

Unit 2: Interactions Among Branches of Government

Unit 2 covers the institutions that run the American government and how they interact. That includes the structure and behavior of Congress, the powers and limits of the presidency, the role of the courts, the bureaucracy that implements policy, and the bargaining among branches that produces policy. CED topics 2.1 through 2.15.

AP U.S. Government

Interactions Among Branches of Government

25-36% of the exam

About 16 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read this guide the first time by looking for who checks whom and how each check works. Unit 2 is the heaviest unit on the exam because it covers the machinery of American government, including Congress, the presidency, the courts, and the bureaucracy, plus the bargaining that connects them. It helps to read the sections in order and notice where each branch gains a power and where another branch limits it.

After the first read, study from the tables and trap boxes. The House-versus-Senate table, the trustee-delegate-politico table, and the checks-on-the-Court table are useful for the sorting questions that appear often in the multiple-choice section. Each trap box covers a common misconception in its section. You can finish with the two practice questions, the six recall questions, and the 20-minute plan.

What this unit is worth. Unit 2 is 25-36% of the AP exam, and it is the heaviest unit in the course. The material also comes up in the other units because rights, parties, and elections all depend on the institutions that make, enforce, and interpret the rules.

2.1 Congress: The Senate and the House of Representatives

Congress is **bicameral**, with two chambers that represent the country in different ways. The **House of Representatives** has 435 voting members, apportioned by population and elected every two years. Short terms and population-based seats were designed to keep the House close to the people, the chamber most responsive to shifts in public opinion. The **Senate** has 100 members, two per state regardless of population, serving six-year terms with one-third facing election every two years. That staggered design makes the Senate a **continuous body** because it never turns over all at once, which was meant to give it steadiness and a longer view.

Congress carries the Constitution's lawmaking power. Its **enumerated powers**, expressly granted in the Constitution, include declaring war, setting the national rules for **naturalization**, and regulating

interstate commerce. Its **implied powers**, inferred from those listed powers through the Necessary and Proper Clause, let it act on matters the founders never imagined. Both chambers together embody **republicanism**, the principle that citizens govern through elected representatives. When the exam asks which principle Congress reflects, republicanism is the answer, and the House's design is the reason.

	HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES	SENATE
Members	435, apportioned by population	100, two per state
Term length	Two years	Six years; one-third elected every two years
Designed to be	Closest to the people, most responsive	Steadier, more insulated from swings

The two designs pull in opposite directions on purpose. Two-year House terms keep members attentive to voters; six-year Senate terms let senators cast unpopular votes and wait out the anger. When the exam asks which chamber responds faster to public opinion, the answer is always the House, and the reason is the term length.

Trap. the Senate does not represent population. Two senators per state was the Connecticut Compromise's price for small-state support at the Convention, and it is still the reason a voter in a small state carries proportionally more Senate influence than a voter in a large one. Any answer that treats Senate seats as population-based is wrong on the design.

2.2 Structures, Powers, and Functions of Congress

Congress does its real work in committees. **Standing committees** are permanent bodies that specialize in a policy area. They hold **committee hearings** to gather testimony, then **mark up** bills by debating and revising them line by line. Most bills die in committee, which makes committee chairs and members the gatekeepers of the legislative process. In the House, the **Rules Committee** sets the terms of floor debate, including how long a bill is discussed and whether amendments are allowed. The **Speaker of the House**, the House presiding officer elected by the majority party, wields major influence over House legislative work, from committee assignments to which bills reach the floor. A **conference committee**, temporary by design, reconciles the differences when the House and Senate pass different versions of the same bill.

The Senate runs on different rules because any single senator can matter. **Unanimous consent** moves routine business quickly when nobody objects. A **hold** lets a senator delay a bill from reaching the floor. A **filibuster** prolongs debate to delay or prevent a vote, and **cloture** is the procedure for ending debate, requiring three-fifths of the Senate. These tools help explain why the Senate often moves more slowly than the House. The House majority controls the floor, while Senate rules protect the minority's ability to be heard.

Money follows specific constitutional rules. **Revenue bills**, which raise money, must originate in the House. **Mandatory spending** is required by existing law and covers entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid; Congress does not vote on it each year. **Discretionary spending** is approved through the annual appropriations process and is where most yearly budget fights happen.

Members also trade favors. **Pork-barrel legislation** tucks local projects into larger bills, and **logrolling** trades votes so each member's priorities survive.

