

Basic Political Structures 政治制度 & Functions 功能 in the USA (for Chinese learners)

Note that comparisons with China below are generally made from a U.S. perspective 视角, derived from the content of high school civics classes 公民意识课 or American politics classes in U.S. colleges, and as a result institutions 政治制度/机构 in the PRC may be portrayed in a relatively negative light. Keep this bias 偏见 in mind!

As outlined in the Constitution 宪法, the founding legal document of the USA, U.S. government is divided into three *branches 部门*: Executive 行政, Legislative 立法机关, and Judicial 司法. Each has its own functions, as part of a “separation of powers” 三权分立/分权制衡 and is part of a system of “checks and balances” 政府机关彼此之间的相互制衡 which prevent any single branch (especially the executive, which might otherwise behave like a king) from dominating 统治 the others.

Levels of government are generally described as federal 联邦制的/全国的, state 州 (CA, TX, FL, etc.), and local (county 县, city, town/township, village 村, etc.). Each level has its own taxes as sources of revenue, each its own laws and courts with those at higher levels generally more powerful but less concerned with non-national issues. Heads of government at the federal level are presidents 总统, governors 州长 at the state level, mayors 市长 of cities and some towns, head council members 村委会成员 at some levels lower than cities. In direct contrast with the PRC, surveys 调查 show that U.S. citizens generally trust their local governments but strongly distrust the federal government.

Note that the U.S. is a *federal state 联邦国家*, while the PRC is a *unitary state 单一制国家*. This means we don't call the government in Washington D.C. the “national” or “central” government; in some policy areas, such as drugs, gay marriage (until the Supreme Court made it legal in all 50 states in 2015), sales tax 营业税, and many others, states enact their own, individualized laws which may contradict 相悖 or vary from 作出调整 federal law.

The Executive Branch 行政部门 The president is the leader of the Executive Branch and makes national decisions as head of state for no more than two terms of four years each. One of the president's most important duties is to either approve (sign) 签署生效 or veto (reject) 否决 laws passed by Congress 美国国会. A president's staff and term in office are considered an “administration” or “government,” such as the Obama Administration/Government 奥巴马政府, the First/Second Bush Administration/Government, etc. By contrast, if a leader is not subject to term limits, their staff and term are more often called a “regime,” such as The Assad Regime in Syria 叙利亚阿萨德政权. The line of succession if the president dies 如总统意外死亡 副总统代行总统职责 extends, in order, to 17 different officials, beginning with the vice president, then the Speaker of the House 众议院议长, currently Paul Ryan, and so on.

This branch contains the federal bureaucracy 联邦的科层制, including the president's Cabinet 内阁, headed by appointed secretaries 部长 of federal departments. The 15 Departments control most of the various federal Agencies 政府机构, while both Departments and Agencies administer federal government programs 一整套政策. One of the newest and largest departments, the Department of Homeland Security 国土安全部, was created by George W. Bush in response to 9/11.

Some agencies are under department control, while others are independent. For example, the FDA (Food & Drug Administration) 食品药品监督管理局, which monitors quality and safety of food and medicine, is an agency under the Department of Health and Human Services 卫生与公众服务部. By contrast, the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) 环保部 is independent of any department and in charge of programs to monitor drinking water quality 监督饮用水质量 at regional offices 地方派出机构 throughout the country. Other Agencies to know: IRS (Internal Revenue Service) 美国国税局, FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) 美国联邦调查局, CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) 中情局, FCC (Federal Communications Commission) 美国联邦通信委员会.

Unlike China and many countries of the world, the U.S. has no single central bank 中央银行. Instead, national currency 本国货币 is managed by the Federal Reserve System 美国联邦储备系统 of regional banks, themselves a mix of both private and public components. The USD\$ is printed by the Dept. of the Treasury 财政部. The Fed or Federal Reserve 美联储 is both highly independent (critics say “self-interested” as a for-profit institution) and controversial 有争议的 in the U.S.

