Our Government

The government that ran the country during the Revolutionary War was outlined by a document called the Articles of Confederation. This government could create treaties, solve disputes between states, direct the Continental Army and print money. On the other hand, it did not have any way to enforce any laws it created, it could not use taxes to raise money (all its money was donated voluntarily by the states,) and it couldn't really force the states to do anything. After the war ended, several crises showed that the Articles would need to be replaced with a stronger central government. As it stood, the Articles didn't even have a way to force member states to show up when sued to do so. It would need to be reconstituted.

Our government is constituted (made up of) three branches of government that are designed to be equal in power but separate in focus. The idea that each branch can to a limited degree block the power of the other two branches was intended to provide a balance of power and a system of checks and balances. This means that each branch could prevent (or check) the other branches from taking over and becoming too powerful.

The legislative branch is responsible for creating laws and modifying the constitution document itself. The executive branch is responsible for performing the tasks required by laws, running the armed forces, and enforcing regulations. The Judicial Branch runs the court system in order to evaluate laws to see if they violate the constitution, to resolve guilt or innocence in the event that laws are broken, and to issue consequences in the form of fines or prison sentences.

There are many different opinions about how the government should be run, and what the purpose of the government should be. Traditionally, people gather into groups based on a shared idea of what government is. These groups are known as political parties. There are currently two primary political parties that compete for power in the U.S.

The Republicans are a political party that began just before the American Civil War and ran on a general platform of opposition to slavery. Since then, they have evolved to run on a platform of small, limited federal government, gun rights, religious conservativism, "traditional family values," “traditional American values,” and a strong military. (Conservatives seek to conserve or keep what they consider to be the best elements of the past.) At the same time, republicans are heavily favored as the party of the elderly, males, the wealthy and white non-hispanics. They are sometimes referred to as the G.O.P. (grand old party) and are represented by the elephant, their mascot. The core of the Republican Party believes that the best route to prosperity is to let individuals make their own decisions, and the economy of the free market will sort out the winners from the losers to everyone's benefit.

The Democrats are a political party that has its roots back in the 1830's. It began as a very conservative party, but began to shift in a more liberal direction during the economic crises of the 1930's during the Great Depression. Since then, the Democrats have come to embrace the government as a positive force for change. They tend to believe that the government should heavily regulate markets to keep them "fair," and that the government should intervene in order to provide a social safety net for the poor and weak. As liberals, democrats tend to be more progressive, focusing less on traditional roles and values and more on general equality (according to their definition of what equality looks like.) As a party, they are favored by women, the young, the more highly educated, and by most minorities. They are represented by a donkey, and argue that the best route to prosperity is to support individuals so that they all have an equal chance at success within a regulated free market.

Currently, the House is majority Republican, and so has (by a simple majority) elected John Boehner as the leader and Speaker of the House. Democrats currently control the Senate and Presidency, and so have elected a Democrat to be the Senate President Pro Tempore (Patrick Leahy) and are led by the Senate Majority Leader Senator Harry Reid.

The document that outlines the various parts and powers of our government, and the rights of its citizens, is known as the Constitution of the United States.

Respond to the following prompts in the CARs format.

1. Explain why the Constitution is probably better than the Articles of Confederation.
2. Explain what demographic groups are more likely to vote for Republicans, and why.
3. Explain what demographic groups are more likely to vote for Democrats, and why.