A few rarely used tools round out the picture. A **discharge petition** can force a bill out of committee to the House floor, but it is rarely attempted and even more rarely succeeds. The **Committee of the Whole** lets the House debate under looser rules to move faster. It is more useful to learn the logic behind these procedures than to memorize every name. House rules give majorities room to act, while Senate rules protect the minority's ability to slow things down.

Trap. the filibuster is a Senate-only tool. Nothing in the House works like it, because the House has the Rules Committee and majority control of the floor. If a question describes extended debate blocking a vote, you are in the Senate; if it describes strict debate limits set by a committee, you are in the House.

The distinctions in the trap boxes are in the Unit 2 deck as flashcards. If one catches you here, you will see it again in the deck until you can spot it without stopping.

2.3 Congressional Behavior

Members of Congress choose, issue by issue, whom they are really voting for. The **trustee model** has legislators vote their own judgment about what is best. The **delegate model** has them vote as their constituents would want. The **politico model** mixes the two approaches. Members follow the voters on issues they care about and use independent judgment on the rest. Which model a member follows often depends on visibility. On a closely watched vote back home, the delegate model dominates; on an obscure procedural question, the trustee model has room.

Two forces make Congress harder to move. **Ideological polarization** is the growing distance between the parties' elected officials and voters, which makes bipartisan compromise harder. **Gridlock** follows when there is a lack of consensus that prevents legislative action. **Divided government**, with the presidency held by one party and at least one chamber of Congress by the other, makes gridlock more likely, though unified government does not guarantee smooth sailing either. On the exam, gridlock is a condition to identify rather than a judgment about whether the system is working well. The same separated powers that protect liberty also slow action.

Who gets represented starts with the district map. **Redistricting** redraws legislative boundaries after population changes, and **gerrymandering** draws those lines to advantage a political group. Two required cases set the legal frame. **Baker v. Carr** held that redistricting claims are justiciable, opening federal courts to Equal Protection challenges over district maps. **Shaw v. Reno** held that race-based districting can face Equal Protection challenges when race is the predominant factor in drawing the lines.

MODEL	THE MEMBER VOTES BASED ON	WHEN IT DOMINATES
Trustee	Their own judgment	Low-visibility issues voters are not watching
Delegate	Constituent preferences	Closely watched votes back home
Politico	A mix of both	Most real-world voting

A **lame duck president**, one nearing the end of a term with a successor chosen or influence fading, changes congressional behavior too. Members start positioning for the next administration rather than the current one, and timing becomes part of the calculation, which is why major legislation often stalls in a president's final months.

Trap. Baker v. Carr did not outlaw gerrymandering. It said federal courts could hear redistricting cases at all. Shaw v. Reno drew the racial line. Conflating the two, or claiming either case banned partisan map-drawing outright, is the wrong answer the exam expects you to avoid.

2.4 Roles and Powers of the President

The president's power comes in two kinds. **Formal powers** are established by the Constitution or by law and include the **veto**, service as **commander in chief** of the armed forces, negotiating **treaties**, and appointing officials and judges. **Informal powers** grew up through political practice rather than constitutional text and include **bargaining and persuasion** with Congress, **executive orders** directing the executive branch, and the public tools of communication covered in the next sections. The distinction matters because formal powers have defined limits while informal powers stretch or shrink with the politics of the moment.

The veto shows both kinds of power at work. A president can reject a bill outright, and Congress can override that rejection with a two-thirds vote in each chamber. The **pocket veto** works differently. If the president takes no action during the final ten days of a congressional session and Congress adjourns, the bill dies without a veto message and without any chance of override. For international agreements, **treaties** require Senate ratification by two-thirds, while **executive agreements** need only the president. Agreements are easier to make, but they are also easier for the next president to undo.

The president does not work alone. The **Cabinet**, the heads of the executive departments, advises the president and administers major areas of federal policy. The **Executive Office of the President** is the staff and agencies that directly support presidential policymaking. Together they turn one elected official into a functioning executive branch, which is also why presidential priorities can reshape how laws are actually implemented.

Informal powers carry limits built into their informality. An executive order can be reversed by the next president with a signature, blocked by a court that finds it exceeds legal authority, or undercut by Congress writing a law that removes the discretion the order relied on. A **signing statement**, the president's written interpretation issued when signing a bill, signals how the executive branch will read the law, but it does not change the law's text. Because these tools do not require Congress, a later president or Congress can reverse them more easily.

