

LIBERTY GAZETTE

NEW CLASS PRESIDENT!

by Lisa and Aaron

Everyone give it up for Elyse K., new 8th grade class president! This basketball star is ready to lead our school government, big time. Your trusty Liberty Gazette team (reporters Aaron and Lisa, plus our advisor Mr. Charles) spoke to Elyse to learn more about what the class president actually does.

Aaron, The Liberty Gazette: Elyse, congratulations on winning the election for 8th grade class president!

Elyse K., 8th grade class president: Thank you! I am super excited!!!!

Lisa, The Liberty Gazette: So tell us, Elyse. As president, what kinds of laws do you plan to create?

Elyse: Uh... what?

Lisa: You're president now, and the president makes all the laws, right?

Elyse: That's... not really how it works.

Lisa: Sure it is! Isn't it?

Mr. Charles, The Liberty Gazette: Not exactly. In our student government, just like in the U.S. government, no one person has the power to make up all the rules or laws. There are different groups that have to work together to make decisions.

Lisa: Interesting... tell me more.

Aaron: Yeah, why don't you explain how our school government works, Madame President!

Elyse: Well, like Mr. Charles said, it takes a lot of students and a lot of teamwork. Our school government is set up just like the U.S. government is, with three different branches.

Aaron: Oh, I know those. The legislative, the executive, and the judicial, right?

Mr. Charles: That's right! The legislative branch, or Congress, comes up with ideas for laws. The executive branch, or the president's office, signs off on those laws. And the judicial branch, which includes the Supreme Court, makes decisions about how to uphold those laws.

Elyse: At Eastman-Baldwin, our school government's legislative branch comes up with ideas that represent the wants and needs of our students.

Lisa: Like strawberry milk drinking fountains.

Elyse: Say what?

Lisa: I'm a student here, and I want – no, I need – a strawberry milk drinking fountain.

Elyse: That's not exactly what I mean... but... I guess we could talk about it?

Lisa: Yesssss!

Mr. Charles: Go on, Elyse. What happens after the legislative branch comes up with ideas?

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Elyse: They write them down and send them over to me, the class president. As the leader of the executive branch, I sign off on each idea.

Aaron: Do you ever not sign off on the legislative branch's ideas?

Elyse: Sure! That's one of the powers of the executive branch. As 8th grade class president, I can "veto" an idea, which is a fancy word that means "no way, we're not doing that."

Lisa: Okay, so let's say the legislative branch brings you, the executive branch, a great idea for strawberry milk drinking fountains. And you say, "What a great idea! Everyone loves strawberry milk! No veto necessary!" And you sign off on it right away, because of course you would. What happens next?

Elyse: Well... I would take the idea to the Principal and we would figure things out from there.

Mr. Charles: Exactly. That's one way our school government works differently from the U.S. government. Our school government doesn't get the final say on school rules... it has to work closely with our school leaders to figure out what kinds of changes are possible.

Lisa: Sure, sure, sure. But come on - Principal P.A. would be all for it.

Elyse: Are we still talking about strawberry milkshakes?

Lisa: Strawberry milk drinking fountains.

Elyse: Right...

Aaron: Elyse, can you tell us more about what you hope to do as 8th grade class president?

Elyse: I think the president's #1 job is to listen to the concerns of our students, and to work together with the other branches of our school government, our teachers and our principal, to make our school the best it can be.

Mr. Charles: Well said.

Lisa: And if I could add just one more thing...

Elyse: Is it that you think our school would be even better with strawberry milk drinking fountains?

Lisa: Yes! How did you know?

Elyse: I told you my #1 job is to listen to the students!

Well, readers, there you have it. An amazing interview with our amazing new 8th grade class president, Elyse! She's a good listener and a good teammate, on the basketball court and in the school government. Electing her was a real slam dunk!

EPISODE 3 STUDY HALL:

How A Bill Becomes A Law



KEY IDEAS

- When the **Founding Fathers** wrote the United States **Constitution**, they did so with a big idea in mind: that no single person or office should hold all the power.
- Instead, the Constitution creates a **separation of powers** that divides powers and responsibilities across our **three branches of government**:
 - **The legislative branch**
 - **The executive branch**
 - **The judicial branch**
- The Constitution also establishes a system of **checks and balances** that give each branch the power to limit the actions of the others. In other words, each government branch can keep the others in check – and this ensures that power remains properly balanced across all three branches.
- Although the three branches are separate, they all share a common purpose: to govern with laws that serve the people of the United States and its Constitution.
- Each branch has a special role to play when it comes to making, enforcing, and interpreting the laws of our country.
- It all starts with an early idea for a law, called a **bill**. The process of turning a bill into a **law** requires collaboration across all three branches.

