

## FAQs

### 1. How much power does a US president actually have?

When the Founding Fathers of the United States of America created the Constitution, they installed a system of checks and balances. This system is to ensure that no part of the federal government receives too much power. The three branches – executive, legislative and judicial – all have the means to keep the others in check and to balance any actions taken. The legislative branch (Congress) makes laws, the judicial branch (Supreme Court) interprets laws and can declare them unconstitutional and the executive branch (President) enforces and administers federal laws.

### 2. What is an executive order?



A presidential executive order (EO) is an order or set of instructions given to federal agencies, department heads or federal employees. They are similar to directives issued by the presidents of companies. Each EO receives a number and is published in the Federal Register (the daily newspaper of the federal government). As opposed to a law, an EO does not go through Congress although it does have the legal effect of a law. However, it can neither reverse a law passed by Congress nor can it be unconstitu-

tional or illegal. Here's where the judicial branch steps in. The Supreme Court can declare an EO unconstitutional. The legislative branch also has the possibility to pass a law that changes an EO or overturn an EO with a two-thirds vote.

What makes EOs attractive to presidents is their immediacy. It takes only the stroke of a pen. The biggest disadvantage is that the next President can overturn any of his/her predecessor's EOs – also with only a signature.

### 3. Does a President have veto power?

Yes. This power is part of the checks and balances system. A President can veto laws (a check), but if there are enough votes in Congress, the veto can be overridden (a balance) and the law goes into effect without the President's approval. However, this is rarely done. What usually happens is that a President threatens Congress with a veto and then Congress modifies the bill (that's the word for a law before it actually become a law) to ensure that the President will not veto it.

### 4. Can a President simply repeal legislation from his / her predecessor?

No. By definition a law that has been passed by Congress cannot be simply repealed by a President. To change an existing law, a new law would have to be passed. This entails introducing legislation which must be approved by both chambers of Congress – the Senate and the House of Representatives.

### 5. Can a President build a border wall and make a foreign power pay for it?

Yes and no. In the current case, Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto has refused to pay for a wall along the Mexico-US border that President Trump has promised to have built.

The US Congress could approve using \$15 billion of government money to pay for the wall. Since the US has about a \$54 billion trade deficit with Mexico (that means the US bought \$54 billion more in goods from Mexico than Mexico bought from the US), proponents of Trump's idea say that Mexico actually has enough money to pay for the wall. Of course, being a sovereign nation, Mexico cannot be forced to use their trade surplus to pay for a border wall.

However, trade laws could be changed to raise money for the wall. The Trump administration's current proposal is called "border adjustment". This means that all goods imported into the US would be subject to a 20% tax, not just goods from Mexico but from any country. Then US exports would be subsidized to balance the price increases for imported goods. Some estimates say that the border adjustment plan could raise up to \$13 billion in just one year – enough to pay for the wall if Trump's figures are accurate. The goal is also to achieve a trade surplus for the US – import less while export levels stay the same or even increase.

However, critics say that American taxpayers would still be stuck with higher prices on consumer goods. Other consequences might be a weakened Mexican economy which would then also damage the US economy because fewer goods would be exported to Mexico. Global trade wars may result.

### 6. With a majority in the Congress, does Trump have free reign?

Not really. Of course, he'll have a much easier time passing legislation with his party in control of both the Senate and the House until 2019 at least. However, the Republican Party is suffering from partisan infighting and not all of the Republican Members of Congress stand behind Trump 100%. His campaign and tactics not only divided the voters; it also divided the Republican Party. Trump has gone against traditional Republican conventions on issues such as trade and foreign policy.

### 7. Do a President and his family have to live in the White House?

No. US law entitles the President to live in the White House, but it is not a requirement. And living at the White House isn't free for the President either. No rent is charged, but the President has to pay for everything else – food, parties, vacations, butlers, housekeepers etc. Ironically, the first US President, George Washington, is the only one not to have lived in the White House. He selected the site for it and approved the architect's design, but he died before the US capital was moved from Philadelphia to Washington D.C.



Not living in the White House can cause a lot of logistical difficulties on different levels. For the President it means being separated from advisors, staff and infrastructure. For example, the White House is only two miles away from the Capitol building, but Trump Tower in New York City

## The Power of the US Presidency

is 220 miles away, which makes for neither a speedy nor an easy commute. However, the latest reports say that Trump will live in the White House and his family (wife Melania and son Barron) will join him at the end of the 2016-17 school year.

Another logistical problem has to do with security. One of the Secret Service's missions is to provide protection to the First Family. In the case of Trump's family this means protection in New York City on Fifth Avenue – until they reunite in the White House. Manhattan residents are not amused by the inconveniences this has caused since Trump's election.

### Tasks

1. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a record 3,552 EOs. Find out about EO 9066 and compare it to the current situation in the US.
2. Find out about the conflict between the National Park Service and Trump. How did the differences arise and how are NPS employees resisting Trump?
3. In 1883 American poet Emma Lazarus wrote a poem to raise money for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. In 1903 a plaque with her poem was attached to the inside of the pedestal. The most famous part of the poem is the last five lines. Read the lines here and discuss whether you think these lines still apply to the United States in 2017.

GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR,  
YOUR HUDDLED MASSES YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE,  
THE WRETCHED REFUSE OF YOUR TEEMING SHORE.  
SEND THESE, THE HOMELESS, TEMPEST-TOST TO ME,  
I LIFT MY LAMP BESIDE THE GOLDEN DOOR!


4. Look at this political cartoon.
  - a) Identify the three figures in the cartoon and describe their actions.
  - b) Write a short job description for each one.
  - c) State your opinion on what is happening.



# The Power of the US Presidency

## Teacher's page

Here are some good websites for helping you understand the system of federal government in the United States of America.

“I’m Just a Bill” is an educational cartoon series from the 1970s. But since government hasn’t changed much since then, it still applies. This cartoon explains how a bill becomes a law, or doesn’t.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyeJ55o3EI0> 

This government-sponsored site offers a good overview of the US government.  
<https://kids.usa.gov/teens/government/index.shtml> 

## Tasks/Lösungsvorschläge:

1. The EO 9066 signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt allowed him to establish military zones within the United States. The entire west coast became a military zone. The EO also said that, if necessary, anyone living within the military zone may be removed, i.e. forced to leave. This EO especially affected about 110,000 Japanese Americans, who were put into remote internment camps throughout the country. Ten weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt saw their internment as a military necessity to protect the United States. This EO also affected smaller numbers of residents of German and Italian descent. They and the Japanese Americans were seen as a threat to national security.

The question then and now is whether immigrants and refugees represent a threat to the national security of the United States, simply based on their country of origin or religious background. This debate can easily be applied to Germany and the EU as well.

2. The conflict between the National Park Service (NPS) and Trump’s administration began shortly after the inauguration. The NPS is responsible for the National Mall, where the inauguration is held and the spectators gather. On Twitter, the NPS posted side-by-side pictures of the Mall from Obama’s inauguration in 2009 and Trump’s in 2017. It appears that far fewer spectators were at Trump’s inauguration. This comparison apparently displeased Trump and he ordered the NPS and other federal agencies to stop using government Twitter accounts “except in the case of public safety”. Trump has been criticized for being petty about the size of the inauguration crowds. Possibly as a reaction to this order regarding use of social media, someone with access to the Badlands National Park NPS Twitter account began tweeting climate change facts. The tweets were deleted just hours later. It appears that some splinter groups, e.g. BadlandsNPSFans and AltUSNatParkService, have resulted from this conflict. They are in resistance to Trump’s presidency and more specifically to his policies concerning the environment.

### 3. Here is a German translation of the lines:

Gebt mir eure Müden, eure Armen,  
Eure geknechteten Massen, die frei zu atmen begehren,  
Den elenden Unrat eurer gedrängten Küsten;  
Schickt sie mir, die Heimatlosen, vom Sturme Getriebenen,  
Hoch halt’ ich mein Licht am gold’nen Tore!

## The Power of the US Presidency

---

4.

a) The three figures are President Trump, Justice/Justitia and the Statue of Liberty/Lady Liberty. Trump is trying to fight his way past Justice to get at Lady Liberty. Justice is standing between Trump and Lady Liberty and is fending off Trump's attacks. Lady Liberty is standing calmly behind Justice.

b) Your students can either write serious job descriptions accurately stating what is expected of each figure or they could enhance the descriptions with their opinions and with criticism.

President: We are looking for an employee who is ready and willing to fight unpopular battles. You must be self-confident. You must also follow the laws of the land. If something happens that you do not like, you must have the ability to lie about it and not worry about people calling your statements lies. You should be able to ignore conventionality, values and expectations. We expect you to have excellent tweeting skills.

Justice: We are looking for an employee who is ready and willing to fight unpopular battles. You must be self-confident and able to stand up against higher powers. You must follow and enforce the laws of the country. You must not let your personal opinion influence you in your job.

Lady Liberty: You must be well-groomed and have a friendly disposition. Your position is mostly a representative one as you hold no real power. You should not intimidate visitors and guests but rather warmly welcome them. Since first impressions are very important, you are expected to have perfect manners and be open to and accepting of everyone. Pay is quite low, but the personal rewards are very great. You can be assured of gratefulness and admiration.

c)

1) I think it is good that there is already a situation like this so early in Trump's presidency. It may show that the US systems of checks and balances and the separation of power are effective. The US Constitution still serves as a strong foundation for the government.

2) I think it is unbelievable that the situation in the US could get this bad. If the US is a model of democracy for the world, how could the people let something like this happen? I'm not sure if the system is strong enough to stand up to such a president.

3) I don't know why people are getting so upset. If the American people voted for Trump, then they must like him and his policies. They should let him do his job.

4) I think the cartoon is good because it accurately portrays Trump as childish in his actions. The cartoon shows that he thinks force and power can get him whatever he wants.