Trap. executive agreements are not treaties, and the difference is the Senate. A treaty needs two-thirds of the Senate; an executive agreement needs only the president. Questions that describe a president making an international deal 'without Senate approval' are describing an agreement, and the durability tradeoff is usually the point being tested.

2.5 Checks on the Presidency

Every presidential power has a check aimed at it. The Senate's **advice and consent** role means many appointments, and all treaties, need **Senate confirmation**; a hostile Senate can stall or block a president's team and deals. Congress can override vetoes, write laws that narrow presidential discretion, and control funding for presidential priorities. The courts can strike down executive actions that exceed legal authority. The **congressional agenda** is also a check because a president who wants legislation needs a Congress willing to take it up.

Judicial appointments let a president shape policy decades after leaving office, because federal judges serve during good behavior. Confirmation fights over judges tend to be intense because an appointment can affect policy long after the president has left office. **Appointment conflict**, when the Senate opposes a president's nominees, is the friction this design guarantees.

Impeachment is the heaviest check in the system. The House charges, the Senate tries, and conviction removes the official, but the supermajority requirement keeps removal rare by design. The prospect of proceedings can constrain presidential behavior long before any vote, so the threat itself can act as a check. Congress also checks the presidency prospectively, by writing statutes that define and limit what the executive branch may do, shrinking presidential discretion inside lines Congress draws.

Trap. questions about checks on the presidency often smuggle in the president's own tools as wrong answers. Executive orders, signing statements, and executive directives are presidential powers, not checks on them. A check is always another branch's power, such as Senate confirmation, a congressional override, or judicial review by the courts.

2.6 Expansion of Presidential Power

The modern presidency is far larger than the office the founders designed, and the growth has a theory behind it. In **Federalist No. 70**, Hamilton argued that a single, **energetic executive** serves the public because unity in the executive supports decisiveness, and decisiveness helps protect national security, property, and liberty. That argument became the intellectual foundation for presidential power growing through crises, congressional delegation, precedent, and political practice.

Two theories still fight over how far that growth should go. **Stewardship theory** holds that presidents may act for the public good unless the Constitution or a law forbids the action. The **limited presidential power** view holds that presidents should exercise only authority the Constitution or a statute grants. **Executive privilege** is the claimed right to withhold confidential communications from Congress or the courts to protect candid advice. Supporters point to the need for honest deliberation, while critics describe it as a way to limit oversight.

The system's answer to concentrated executive power was the **Twenty-Second Amendment**, which limits a person to two elected presidential terms. It was a direct response to the concern that an energetic executive could become a permanent one, a concern Hamilton's critics had raised. Term limits do not shrink the office's powers, but they guarantee the office changes hands.

THEORY	PRESIDENTS MAY...	RISK IT ACCEPTS
Stewardship theory	Act for the public good unless the Constitution or a law forbids it	Overreach in the name of necessity
Limited power view	Act only when authorized by the Constitution or a statute	Inaction in a genuine emergency

The fight between these theories never ends because the constitutional text supports both readings. Article II vests the executive power in the president without defining its edges, and Congress keeps delegating new authority while complaining about how it is used. The exam does not ask you to pick a winner. It asks you to recognize which theory a given presidential action is relying on.

Trap. the Twenty-Second Amendment limits terms, not power. A second-term president keeps every formal power of the office; the amendment only ends the tenure. Questions that ask what the amendment 'takes away' from a sitting president are testing whether you confuse duration with authority.

2.7 Presidential Communication

The president is the only official elected by the whole country, and that **national constituency** gives the president a broader base of support than any individual member of Congress has. The **bully pulpit** is the president's ability to use the visibility of the office to shape what the public pays attention to. **Going public** means appealing directly to citizens to build support and pressure Congress or other actors into moving. **Agenda setting** is the quieter version, where the president influences which issues the public and the government treat as priorities.

The tools have changed with technology. The **State of the Union** is constitutionally required, a presidential message to Congress, but modern presidents also use it as a national pitch for their policy priorities to a prime-time audience. **Social media** lets presidents respond rapidly and speak to the public without intermediaries. Across these tools, the president uses national attention to gain political leverage and then uses that leverage with Congress.