The Legislative Branch 立法机关 The U.S. Congress has two houses: the upper house is the Senate 参议院, in which each state has two senators elected to six-year terms; the lower house is the House of Representatives 众议院, in which each state elects Representatives proportional to their populations 他们的人口比例 (in 2016, only one Representative each for seven states, fifty-three for CA) for two-year terms. The legislature has sole power to make the laws, actually debates bills 法案 (proposed laws), and often goes against (and rarely overrides 驳回) the president. The tendentious nature 倾向性 of Congress as the origin of laws 法律依据 and forum for debate 辩论场所, including especially the power to approve or reject proposed national budgets 国家财政预算, puts it in contrast with the “rubber stamp” legislatures 橡皮图章 of the PRC and many other countries where the purpose of the national legal body is to approve the executive’s policies swiftly, with opposition being rare or nonexistent.

While Congress is intended to be a representative body for the constituencies 选区 of elected legislators, the U.S. legislature is in practice heavily influenced by special interest groups 特殊利益集团 and lobbyists 说客 who give money to members of Congress to encourage them to legislate on their behalf. All lobbyists’ financial contributions are required by law to be reported in tax statements, making such behavior an “open secret” 公开的秘密 and an American form of “institutionalized corruption” 制度化腐败 not unlike 关系 in China.

The Judicial Branch 司法部门 The highest federal court is the U.S. Supreme Court 最高法院 and is considered to be an “independent judiciary” 独立的司法部门 because no individual leader or other branch of government can overrule its interpretations of constitutional law 宪法解释. It is led by the Chief Justice 首席大法官, currently John Roberts, who with eight other “associate justices 陪审法官” are appointed by the president and approved by Congress to life tenure 终身任职 on the court. Unlike criminal courts 刑事法庭 in which someone is found innocent 清白的 or guilty 有罪的 of a crime, most cases heard in the Supreme Court decide, by votes of the nine justices, the constitutionality 合宪性 of past legal decisions in lower courts 低级法院 and laws themselves. (i.e. In 2015, the Court found state laws banning same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional 违宪的, repealing 废止 them, and in 2012 a major legal section of Obamacare to be constitutional 合宪的, upholding 维持 it.)

A couple of very important Supreme Court positions which structure American politics are the principles of corporate personhood 公司法人, which gives for-profit corporations such as multi-national corporations 跨国公司 (MNCs) the same basic rights as individual citizens and the recent decision known as “Citizens United 公民联合会” which, among other things, allows rich individuals and corporations to make unlimited financial contributions to presidential political campaigns based on the idea that campaign donations of millions of dollars are like an individual’s right to “free speech 言论自由.”

Why is each branch so concerned with law? The U.S. and most Western countries pride themselves on having “rule of law 法规,” in which the law is more powerful than any individual or political institution. Contrast this with the “rule by law” 法治 of many countries in which top leadership may be “above the law 凌驾于法律之上” and use the law primarily as a tool to strengthen their grip on power.

In the U.S. and around the world, many vital functions and services are provided by NGOs 非政府组织 (Non-government Organizations) which are often private but non-profit. China’s GONGOS 政府组织的非政府组织 (Government-Organized NGOs) and limits on international NGOs (INGOs) based in the U.S. and elsewhere in the West are an exception!

Notable non-government organizations of political importance in the U.S. include: the American Civil Liberties Union 美国公民自由协会 (ACLU) (lobbies 游说 & litigates 对簿公堂 on behalf of people involved in individual freedom and privacy 隐私 issues), the Better Business Bureau (BBB) 商业信用局 (provides consumer protection 消费者保护 against immoral and illegal business practices), various “professional organizations 工会,” and Public Interest Research Groups 公共利益研究小组 (PIRGs).

Advocacy groups 辩护团 for specific segments of the population include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People 全国有色人种协进会 (NAACP) (lobbies & litigates for African Americans and, increasingly, all non-white citizens), the American Association of Retired Persons 美国退休者协会 (AARP)

Other Vocabulary: • appointment 任命 VS. election 选举 (to a position) • impeachment 弹劾 VS. resignation 辞职
• term limits 任期限制 VS. life tenure 终身任职 (in public office position)