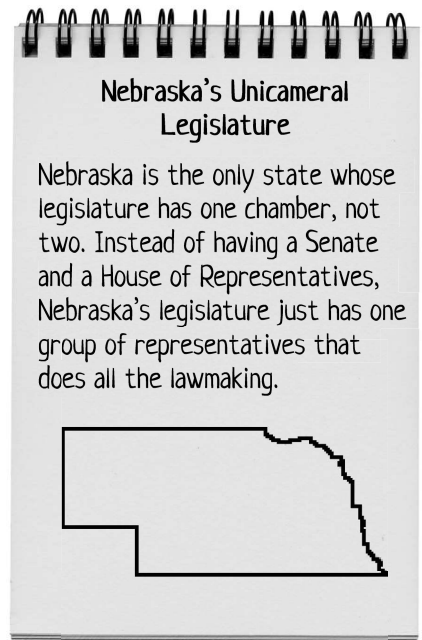# The Great State

State Government: Sound Familiar?

State governments work almost exactly like the federal government. There are three branches of government: an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. At the state level, the head of the executive branch is called the governor. Every state except one also has a **bicameral** legislature, meaning that the legislature is made up of two chambers. In most states, those chambers are called the Senate and the House of Representatives. A state's judicial branch normally includes a high court, often called the Supreme Court, and a system of lower courts. These lower courts include trial courts and appeals courts.

A state's three branches interact just like the three branches at the federal level. The purpose of having three branches is to balance power so that no one branch or person becomes too powerful. The state's legislature passes laws. A state's governor can veto laws that are passed, and a state's high court has the power to decide whether state laws violate the state's constitution.

Nebraska's Unicameral Legislature

Nebraska is the only state whose legislature has one chamber, not two. Instead of having a Senate and a House of Representatives, Nebraska's legislature just has one group of representatives that does all the lawmaking.
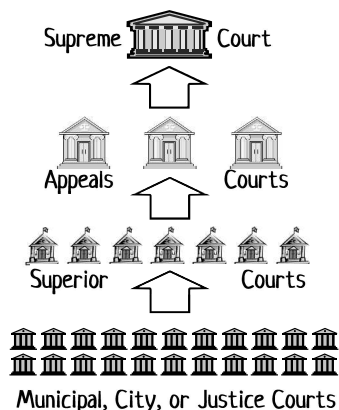
The State Legislative Branch

The state **legislature** is the state's lawmaking body. The state's **legislators** are the state's lawmakers. Each state is divided into legislative **districts** that contain roughly the same number of citizens. Citizens in each district elect representatives to serve in the state legislature. That means the state legislators represent the citizens who live in their district. This way, the interests of people in different parts of the state can be represented when state laws are being considered.

Many state legislatures have outgrown their historic buildings, such as this state capitol building in Arizona.

The State Executive Branch

The head of a state's executive branch is the state **governor**. The governor is like the "president" of a state and has similar powers, such as the power to veto bills passed by the state's legislature. A state's executive branch also includes many **departments**. States usually have their own departments of education, transportation, health, and other services. These departments carry out the laws passed by the state's legislature.

Governors from each state belong to the National Governors Association and meet twice each year to discuss issues that affect all states.

Supreme Court
Appeals Courts
Superior Courts
Municipal, City, or Justice Courts

The State Judicial Branch

At the state level, like the federal level, cases start in a trial court. In many states, the trial-court level is called the **superior court**. States also have appeals courts where people can fight a trial court's ruling. And, of course, every state has a high court. A state's high court reviews the decisions made by lower courts, supervises the other courts, and interprets the state constitution as it applies to the law. State judicial branches also include a level of courts below the trial courts. These courts handle the thousands of smaller issues that come up every day, such as traffic tickets and minor crimes called misdemeanors.

The Great State

The New York Assembly

State Laws

The state legislature is a state's lawmaking body. But in all states, the "law of the land" is the **state constitution**. Just like the U.S. Constitution, a state's constitution describes how the state's government must operate. It may also include other laws, such as requiring a free education for state citizens. In addition to the state constitution and the state legislative branch, there are usually other ways that laws can be made in a state. In many states, the **initiative** process allows citizens to draft laws they would like to see adopted. If citizens collect enough signatures, the law will be placed on the ballot for state citizens to vote on. The **referendum** process works the same way but is used to let citizens vote on a law already passed by the state legislature. However a state law is adopted, the law only applies inside that state.

Services, Services

State governments provide many services to state citizens. These include things like police, fire safety, child protective services, roads, schools, and parks. One of the biggest services is maintaining the state's **infrastructure**—the basic support structures that serve a geographic area, such as transportation, communication, and power systems. All of these services cost money and are generally paid for with taxes collected from citizens. Usually, however, states cannot afford to provide all the services citizens need. Very often, states look to the federal government for help. The federal government gives states money in the form of **grants**, which are sums of money designated for a certain purpose such as improving an airport or providing health care to low-income households.

Regulations = Rules

Idaho's Division of Building Safety issues licenses to electricians, plumbers and others.

State governments also protect citizens by **regulating**, or making rules about, many activities. Doctors, dentists, accountants, builders, barbers, and many other professionals must be certified by state agencies. State and local governments enforce building codes that specify exactly how buildings must be constructed. They conduct food safety inspections at restaurants, check to make sure gasoline pumps are accurate, and administer tests to people seeking a driver's license. The state agencies that carry out these regulations are almost always part of the state's executive branch.

Local Governments

Local governments, such as cities and counties, get their power from the state government. The state decides what services cities and counties are responsible for providing and what kinds of laws cities and counties are allowed to make. Because local governments are the closest to citizens, often they are the ones that can most easily provide services. Some services such as schools, libraries, police, water, and trash collection are usually controlled at the local level. Even so, local governments must follow both state and federal laws when providing these services.

Animal licensing and leash laws are usually controlled by local governments.