Going public has limits. A president speaking to a divided public may reach only supporters, and members of Congress in safe seats can ignore national pressure entirely. Presidents also compete for attention with everything else in the media environment, so public attention is easier to hold when events already have the country's focus. Going public tends to work best alongside bargaining with Congress rather than instead of it, since public pressure and private persuasion often need to work together.

Trap. agenda setting is not lawmaking. A president can force an issue onto the national agenda and still need Congress to pass a single word about it. The exam distinguishes the power to focus attention from the power to enact law; confusing them turns the bully pulpit into a legislature.

2.8 The Judicial Branch

Article III creates the Supreme Court and lets Congress establish the lower federal courts. But the judiciary's most famous power appears nowhere in the constitutional text. In **Marbury v. Madison** (1803), the Court established **judicial review**, the power of courts to determine whether government actions comply with the Constitution. Chief Justice Marshall's reasoning was structural. If the Constitution is the supreme law, someone must be able to say when ordinary law conflicts with it, and that someone is the courts.

Hamilton had made the case for this kind of judiciary years earlier. In **Federalist No. 78**, he defended an independent judiciary with life tenure as the branch least dangerous to liberty because it controls neither the military nor the money, only judgment. **Judicial independence**, the ability to decide cases without direct electoral or political pressure, is what lets courts issue unpopular decisions and still expect compliance. **Constitutional interpretation**, the process of determining what the Constitution's provisions mean in new circumstances, is where that independence does its daily work.

Hamilton called the judiciary the least dangerous branch because it commands neither the military nor the treasury, only judgment. That weakness also offers some protection. Because courts cannot enforce their own rulings, their authority rests on the willingness of the other branches and the public to comply. Life tenure supports this arrangement. A judge who never faces voters can protect unpopular minorities and strike down popular laws, which is part of what judicial independence is meant to allow.

Trap. judicial review is not written in the Constitution. Marshall derived it in Marbury. 'The Constitution grants the courts judicial review' is the classic wrong answer, and it appears on the exam precisely because it sounds so plausible.

2.9 The Role of the Judicial Branch

Courts do not start from scratch with each case. **Stare decisis**, the doctrine that courts generally follow **precedent**, keeps the law stable and predictable so that similar facts tend to get similar rulings. **Judicial decision making** weighs the law, the precedent, the facts, and constitutional interpretation together. Precedent is not absolute. Courts do **overturn precedent** when a majority concludes the old rule was wrong, and **court composition**, the legal and ideological perspectives of the sitting justices, shapes whether old rules survive.

How a court approaches that choice has names. **Judicial activism** favors robust judicial review, including willingness to overturn precedent or invalidate government action. **Judicial restraint** favors deference to the elected branches and close adherence to precedent. These terms describe approaches to judging rather than political positions. A restrained judge can uphold a law you oppose, and an activist judge can strike down one you support.

Precedent tends to be reconsidered when the old rule proves unworkable in practice, when new facts no longer fit it, or when a changed Court composition brings a majority willing to revisit it. None of this happens lightly. The Court explains at length why the old rule must go, because every overruling trades some of the law's predictability for what the majority sees as correctness. Stare decisis is a strong

presumption, not an absolute rule, and questions that treat it as unbreakable miss how the Court actually behaves.

Trap. activism and restraint are methods, not ideologies. Treating 'activist' as a synonym for liberal and 'restrained' as a synonym for conservative will fail on any question that separates the judge's philosophy from the outcome. On the exam, the question is whether the judge defers to the elected branches or not.

2.10 The Court in Action

The Supreme Court's power is protected by design. Federal judges serve during good behavior, and that **life tenure** means a president's judicial appointments keep shaping the law long after the president leaves. Cases reach the Court mostly by **writ of certiorari**, an order directing a lower court to send up a case for review; the justices choose which disputes deserve their attention, which is itself a form of power.

When the Court decides, it speaks in layers. The **majority opinion** is the controlling explanation agreed to by more than half the participating justices, and it is the law. A **concurring opinion** agrees with the outcome for different reasons. A **dissenting opinion** disagrees with the decision and explains why. Dissents can matter beyond the case because they preserve arguments that future majorities sometimes adopt. Together, these features create the **countermajoritarian difficulty**, in which unelected judges with life tenure can invalidate the acts of elected majorities. That result can seem undemocratic, but it follows from the design of judicial review.

