good citizen before you become an adult. You can obey the laws of the country and your state. You can show respect for the rights of others. You can develop leadership traits, such as courage, honesty, fairness, and wisdom. You can learn to recognize these traits in others.

### Lesson Summary

Learning about the government of your state helps you understand how laws are created and problems are solved. Understanding the federal system allows you to understand your state government's role within the United States. It is also important for you to understand how power is separated between the three branches of government.

To learn about your state's government, you first need to find out who the leaders in your state are. Who are your state's governor and state legislators? You will also need to learn about new laws and how they are created. You should also learn about your rights and responsibilities as a citizen. What rights do you have in your state?



# Your State's Government

You've just learned that state governments make and carry out laws. Laws help keep our nation, state, and communities running smoothly. You can compare laws to rules. When you play sports, there are rules you must follow so that players are safe and the game runs smoothly. These rules are like laws that governments create for similar reasons. There are laws at work all around you. For example, some laws control the way people drive cars and the materials people use to build homes.

Sometimes state legislators make laws that directly affect you and your classmates. For example in 2005, the Illinois legislature passed a law saying that children in kindergarten, second, and sixth grades must have a dental check-up.

As you learned, your state government is based on the democratic idea of "rule by the people." It is important for you to know who makes the laws for your state. Search the Internet to find out: Who is your governor? Who are your representatives in the legislature? Where do your legislators meet to discuss laws?

Illinois lawmakers meet in this room in the state capitol. They write laws that are then voted on.





## Democracy in Your Classroom

Put democracy to work in your classroom. Create a new rule for your class or school. Make your decisions by following the democratic steps described below.

First, decide on a problem you want to solve. For example, some students want the teacher to set aside a time every day for “free reading” so they can read anything they like. Other students want to change a safety rule that forbids students from riding their bicycles to school. Make suggestions for a topic to your classmates. Support your suggestion with reasons. Take a vote and find out if most students want to move forward with this rule. If not, talk about what changes might make more people agree with you.

Once you decide on a topic, write the rule carefully. Then ask a few classmates if the rule you wrote makes sense. Does it describe enough details, such as who is affected, how, and when?

Once your rule is clearly written, take a vote in your class. Do most people agree with the rule? If not, try to change people’s mind with a strong argument or by rewriting parts of the rule. If the class votes in favor of the rule, then it is time to get the approval from your teacher, principal, or other person in charge. Good luck!

These students are using the democratic process to vote on a new class rule. The rule that has the most votes wins.

# Student Citizens Help Make Laws

In Franklin, Massachusetts, Ms. Johnson’s students were discussing state symbols, like the state flag. During their discussion, they thought of a new symbol for their state, and they used their idea to help make a law. What did the students learn about their state’s government in the process?

In 1974, Palma Johnson’s second grade class at John F. Kennedy Elementary School was studying the state symbols of Massachusetts. They looked at symbols like the Massachusetts flag and the state seal. Ms. Johnson explained to the class that Massachusetts also had a state bird (the chickadee), a state tree (the American Elm), and even a state fish (the Atlantic cod).

“What about a state bug?” one student asked. “Do we have one?” Ms. Johnson told that class that Massachusetts did not have a state bug.

“I think Massachusetts should have a state bug,” said one student. The rest of the class agreed, and one student suggested the ladybug. Ladybugs are found in yards and parks all over Massachusetts, so they believed it would make a good state symbol.

“Every citizen of Massachusetts has the right to suggest new laws for our state,” Ms. Johnson told her class. “Maybe our class can make the ladybug the state bug. Maybe we can make it a law.”

Many states choose state symbols, like plants or animals that are found in the state. These are some of the Massachusetts state symbols.





## Petitioning the Massachusetts Legislature

Ms. Johnson’s class agreed to try to turn their idea into law. But before they could begin, the class had to first find out how they could propose a law to the government.

As citizens of Massachusetts, they had the right to give their legislators ideas for new laws. This right is called the **right of free petition**. The first step was to write to the State House in Boston where the state’s legislators work and ask for a petition form.

When the petition form arrived, the class filled it out carefully. In the petition, the class explained why they proposed the ladybug as the state bug.

Next, they had to find a legislator to sign the petition. Any petition for a new law needs the support of a legislator. The class decided to ask Representative Robert Ficco to help them. Mr. Ficco represented Franklin, the town where the students lived, in the Massachusetts state legislature. The class wrote to ask him to sign their petition, and he wrote back to say he would be glad to help.

After he signed the petition, Mr. Ficco sent it to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The ladybug idea was on its way.

The Massachusetts legislature works in the state capitol building in Boston. The students sent their petition form [here](#).

**right of free petition** the right of the people to give legislators ideas for new laws

## From a Petition to a Bill

Representative Ficco sent the ladybug petition to Boston, but it was not a law yet. It had only just started the long journey to becoming a state law.

Before the petition could become a law, it needed to become a bill. To do this, the House Clerk for the House of Representatives had it give the petition a number. The students' petition was given the number H.5155. Next, the House Clerk assigned it to a committee. Different committees are responsible for different issues. The Clerk also sent copies of the bill to all the legislators on this committee, and they started to study and talk about the bill.

The students hoped to go to Boston when anything important happened with their bill, and one event they did not want to miss was the public hearing the committee would hold on their bill. The students knew that they needed to show that the bill had support.

On the day of the hearing, Ms. Johnson's class dressed in ladybug costumes that they had made and rode the school bus to Boston. At the hearing, the students were allowed to speak, and they explained why the bill was important to them.

The committee listened carefully. Afterward, they told the House of Representatives that the ladybug bill should be passed into law. This was a good start. But there was still a long way to go.

### How the Ladybug Petition Became a State Law

Students wrote a petition to make the ladybug the Massachusetts state bug.

A legislator signed the petition.

The petition was sent to the State House. It received a number and became a bill. The bill went to the House of Representatives.

Students wrote letters and attended hearings to support the bill.

The House of Representatives voted "yes."

## From a Bill into Law

Over the next few weeks, the class went back to hearings at the state capitol several times. The representatives in the House discussed the class's bill on three different occasions. Between hearings, the students wrote letters to representatives to convince them to vote for their bill, and some also talked to representatives in person. In the end, the House of Representatives voted "yes" on the bill.

Next, the bill went to the other house of the legislature, the Senate. It was the Senate's turn to read, discuss, and vote on the bill. When the Senate voted "yes" on the bill, the students cheered.

The bill was almost a law, but not quite. After it was printed on special paper, all the legislators voted together to enact the bill meaning that the bill could become law.

The governor of Massachusetts was the final person who had to say "yes." When he signed the bill, it officially became a state law. Ms. Johnson's students attended the signing ceremony. The students' hard work had paid off, and the ladybug was now the state bug of Massachusetts.

Ms. Johnson was happy, too. "I wanted my students to know how important it is to be active in our public life," she said. "After all, no voice is too small to be heard." ♦

The Lady Bug bill had a long journey before it could become a law. The chart below shows the different steps the Lady Bug bill had to go through.

