US Elections and Politics

Vocabulary sheet · TSI · institutions, elections, campaigns and the midterms · → = en français

The US system at a glance

3 branches: legislative (**Congress** = **House of Representatives**, 435 members, 2-year terms + **Senate**, 100 senators, 6-year terms, about a third elected every two years), executive (**the President**, 4-year term, two terms maximum, elected through the **Electoral College**: 538 electors, 270 needed) and judicial (**the Supreme Court**).

Midterms = two years after a presidential election, halfway through the president's term. Latest: **Tuesday, November 3, 2026** (all 435 House seats, 33 regular Senate seats plus special elections, 36 governorships). *Vocabulary only: the results are not included.*

1. Institutions and powers

Congress: the legislature (House + Senate) → *le Congrès*

the Speaker of the House: presiding officer of the House → *le président de la Chambre*

majority / minority leader: leader of the larger / smaller party in a chamber → *chef de la majorité / minorité*

the Vice President: replaces the president if needed; presides over the Senate and breaks ties → *le vice-président*

the Cabinet: heads of federal departments advising the president → *les secrétaires (ministres)*

governor: head of a state's executive branch → *le gouverneur*

the Supreme Court: highest federal court: nine justices, appointed for life → *la Cour suprême*

the White House / Capitol Hill: the president's office / Congress → *la Maison-Blanche / le Capitole*

federalism: power shared between federal government and states → *le fédéralisme*

checks and balances: each branch can limit the others → *les contre-pouvoirs*

2. Choosing a president

primary / caucus: vote / local meeting within a party to choose its candidate → *primaire / caucus*

nominee: the candidate chosen by a party → *le candidat investi*

ticket / running mate: president + vice-president candidates / the VP candidate → *le ticket / le colistier*

popular vote: total votes cast by the voters → *le vote populaire*

winner-take-all: in most states, the winner gets all the electoral votes → *le vainqueur emporte tout*

swing / battleground state: a state either party could win → *un État clé*

red / blue state: a state that usually votes Republican / Democratic → *État républicain / démocrate*

inauguration: ceremony when the president takes office → *l'investiture*

term limit: legal limit on the number of terms → *la limitation des mandats*

3. Voting and results

voter registration: signing up to vote → *l'inscription sur les listes*

polling place (UK: station): where people vote → *le bureau de vote*

ballot: the paper or screen used to vote; the vote itself → *le bulletin*

early voting: voting in person before election day → *le vote anticipé*

absentee / mail-in ballot: a vote cast by mail → *le vote par correspondance*

turnout: percentage of eligible voters who vote → *le taux de participation*

ballot measure: a question put directly to the voters → *la consultation locale*

exit poll: survey of voters leaving the polling place → *le sondage sortie des urnes*

to call a race: to announce the winner (usually the media) → *annoncer le vainqueur*

recount: a second count when the result is very close → *le recomptage*

to concede: to admit defeat → *reconnaître sa défaite*

landslide / narrow win / upset / toss-up: huge victory / win by a few votes / surprise result / race too close to call → *raz-de-marée / victoire serrée / surprise / indécis*

4. Campaigns, polls and money

to run for office (UK: stand for election): to be a candidate → *se présenter*

incumbent / challenger: current office-holder / person trying to win the seat → *le sortant / le challenger*

open seat: a seat with no incumbent running → *un siège sans sortant*

district (UK: constituency): area represented by one House member → *la circonscription*

gerrymandering / redistricting: drawing district lines to favour a party / redrawing them → *découpage partisan / redécoupage*

canvassing: going door to door to talk to voters → *le porte-à-porte*

rally / stump speech: big public meeting / the standard campaign speech → *un meeting / discours de campagne*

attack ad: advertisement criticising the opponent → *la publicité négative*

fundraising / donor: raising money / person who gives it → *collecte de fonds / donateur*

Super PAC: independent group that can spend large sums to support candidates but cannot coordinate with their campaigns → *comité d'action politique indépendant*

poll / margin of error: opinion survey / possible gap with reality → *sondage / marge d'erreur*

approval rating: percentage who approve of the president's work → *la cote de popularité*

