**USA: Political System**

The nation's capital, Washington, D.C., has the 10th largest metropolitan population in the country, with a population of over 3.9 million. Laid out by the French architect Pierre L'Enfant in the late 18th century, it was the world's first city especially planned as a center of government.

The city of Washington, in the District of Columbia along the Potomac River, is the capital of a federal union of 50 states. When the United States declared its independence from Great Britain on July 4,1776 (now celebrated as a national holiday), there were 13 original states—each one sovereign, each wanting to control its own affairs. The states tried to keep their sovereignty and independence within a loose confederation, but their attempt proved ineffectual. Therefore, in 1789, they adopted a new Constitution establishing a federal union under a strong central government.

The original 13 states were grouped along the Atlantic Coast. As the frontier moved westward, large areas of what is now the continental United States were added by purchase, treaty and annexation. As each state was settled, governments were first organized as territories and later entered the Union as states when their territorial legislatures petitioned the Congress for admission. There are now 50 states. Alaska and Hawaii, the last states to enter the Union, did so in 1959.

Under the Constitution, the states delegated many of their sovereign powers to this central government in Washington. But they kept many important powers for themselves. Each of the 50 states, for example, retains the right to run its own public school system, to decide on the qualifications of its voters, to license its doctors and other professionals, to provide police protection for its citizens and to maintain its roads.

In actual practice, and in line with the American tradition of keeping government as close to the people as possible, the states delegate many of these powers to their political subdivisions—counties, cities, towns and villages. Thus, at the lowest political level, residents of small American communities elect village trustees to run their police and fire departments, and elect a board of education to run their schools. On the county level, voters elect executives who are responsible for roads, parks, libraries, sewage and other services, and elect or appoint judges for the courts. The citizens of each state also elect a governor and members of the state legislature.

In addition to the 50 states and the District of Columbia, citizens of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, the Virgin Islands and American Samoa vote in federal elections. United States possessions include the Pacific Islands of Wake, Midway, Jarvis, Howland, Baker, Johnston Atoll and Kingman Reef. The United States administers the Republic of Palau under United Nations auspices. Two entities, The Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, have become sovereign self-governing states in free association with the United States.

Under the Constitution, the federal government is divided into three branches, each chosen in a different manner, each able to check and balance the others.

The Executive Branch is headed by the President, who, together with the Vice President, is chosen in nationwide elections every four years (in every year divisible by four). The elective process for a U.S. President is unique. Americans vote for slates of presidential electors equal to the number of Senators and Representatives each state has in Congress (a total of 535 persons). The candidate with the highest number of votes in each state wins all the electoral votes of that state. The presidential candidate needs 270 electoral votes to be elected; if no candidate has a majority, the House of Representatives makes the decision. (In all other state and local elections, voters cast their votes directly for the candidate or referendum on that particular ballot.) Any natural-born American who is 35 years old or older may be elected to this office. The President proposes bills to Congress, enforces federal laws, serves as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and, with the approval of the Senate makes treaties and appoints federal judges, ambassadors and other members of the Executive Departments (the Departments of State, Defense Commerce, Justice, etc.). Each Cabinet head holds the title of Secretary and together they form a council called the Cabinet.

The Vice President, elected from the same political party as the President, acts as chairman of the Senate, and in the event of the death or disability of the President, assumes the Presidency for the balance of his term.

The Legislative Branch is made up of two houses: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The 435 seats in the House of Representatives are allocated on the basis of population, although every state has at least one representative. Each state elects two members of the 100-member Senate; a Senator's term of office is six years.

Both houses must approve a bill for it to become law, but the President may veto or refuse to sign it. If so, Congress reconsiders the bill. If two-thirds of the members of both houses then approve it, the bill becomes law even without the President's signature.

The Judicial Branch is made up of Federal District Courts (at least one in every state), 11 Federal Courts of Appeals and, at the top, the Supreme Court. Federal judges are appointed by the President with the approval of the Senate; to minimize political influences, their appointments are for life. Federal courts decide cases involving federal law, conflicts between states or between citizens of different states. An American who feels he has been convicted under an unjust law may appeal his case all the way to the Supreme Court, which may rule that the law is unconstitutional. The law then becomes void.

In order to amend the Constitution, Congress must pass the proposed amendment by a two-thirds majority vote in each house, and three-fourths of the states must concur. In more than 195 years, the Constitution has been amended 26 times. The first 10 Amendments— the Bill of Rights—guarantee individual liberties: freedom of speech, religion and assembly, the right to a fair trial, the security of one's home. Later amendments chronicle America's struggle for equality and justice for all of its people. These amendments abolish slavery, prohibit any denial of rights because of race, grant the vote to women and to citizens of the District of Columbia and allow citizens to vote at age 18.