

*The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes,*

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# UNDERSTANDING CONGRESS

## A CITIZEN'S GUIDE



*To declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water;*

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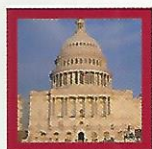


# UNDERSTANDING CONGRESS:

## A CITIZEN'S GUIDE

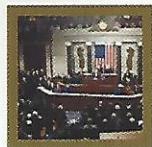
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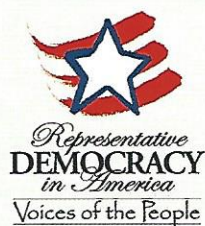
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A Project of the Alliance for Representative Democracy:  
The Center on Congress at Indiana University  
The National Conference of State Legislatures  
Center for Civic Education



# REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY



**“HERE, SIR, THE PEOPLE GOVERN.”**



**H**ow does America function as a democracy?

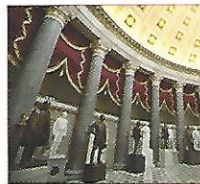
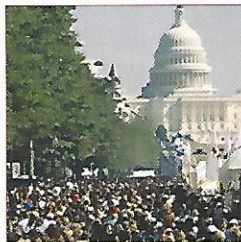
Any search for an answer must begin with a close look at the Congress, which is at the core of our representative democracy. Without Congress, the words “We the people” would have little meaning in our government.



## KEY POWERS GRANTED TO CONGRESS BY THE CONSTITUTION

- Lay and collect taxes
- Appropriate money for specified purposes
- Regulate commerce
- Establish rules for naturalization
- Declare war
- Raise and support armies

Congress protects the freedom of the American people by ensuring that they have a voice in how they are governed. Because Americans elect people to represent them in the Congress, they know that their hopes and dreams are reflected in our government. That is why our nation's founders gave Congress the power to pass laws and check presidential power. For more than 200 years, Americans have carried their voices to Washington and guarded their freedom through the Congress.



There have been stresses and strains, but each generation has guarded the basic principles of our republic: that government of the people, by the people, and for the people be enshrined in our most representative institution.

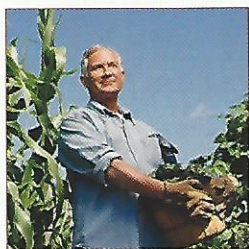
Alexander Hamilton's words painted prominently above the entrance to the House of Representatives make the point clearly: "Here, sir, the people govern."

## “FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA”



**R**epresentative democracy is not easy.

Our republic contains people of virtually every possible race, religion, and ethnic group. Our people live in huge cities and small towns; amid mountains and open plains; and on Atlantic beaches and Pacific islands. American workers toil in factories, farms, office buildings, and stores.



With every difference woven into America comes a different perspective. A farmer in Indiana has different experiences than a teacher in California. A fisherman in Maine has different priorities than a banker in New York. It falls to Congress to represent the multitude that we are, and to reconcile our many points of view on the great issues of the day.

People will sometimes complain that Congress takes too long to act. Yet Congress takes its time because our many views must be heard; our representatives have to forge compromises among those views, and our laws have to reflect consensus. Congress gives us a forum for debate and deliberation, and allows us to settle our differences peacefully and constructively.

So next time you give thanks for living in a union of states that stretches from “sea to shining sea,” remember that it is Congress that knits together our large and diverse nation.

### FAST FACT: THEN AND NOW

When the first Congress convened in 1789, each House member represented around 30,000 people. Today, each represents around 650,000.



## WHAT DID YOU DO TODAY?



**C**ongress is far more than a debating club. In fact, it's nearly impossible to get through a day without being touched by an act of Congress.

The **FOOD** you eat? Congress had a role in ensuring that it is safe, and that nutritional information about its contents is printed on its packaging.



The **AUTOMOBILE** you drive? Nearly every safety feature in it—from seat belts, to air bags, to the quality of the tires—has been strengthened through efforts of Congress. And Congress has also funded many of the roads upon which you drive.



The **JOB** you have? Congress has improved workplace safety, prohibited job discrimination, and protected pensions. Congress may even have supported your elementary school lunch, high school library, or the college tuition that helped set you on your way.

The **RECREATION** you enjoy? National parks and unpolluted rivers bear the stamp of congressional involvement.

The **MEDICINE** you take? Congress likely supported its research and development, and regulated testing to ensure that it is safe.



The **SECURITY** you depend on? Congress makes sure members of the military have the equipment and support they need—both at home and abroad.

## FAST FACT: SPENDING

The four biggest areas of congressional spending  
(as percentage of total spending):

- Social security: 21%
- National defense: 18%
- Medicare: 12%
- Interest payments on the national debt: 9%



Congress is certainly not responsible for every aspect in our daily lives—the hard work and ingenuity of the American people propel our nation, and state and local governments affect our lives in countless ways. However, the safety and security that many Americans take for granted is owed in part to Congress, and

to the representative or senator who recognized a problem and did something about it.