5. The midterms

the midterms: elections halfway through a president's term → *élections de mi-mandat*

midterm penalty: the president's party tends to lose seats in Congress → *le « malus » de mi-mandat*

to flip / to hold a seat: to win a seat from the other party / to keep it → *faire basculer / conserver un siège*

majority / minority: party with more / fewer seats in a chamber → *majorité / minorité*

divided government: different parties control the White House and part of Congress → *gouvernement divisé*

gridlock: nothing can be passed because of disagreement → *le blocage législatif*

lame duck: official near the end of a term, with weakened influence → *« canard boiteux »*

government shutdown: federal services stop non-essential work because no budget has passed → *paralysie budgétaire*

6. Parties and ideas

Democrat / Democratic Party: major party, centre-left (Democrat = person; Democratic = adjective) → *démocrate*

Republican / GOP: the other major party, centre-right ("Grand Old Party") → *républicain*

liberal / progressive: left-leaning (in the US, liberal = left of centre!) → *de gauche (≠ libéral)*

conservative / moderate: right-leaning / close to the centre → *conservateur / modéré*

independent: not in either major party → *indépendant*

bipartisan / partisan: involving both parties / favouring one party → *bipartisan / partisan*

the base / swing voter: most loyal supporters / voter who may switch parties → *électorat fidèle / électeur indécis*

7. Making and challenging laws

bill / amendment: proposed law / change to a bill or the Constitution → *projet de loi / amendement*

to pass / sign into law: to approve a bill / president makes it law → *adopter / promulguer*

veto / override: president rejects a bill / Congress passes it anyway (two-thirds of both chambers) → *veto / passer outre*

executive order: directive issued by the president to run the federal government → *décret présidentiel*

filibuster: Senate tactic: speaking at length to delay a vote → *obstruction parlementaire*

committee: small group that studies bills or investigates → *une commission*

to confirm: Senate approves the president's nominees → *confirmer (une nomination)*

impeachment: House charges an official, Senate holds the trial → *mise en accusation / destitution*

subpoena / oversight: legal order to testify / Congress monitoring the executive → *assignation / contrôle parlementaire*

8. Useful verbs

to run for president / office · *She is running for governor.*

to win / lose an election, a seat, a majority · *He lost his seat narrowly.*

to cast a ballot for / against · *Millions cast their ballots early.*

to turn out (to vote) · *Young voters turned out in large numbers.*

to endorse a candidate (= to publicly support) · **to sway** voters

to be sworn in / to take office / to leave office / to step down

9. Traps for French speakers

the **Democratic** Party (not *Democrat Party*) · a **Democrat** (person)

liberal = left of centre in the US; free-market ideas = *free-market, libertarian*

to run for office (not *to present oneself*) · **candidacy** (not *candidature*)

a **poll** (sondage) ≠ a pole (pôle) · the elections **are** · election **day** is

to **elect** a president · to **vote for** a candidate (not *vote the president*)

Congress ≠ Congrès de Versailles: it is the House + the Senate, sitting all year

US ↔ UK: run for office ↔ stand for election · district ↔ constituency · polling place ↔ polling station · absentee ballot ↔ postal vote · Representative ↔ MP · the House ↔ the Commons

10. Test yourself

turnout · incumbent · ballot · swing · gerrymandering · veto · filibuster · poll

1. The _____ was low: fewer than half of registered voters went to the polls.
2. A sitting senator running for re-election is an _____.
3. Voters who cannot go to the polling place send an absentee _____.
4. Candidates focus on _____ states, where the result is uncertain.
5. Drawing district lines to favour one party is _____.
6. The president can _____ a bill, but Congress can override it.
7. In the Senate, a very long speech to delay a vote is a _____.
8. A new opinion _____ shows the president's approval rating falling.

Speak. Why do the midterms matter when the president is not on the ballot? What are the risks of divided government?