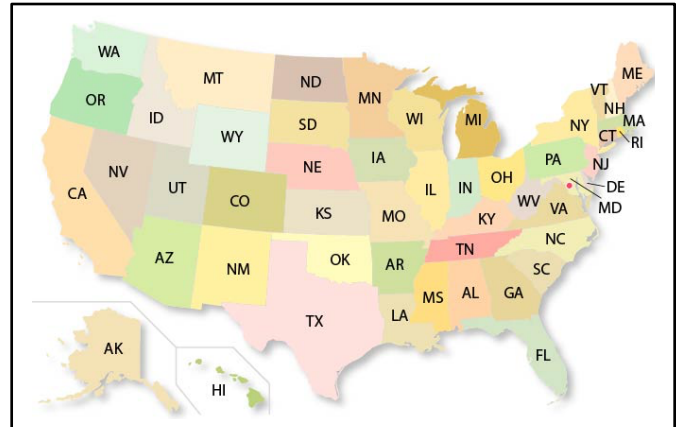


# An introduction to the USA

## 1. America in a nutshell

- Population: about 330 million inhabitants.
- Area: About 10million km<sup>2</sup>. (almost 20x France!)
- Capital city: Washington DC
- Largest cities: New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago
- Minorities: Hispanic Americans (≈ 18%), African-Americans (≈ 13%), Asian-Americans (≈ 6%)...
- Number of states: 50
- Current President: Joe Biden (D) since January 2021.



## 2. American politics

- Although it is often called the “New World”, the US is one of the oldest democracies in the world: its **Declaration of Independence** was written on July 4, 1776, and its **Constitution** dates from 1789!
- American politics is dominated by two very old parties:
  - ⇒ The **Republican Party**, nicknamed the "Grand Old Party" (GOP), is symbolized by an elephant. Its most prominent figures include Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump. Today, the GOP is a right-wing party with a conservative ideology: they call for a “small government (tax cuts, individual freedom), they defend Christian & family values, and they are very patriotic.
  - ⇒ The **Democratic Party** is symbolized by a donkey. Famous Democrats include Franklin D Roosevelt (FDR), John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Barack Obama. They have a liberal (=progressive), center-left ideology, and they advocate environmental measures, racial and social equality, the rights of minorities, universal health care....
- The **US president** is elected indirectly (by the Electoral College) every 4 years. Although he is very powerful (the most powerful person on earth?), his prerogatives are limited:
  - ⇒ He is the Commander in chief of the US armed forces.
  - ⇒ He leads the country's domestic and foreign policy.
  - ⇒ He signs bills (= *projets de loi*) voted by Congress into laws (or Acts).
- The **US Congress** plays a major role: without a majority in Congress, it is very hard for Presidents to rule... (ex: during Obama’s term). It is composed of two chambers, which are both located on Capitol Hill in Washington DC:
  - ⇒ The US Senate: 100 Senators (two for each state) elected every six years.
  - ⇒ The House of Representatives: 435 Representatives elected every two years.
- The **US Supreme Court** is hugely influential, because they are the “Guardians of the Constitution”. There are nine Supreme Court Justices who are appointed (= *nominated*) for life by the President, and who issue decisions which shape the nation. For example, they outlawed school segregation in 1954 and they declared same-sex marriage to be constitutional in 2015. More recently, in 2022, they shocked the world when they ruled that states could ban abortion...

## 3. A few facts and figures

- The United States has been **the world’s most powerful and influential country** for the past 80 years:
  - ⇒ It is the world’s wealthiest country: despite China’s industrial power, the United States has the highest GDP (= *gross domestic product* = *PIB*) in the world: more than \$25 trillion (vs. \$3 tn for France and the UK!).
  - ⇒ The US has the world’s strongest army. For example, 40% of the world’s military spending is done by the US.
  - ⇒ American culture is hugely influential throughout the world – it is called “soft power”. Indeed, most leading social networks, film studios, streaming services... are based in America.
- Yet the US is also a **fragile superpower** with major weaknesses. For example...
  - ⇒ America is crippled by gun violence. Incredibly, 50% of the world’s firearms are in the US (≈ 400 million), even if only 30% of US adults possess a gun (gun ownership is protected by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution).
  - ⇒ The US is hampered by stark inequalities: the “top 1%” (= the richest 1%) own 30% of the country’s wealth, while the “bottom 50%” only hold 2% of American wealth. => Does the American dream still exist?
  - ⇒ Access to healthcare is difficult for poor Americans. As a result, for instance, more than 2/3 of Americans are either obese or overweight, and 25% Americans can’t afford to go to the dentist’s...