At-A-Glance: The Three Branches

The Legislative Branch

- Represented by **Congress**
 - Congress is made up of two **chambers** (or sections):
 - **The House of Representatives** (also referred to as “The House”)
 - **The Senate**
 - Both the House and the Senate are made up of elected officials from all 50 states.

- Officials who serve in the House are known as **Representatives**, or Congressmen and Congresswomen; officials who serve in the Senate are known as **Senators**.
- The House is made up of 435 Representatives, and the Senate is made up of 100 Senators.

- Among other responsibilities, Congress has the power to write laws.
- Congressional checks-and-balances include the ability to override a presidential **veto** with a two-thirds majority vote, among others.

The Executive Branch

- The Executive Branch is made up of the President of the United States and his or her Presidential Cabinet.
- That’s why we sometimes say the Executive Branch is represented by the **White House**.
- The Cabinet includes the Vice President, the Attorney General, and the leaders of 15 executive federal departments (such as the Department of State, the Department of Treasury, etc.)
- The President has the power to sign a bill into law or to reject it, using a special checks-and-balances power known as a veto.

The Judicial Branch

- The Judicial Branch is made up of our federal and state courts.
- The job of the Judicial Branch is to interpret our laws and decide how they apply to disputes brought before the courts.
- The Judicial Branch also examines whether laws are **constitutional**, or allowed according to the U.S. Constitution.
 - One of the Judicial Branch’s main powers of checks-and-balances is the ability to overturn laws it deems **unconstitutional**, or not allowed according to the Constitution.

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The Judicial Branch (cont.)

- In our courts system, there are “lower” courts and “higher” courts. Court cases start in the lower courts and can sometimes move to higher courts if there is disagreement about the lower courts’ decision.
- **The Supreme Court** is the highest court of all.
 - There are nine Supreme Court Justices who consider and vote on the issues brought before them.
 - These judges are appointed by the president and confirmed by Congress.

How A Bill Becomes A Law

It All Starts in Congress

- Lawmaking starts with the legislative branch, **in Congress**.
- When a Representative or a Senator has an idea for a law or wants to make a change to an existing law, they write and **sponsor** a bill, introducing it in the chamber where they serve. That chamber will go through a process of reviewing, changing, and voting on the bill before sending it to the other chamber for a similar process.
 - Both the House and the Senate must vote in favor of the bill to keep it moving forward.
- Let’s say a bill is first introduced in the House. Next, a House **committee** – a small group of Representatives – will study the bill. They research it, talk to the public about it, and debate it with other Representatives. The committee can make changes to the bill to reflect what they’ve learned in their study.
- When the bill passes the committee’s review, it is brought back to the House for a vote.
- If a **simple majority** (more than half) of Representatives vote in favor of the bill, then the bill moves to the Senate.

- In the Senate, the bill will go through a similar process: committee review, debate, changes, and a Senate vote. A simple majority vote will move the bill further once again.
- Finally, a **conference committee** made up of House and Senate members works out any last differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. When they finish, that bill returns to the House and Senate for final approval.
- At last, the bill is ready to move out of the legislative branch and over to the executive branch for the next step in the process.

Next Stop: The White House

- The leader of the executive branch is the **president**.
- Once the president receives a bill from congress, he or she has 10 days to decide what to do next.
- The president will either sign the bill into law or reject it – an action known as a presidential **veto**.
- If the president doesn’t sign or veto a bill within 10 days, the bill automatically becomes a law.

Vetoes

- Vetoes are a form of checks and balances. By being able to veto a bill, the president keeps Congress from being the only branch with the power to create laws.
- But Congress has its own powers in this situation. Congress can **override** a presidential veto if two-thirds of both the House and the Senate vote in favor of doing so. (That’s another example of checks and balances at work!)
- Still, a two-thirds majority vote can be hard to accomplish. It means many more people than just a simple majority must agree to it.
- Only a few presidential vetoes have been successfully overturned by Congress. Usually, a presidential veto marks the end of the road for a bill.