Thousands of petitions arrive each term, and the justices grant only a small fraction. It takes four justices agreeing to take a case, the rule of four, which means a determined minority of the Court can force the full Court to decide an issue. Certiorari is most likely when lower courts disagree with each other or when the case presents an important unsettled question of federal law.

Trap. a concurring opinion agrees with the result, not the reasoning. Only the majority opinion controls the law. Students who treat every published opinion as equally authoritative will misread any question that hinges on what the Court actually held.

2.11 Checks on the Judicial Branch

The Court has no army and no budget, so the elected branches have real ways to push back. The Senate's **judicial confirmation** power means presidents shape the Court only with senatorial consent, and over decades the bench comes to reflect the politics of the presidents and Senates that built it. Congress can pass new legislation to blunt a ruling's practical effect where the Constitution allows it. It can engage in **jurisdiction stripping**, limiting the categories of cases the Court may hear on appeal, within constitutional limits. And it can propose a **constitutional amendment** that changes the legal rule underneath a decision entirely, which is the one response the Court cannot overrule.

CHECK	HOW IT WORKS	ITS LIMIT
Judicial confirmation	Senate approves nominees, shaping the bench over time	Only operates at vacancies
New legislation	Congress blunts a ruling's practical effect	Must stay within constitutional bounds
Jurisdiction stripping	Congress limits appellate case categories	Cannot erase the power of judicial review
Constitutional amendment	Changes the rule beneath the decision	Requires supermajorities to propose and ratify

Court legitimacy, the public's acceptance of the Court's authority, helps rulings take effect, because the Court cannot enforce its own decisions. **Implementation of court decisions** depends on executive officials, states, and institutions willing to carry them out. When public acceptance weakens, implementation can become harder, which is one reason the justices pay attention to how their decisions are received.

Trap. jurisdiction stripping has constitutional limits. Congress can adjust the Court's appellate jurisdiction, but it cannot erase the Court's power to say what the law is. Answers that treat Congress as able to simply delete judicial review confuse a real check with an imaginary one.

2.12 The Bureaucracy

The **federal bureaucracy** includes the departments, agencies, commissions, and government corporations that administer and implement federal policy. A **department** is a major executive organization covering a broad policy area, led by a Cabinet secretary who answers to the president. Beyond the departments sit **independent agencies**, **independent regulatory commissions** designed to regulate with some insulation from direct presidential control, and **government corporations** that deliver services in a businesslike form. Where an agency sits on the org chart determines who can tell it what to do, which is why the categories matter more than any single agency's name.

The workforce changed with the **merit system**, where hiring and promotion are based on qualifications and performance. That system replaced **political patronage**, the awarding of government jobs for political support. The professional **civil service** that resulted is meant to be competent and politically neutral, administering the law steadily across administrations. That neutrality can also make the bureaucracy slower to change, because career officials outlast every administration and answer to the statute as well as to the White House.

Around the agencies form durable relationships that shape policy from the outside. An **iron triangle** is a stable alliance among a congressional committee, a bureaucratic agency, and an interest group in one policy area. The committee protects the agency's budget, the agency serves the group's interests, and the group supports the committee's members. An **issue network** is a looser, wider coalition of officials, experts, groups, and advocates organized around an issue rather than locked into a three-way deal. Iron triangles tend to be stable, while issue networks are more fluid and can be harder to map.

Trap. independent regulatory commissions are the insulated ones, not cabinet departments. Departments answer to the president through the Cabinet; commissions were designed to sit at arm's length from presidential control. Questions asking which agency type a president can most easily direct are testing exactly this split.

2.13 Discretionary and Rulemaking Authority

Congress writes laws in broad strokes and hands the details to agencies, because it lacks the time, the technical expertise, and the ability to anticipate every application. **Delegated authority** is the transfer of power that occurs when Congress authorizes executive agencies to carry out legislation.

Bureaucratic discretion is the agency's room to choose how laws will be interpreted and implemented case by case. **Rulemaking authority** goes further, letting agencies create **regulations** that carry the force of law. **Policy implementation**, putting laws and decisions into effect, is where statutes become the rules that affect daily life, so the details of a regulation can matter a great deal.

The examples are worth knowing by function rather than by trivia. The **Environmental Protection Agency** develops and enforces environmental regulations. The **Securities and Exchange Commission** regulates securities markets and enforces securities law. The **Federal Election Commission** administers and enforces federal campaign-finance law. Cabinet departments handle their own policy areas, including **Homeland Security**, **Transportation**, **Veterans Affairs**, and **Education**. The exam rarely asks what a specific agency does; it asks what kind of authority an agency is exercising when it acts.

