



Each U.S. state's executive branch of government is led by a **governor**, the elected official responsible for the management of the executive business of the state. Governors have varying powers and responsibilities, depending on each state's constitution and laws, which can at times make generalizations about them difficult.¹

Observers often compare governors to the U.S. president, as both are executive officials. There is some validity to this comparison. Governors, like presidents, are charged with implementing the laws. They propose legislation and budget plans, make key appointments, and can veto bills passed by state legislatures.

Most governors have less formal power over the state executive branch and more formal power vis a vis the state legislature than the president has at the national level, however. In the case of the executive branch, the only executive officials elected nationwide are the president and vice president – and they are on the same team. In states, however, the **lieutenant governor** is often elected separately from the governor, leading to the possibility that the top two state officials may be at odds with one another. Furthermore, other statewide executive posts, such as the **secretary of state** (the official in charge of managing elections), the **attorney general**, the **state treasurer**, the **state auditor**, and others may also be elected independently. The U.S. president has the power

to fire members of the cabinet at will; governors often do not have that luxury.

Governors have an advantage when it comes to the legislatures, however. In most states, they have a **line item veto power**,² that is, the power to reject portions of a bill passed by the legislature without rejecting the full bill. If a legislature wishes, it can override such a veto (as in the case of other vetoes), but this is a difficult feat, and governors are not overridden very often. Governors' offices are also better staffed than state legislatures and remain in business year-round, whereas most legislatures go out of session for at least some portion of the year. All but two governors have four-year terms,³ whereas most state legislators have two-year terms.⁴ All of these factors give governors leverage in policy disputes with the legislative branch.⁵

As state chief executives, governors have the duty to respond quickly to crises in their states, from natural disasters such as hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes to public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In most states, governors have the power to alter at least some laws or regulations in times of emergency.⁶ Each governor also serve as commander in chief of their state's **National Guard** unless these state-based militia units are called into federal government service. Governors may call upon the Guard to assist in humanitarian missions or in the enforcement of state and local laws.

¹ See the National Governors Association website for detailed information about gubernatorial powers: <https://www.nga.org/consulting/powers-and-authority/>

² Exceptions are Indiana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

³ The exceptions are New Hampshire and Vermont, whose governors have two-year terms.

⁴ State senates often have four-year terms, but the vast majority of state house members have two-year terms; see the National Conference of State Legislatures, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/number-of-legislators-and-length-of-terms.aspx>

⁵ As with presidents, institutional features cannot fully explain governors' success and failure. See, for example, Margaret Robertson Ferguson, "Chief Executive Success in the Legislative Arena," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 3:2 (Summer 2003), pp. 158-182.

⁶ Gregory Sunshine, et al., "An Assessment of State Laws Providing Gubernatorial Authority to Remove Legal Barriers to Emergency Response," *Health Security* 17:2 (April 2019), pp. 156-161.