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Veto (cont.)

- However, if Congress succeeds in overriding a president's veto, then the bill becomes a law without the president's signature.

The Judicial Branch

- Once a law is in place, it is up to the Judicial Branch to **interpret it**: consider its meaning and how to apply it to disputes in our court system.
- The Judicial Branch can decide if a law is constitutional – meaning, if the rules of the U.S. Constitution allow it.
- If the judicial branch determines that a law is unconstitutional, that law can no longer be enforced.

Key Terms

Bill: A written proposal for a law; a rough draft of an idea that could turn into a law.

Branches of Government: The three equal parts of the U.S. government; the Legislative Branch, the Executive Branch, and the Judicial Branch.

Chambers of Congress: The two parts of our Congress; the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Checks and Balances: A system that gives each branch of government the ability to place limits on the other branches' powers.

Committees: Small groups in each chamber of Congress. There are House Committees and Senate Committees.

Conference Committee: A group made up of members from both the House and the Senate.

Congress: The collective name for elected lawmakers in the House and the Senate; the legislative branch.

Constitution: The document establishing the basic principles, structure, and powers of our government.

Constitutional: Officially allowed by the rules of the U.S. Constitution.

Founding Fathers: Important leaders who took part in the American Revolution and helped form our system of government.

House of Representatives: One of the two chambers of Congress.

Interpret: To consider and explain the meaning of something.

Law: A rule, or the system of rules, that guide our country.

Override: The power to change someone else's action or decision.

President: The highest elected official in the United States; the leader of the Executive Branch.

Representatives: Elected officials who serve in the House of Representatives in Congress.

Senate: One of the two chambers of Congress.

Senators: Elected officials who serve in the Senate in Congress.

Separation of Powers: A system that ensures no one person or group holds all the power of the government; the splitting up of powers and responsibilities across the three branches of government.

Simple majority: A requirement that more than half of voters vote in favor of something in order for it to move forward.

Sponsor: To officially introduce or support a proposal for a new law (a bill).

Supreme Court: The highest court in our judicial system; part of the Judicial Branch.

Unconstitutional: Not allowed by the Constitution.

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How A Bill Becomes A Law



Key Terms (cont.)

Veto: The president's ability to reject a bill and stop it from becoming a law.

White House: The office of the president; the Executive Branch.

SOURCES

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EPISODE 3 STUDY HALL:

The Three Branches of Government FAQs



1. What are the three branches of the United States government?

The U.S. Constitution divides our government into three separate parts, known as **branches**. They are the **legislative branch**, the **executive branch**, and the **judicial branch**.

Each branch has its own powers and responsibilities, and all three must work together to create the laws that guide our country.

2. Why do we have three branches, anyway?

Before the American Revolution, most countries had a single ruler in charge – like a king or an emperor – who made laws that people were forced to obey.

When the colonists won the American War of Independence, they now had the opportunity to create an entirely new system of government – one that would make sure no single person had total power to make the laws for its citizens. When our Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution, they created a **separation of powers** that divides lawmaking across three separate branches, and a system of **checks and balances** that keeps each branch from overstepping its powers.

3. What does each branch do?

When it comes to lawmaking, each branch has a role to play. Simply put:

- The legislative branch creates laws,
- The executive branch implements laws (or puts laws into action),
- And the judicial branch interprets laws (or decides how to apply the law to legal matters in our courts).

If you're curious about each step of the lawmaking process, check out the Study Guide on how a bill becomes a law!

EPISODE 3 STUDY HALL:

**The Three Branches
of Government FAQs**



4. Who represents each branch?

The legislative branch is represented by Congress, which is made up of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The White House represents the executive branch. The president is its leader, while the vice president and the members of the presidential cabinet (the leaders of different government departments) make up the rest of the branch.

Finally, the judicial branch is represented by our federal court system. There are three levels and types of courts in this system: District Courts, Courts of Appeal, and the Supreme Court – the highest court in the United States.

5. What are checks and balances?

Checks and balances refer to the special powers each branch of government has to limit or change the actions of another branch. They exist to keep any one branch from having too much power, all on its own. Checks and balances help make sure lawmaking is a fair and collaborative process, with many people working together to make decisions on behalf of the American people.

Notes