Trap. rulemaking is not legislating from scratch. Agencies may create rules only within the authority Congress delegated, and courts can strike down rules that exceed it. Any answer describing an agency as free to write whatever rules it prefers fails on delegation.

2.14 Holding the Bureaucracy Accountable

Because bureaucrats are not elected, elected officials use several tools to oversee them. **Congressional oversight** is the review, monitoring, and supervision of executive agencies by Congress. **Oversight hearings** investigate agency conduct and force officials to answer publicly. **Compliance monitoring** checks whether funds are used properly and regulations are followed. The **power of the purse** also lets Congress reward or punish agencies through appropriations, since an agency that ignores Congress may see its budget cut in the next cycle.

Presidents have their own levers. **Presidential control of the bureaucracy** works through appointments, directives, and administrative priorities that align agencies with White House goals, plus **executive authorization** directing how implementation proceeds. Courts add a third check by reviewing whether agency actions stay within the law. **Bureaucratic accountability** comes from all three branches constraining agencies in different ways, so agencies often have to respond to competing demands from Congress, the president, and the courts.

Trap. oversight hearings are not trials. They investigate, expose, and pressure, but they do not convict or sentence. An oversight hearing works through public scrutiny and the possibility of later legislation or budget cuts, not through a verdict.

2.15 Policy and the Branches of Government

Almost no national policy comes from one branch alone. **Shared powers** overlap across the branches, so policymaking requires competition, bargaining, and cooperation among them. **Interbranch policymaking** describes that process, in which Congress writes the law, the president implements and enforces it, and the courts interpret it, with each step affecting the others. A law has limited effect until an agency writes rules for it, and those rules can be reviewed by courts to see whether they stay within the law.

The constitutional distribution of power also acts as a **policy constraint** because it limits what any branch can do on its own. A president cannot appropriate money, Congress cannot enforce the laws it passes, and courts cannot initiate the cases they decide. **Institutional cooperation** is what makes the system work when it works; **institutional competition**, the branches protecting or expanding their own influence, is what makes it grind when it does not. The founders split power to limit the risk of tyranny, and that choice means governing requires the branches to work with each other on an ongoing basis.

Trap. on checks-and-balances questions in this topic, the exam rewards the interactive answer. Policy emerges from bargaining among the branches, not from one branch commanding the others. Any option describing unilateral control by a single branch is the wrong model of how the system works.

Your 20-minute plan for this unit

- Minutes 0-5. Flashcards: run the Unit 2 deck on Rycal and rate every card honestly. Star every card about checks, one branch on another; those are the arrow questions the exam repeats.
- Minutes 5-12. Brain Dump: write from memory how each branch checks the other two, with one example per arrow. Then compare against the guide and fill the gaps in a different color.
- Minutes 12-18. AP-style questions: do a set of Unit 2 questions on Rycal, focusing on congressional procedure and the courts.
- Minutes 18-20. FRQ drills: outline one SCOTUS Comparison response on Rycal using *Marbury v. Madison* as your required case. Facts, holding, reasoning, then the comparison.

Confusions That Cost Points

Unit 2 rewards knowing who does what to whom. These are the distinctions the exam tests most often.

THE MIX-UP	THE FIX
Filibuster vs House procedure	The filibuster is Senate-only, ended by cloture at three-fifths. The House has no filibuster; the Rules Committee and majority control run the floor.
Pocket veto vs regular veto	Pocket veto: the president takes no action, Congress adjourns within ten days, the bill dies with no override possible. Regular veto: Congress can override with two-thirds in each chamber.
Treaty vs executive agreement	A treaty needs two-thirds of the Senate; an executive agreement needs only the president. Agreements are easier to make and easier for the next president to undo.
Where judicial review comes from	From Marbury v. Madison, not from the Constitution's text. 'The Constitution grants judicial review' is the classic wrong answer.
Concurring vs dissenting opinions	A concurring opinion agrees with the outcome for different reasons; a dissenting opinion disagrees with the decision. Only the majority opinion controls the law.
Iron triangle vs issue network	An iron triangle is a stable three-way alliance of committee, agency, and interest group. An issue network is a looser, wider coalition around an issue.
Trustee vs delegate vs politico	A trustee votes their own judgment; a delegate votes constituent preferences; a politico mixes the two depending on the issue.
Mandatory vs discretionary spending	Mandatory spending is required by existing law, including entitlements like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Discretionary spending is set each year through appropriations.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations follow. Do not peek.

1. The House and the Senate pass different versions of the same bill. What must happen before the bill can go to the president?

- A. The president selects which version to sign into law
- B. The Senate version prevails automatically as the upper chamber's text
- C. Both versions become law and the courts decide which one controls
- D. A conference committee reconciles the two versions into one

2. The Supreme Court declares an act of Congress unconstitutional. The power the Court is exercising comes from:

- A. Marbury v. Madison, which established judicial review
- B. The text of Article III, which explicitly grants judicial review
- C. The Supremacy Clause, which makes federal law supreme over state law
- D. Federalist No. 78, which created the Supreme Court

- 3.** A senator speaks at length on the Senate floor to delay a vote on a bill she opposes. Supporters of the bill want to end the delay and force a vote. Which procedure can they use, and what does it require?
- A. A discharge petition, requiring a majority of the House
 - B. Cloture, requiring three-fifths of the Senate
 - C. A pocket veto, requiring action by the president
 - D. Unanimous consent, requiring every senator to agree in advance
- 4.** Which of the following best describes an iron triangle?
- A. A three-way alliance among a congressional committee, a bureaucratic agency, and an interest group that benefits from the agency's programs
 - B. A constitutional requirement that all three branches approve federal regulations
 - C. A coordinated bloc of three senators who organize filibusters together
 - D. The three-step process for removing a president through impeachment

Answer Key

1. D. D is correct because a bill must pass both chambers in identical form, and the conference committee exists to reconcile House and Senate differences. A is the trap: the president has no power to choose between versions. B is the trap: neither chamber's text automatically prevails, and 'upper chamber' confers no such privilege. C is the trap: two conflicting versions cannot both become law, and courts do not pick legislative text.

2. A. A is correct because Chief Justice Marshall derived judicial review in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803); the power appears nowhere in the Constitution's text. B is the trap: Article III creates the Court but does not mention judicial review. C is the trap: the Supremacy Clause resolves federal-versus-state conflicts, not court-versus-Congress ones. D is the trap: Federalist No. 78 defended an independent judiciary, but Article III, not Hamilton's essay, created the Court.

3. B. B is correct because cloture is the procedure for ending Senate debate, and it requires three-fifths of the Senate. A is incorrect because a discharge petition is a House tool for forcing a bill out of committee, not for ending Senate debate. C is incorrect because a pocket veto is a presidential action, not a Senate procedure. D is incorrect because unanimous consent moves routine business when nobody objects; it cannot overcome a senator who is actively holding the floor.

4. A. A is correct because an iron triangle is the stable three-way relationship among the congressional committee overseeing an agency, the agency itself, and the interest groups that benefit from its programs. B is incorrect because no such constitutional requirement exists. C is incorrect because that describes a voting bloc, not an iron triangle. D is incorrect because impeachment involves the House charging and the Senate trying the case, not a three-step triangle.

If you missed a question above, make a flashcard for the rule you missed and add it to your Unit 2 deck on Rycal. Drill that card in the spaced reviews over the next several days instead of rereading the answer.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud or write it down. Peeking first turns this into rereading, and rereading builds recognition of the page instead of recall of the ideas.

Anything you cannot say out loud goes on a card in the Unit 2 deck so it comes back in your spaced review.

1. Compare the House and the Senate on size, term length, and representation basis, and explain which chamber responds faster to public opinion and why.
2. Trace a bill from standing committee through markup, the Rules Committee, the floor, conference committee, and the president's desk, naming what happens at each stop.
3. Explain the difference between a treaty and an executive agreement, including who approves each and which is more durable.
4. What is judicial review, where did it come from, and why does Federalist No. 78 matter to the judiciary's design?
5. Distinguish an iron triangle from an issue network, and name the three corners of the triangle.
6. Name three ways Congress holds the bureaucracy accountable and one way the president does.

Key terms for this unit

Bicameral Congress, House of Representatives, Senate, Continuous body, Republicanism, Enumerated powers of Congress, Implied powers of Congress, Power of the purse, Declare war, Naturalization, Commerce power, Congressional oversight, Life tenure for justices, Judicial independence, Countermajoritarian difficulty, SCOTUS comparison, Majority opinion, Judicial activism, Judicial restraint, Constitutional amendment, Jurisdiction stripping, Implementation of court decisions, Judicial confirmation, Congressional response to Court decisions, Federal bureaucracy, Department, Independent agency, Independent regulatory commission, Government corporation, Regulation, Iron triangle, Issue network, Civil service, Merit system, Political patronage, Bureaucratic discretion, Rulemaking authority, Delegated authority, Policy implementation, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Transportation, Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Education, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Election Commission, Securities and Exchange Commission, Oversight hearing, Executive authorization, Presidential control of bureaucracy, Compliance monitoring, Bureaucratic accountability, Interbranch policymaking, Multiple access points, Shared powers, Policy constraint, Institutional competition, Institutional cooperation, Standing committee, Committee hearing, Markup, Speaker of the House, House Rules Committee, Committee of the Whole, Discharge petition, Unanimous consent, Hold, Filibuster, Cloture, Conference committee, Mandatory spending, Discretionary spending, Pork-barrel legislation, Logrolling, Revenue bill, Partisan voting, Political polarization, Gridlock, Redistricting, Gerrymandering, Divided government, Lame duck president, Trustee model, Delegate model, Politico model, Baker v. Carr, Shaw v. Reno, Policy agenda, Formal presidential powers, Informal presidential powers, Veto, Pocket veto, Veto override, Commander in chief, Treaty, Executive agreement, Bargaining and persuasion, Executive order, Signing statement, Cabinet, Executive Office of the President, Senate confirmation, Advice and consent, Judicial appointments, Life tenure, Congressional agenda, Executive directive, Appointment conflict, Checks and balances, Federalist No. 70, Energetic executive, Twenty-Second Amendment, Stewardship theory, Limited presidential power, Expansion of presidential power, Bully pulpit, Agenda setting, State of the Union, Going public, Social media, National constituency, Judicial review, Article III, Federalist No. 78, Marbury v. Madison, Constitutional interpretation, Stare decisis, Precedent, Judicial decision making, Court composition, Overturn precedent, Presidential judicial appointments.

Questions students ask about Unit 2

How much of the exam is Unit 2?

Unit 2 is 25-36% of the AP exam, the heaviest unit in the course. The other units also depend on it because rights, parties, and elections all run through these institutions.

How many Supreme Court cases do I need for Unit 2?

The required cases are Marbury v. Madison on judicial review, Baker v. Carr on justiciable redistricting claims, and Shaw v. Reno on race as the predominant factor in districting. McCulloch v. Maryland and United States v. Lopez from Unit 1 carry over as reusable evidence.

What is the hardest part of Unit 2?

Keeping the direction of the checks straight is often the hardest part, including who checks whom and with what tool. It helps to sketch the relationships. Senate confirmation checks presidential appointments, the veto checks Congress, judicial review checks both, and the power of the purse checks the bureaucracy. Being able to recall those relationships without looking is a useful way to check your understanding.

Do I need to memorize every federal agency?

No. Know the categories, departments, independent agencies, independent regulatory commissions, and government corporations, and what insulates each from presidential control. Know a few agencies by function, such as the EPA, the SEC, and the FEC, and be ready to identify what kind of authority an agency is exercising.

How does Unit 2 show up on the free-response section?

Unit 2 appears across the free-response section. The SCOTUS Comparison question uses the required cases, Concept Application questions apply institutional powers to new scenarios, and bureaucracy and rulemaking fit policy and quantitative prompts. A clear understanding of Marbury or a clean explanation of cloture can be reused as evidence across FRQ types.

Where to go next

Turn every missed item above into a flashcard and drill those cards spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, use the Unit 2 deck under AP U.S. Government. That deck covers the terms from this guide, and the practice questions there work on the same traps named in the trap boxes and in the table of common mix-ups.

If you have a test date, put it in the Test Planner so the deck reviews and question sets are paced toward that date. Before a review session, use Brain Dump to write what you remember about how each branch checks the other two, then compare what you wrote against the guide and add cards for the gaps.

About this guide. Written for Rycal and aligned to the College Board AP U.S. Government and Politics course framework, Unit 2. All questions and explanations are original Rycal writing. Rycal is independent and is not affiliated with or endorsed by the College Board.