# HOW CONGRESS FUNCTIONS



## TWO BODIES: ONE CONGRESS



**W**hy is Congress split into two bodies, the House of Representatives and the Senate?

The House was originally intended as a forum to reflect the people's pressing concerns, while the Senate was designed to cool passionate debate and subject proposals to greater deliberation.



# HOW CONGRESS FUNCTIONS

## U.S. CONSTITUTION ARTICLE I, SECTION I

All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Although their differences have narrowed over the years, the requirement that both bodies must approve legislation helps to guard our rights and prevent hasty action.

### THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



Because House seats are up for election every two years, representatives very carefully monitor popular opinion in their districts. They try to keep a high profile in the communities they represent, so they can stay in close touch with voters. Since the average district has 650,000 constituents, that is not easy to do.

### THE SENATE



Senators run for reelection every six years, and these elections are staggered so that only one-third of the Senate's membership is up for reelection at one time. Because there are fewer senators, they think of themselves not simply as officials elected from a state, but as statesmen with a responsibility to consider the national interest.

While many Americans may take it for granted that we have both a House and a Senate, their separate structure is a vital element of America's representative democracy.



## LEADERSHIP



**H**ave you ever wondered why Congress deals with some issues and not others?

The simple answer is that Congress cannot focus on everything at once, and must therefore make choices. Those choices are made, in large part, by congressional leadership—particularly the leaders of the majority party in the House or the Senate.

### KEY CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS

#### HOUSE

**Speaker:** Presides over the House. Chooses priorities and sets the annual and daily legislative schedule.

**Majority Leader:** Schedules time for floor debate on legislation.

**Minority Leader:** Advocates for the minority party's concerns and procedural rights.

#### SENATE

**President Pro Tempore:** Presides over the Senate in the absence of the vice president of the United States.

**Majority Leader:** Chooses priorities and sets the annual and daily legislative schedule.

**Minority Leader:** Advocates for the minority party's concerns and procedural rights.

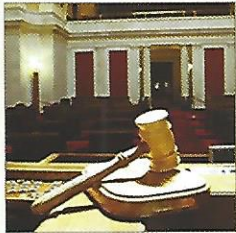


## OFF THE CHART



**H**ow does a bill become a law?

For many, that question invokes memories of boring charts and graphs depicting ideas moving from one box to another: initial drafting to congressional committee to debate to negotiation between the House and Senate to the president's desk for signature.



The truth is much more fascinating and complex. With countless national issues, two major parties, 100 senators, 435 members of the House, and extensive legislative maneuvers to play, Congress is

### SPENDING COMMITTEES

Some people think Congress spends money rashly. Yet budgeting is one of its most complicated and time-consuming tasks. Here's how the process is set up. First, House and Senate **budget committees** look at the big picture, recommending a financial plan for the government that considers the amounts to be spent in major areas like transportation or defense. Next, **authorization committees** prepare legislation that defines programs and sets funding levels (e.g., the Armed Services committees work on spending levels for Department of Defense programs). Following authorized guidelines, Congress then appropriates the funds to be spent in a particular year. Both the House and Senate have **appropriations committees** that focus on specific areas. All funding is limited by the overall budget resolution passed by Congress.



good at undoing the neatest organizational chart. Instead of following a straight line, most ideas wind their way through a long process of argument, airing, and amendment.



Much of this work takes place in congressional committees and subcommittees focused on specific areas. Members of Congress are assigned to various committees, often because of particular expertise or interest—for instance, a congressman from a farm state might be on the Agriculture Committee. Committees review bills that have been introduced, hold hearings on the merits, offer changes to the legislation, and refer bills to the full House or Senate for consideration.

The process is so perilous that of the 10,000 or so bills introduced every two years, only a small fraction ever become laws, or even make it out of committee. Successful bills must survive hearings; debates that spill over into newspapers and television programs;

## INTEREST GROUP LOBBYING

There is an organized group for nearly every person with a policy interest—from automobile manufacturers to small business owners; factory workers to retirees; religious freedom advocates to ethnic constituencies. Many accuse these “special interests” of hijacking the legislative process. But these groups play an important role—by focusing the public’s attention on certain issues and helping members of Congress understand their values. Joining an interest group is one of the main ways Americans participate in public life and communicate their concerns to government.



## KEY LEGISLATIVE TERMS

**Committee Markup:** Committee members offer changes to a bill before it goes to the full House or Senate for consideration and voting.

**Floor Amendment:** In full session, members of the House or Senate can offer changes to a bill under consideration.

**Omnibus Bill:** Several initiatives that are not necessarily related are grouped together and voted on as a block.

**Conference Committee:** Select members of the House and Senate meet to reconcile differences between bills passed in the House and Senate.



cajoling and coercing behind the scenes; outside opinions from presidents and pundits, interest groups and interested voters; fighting within and between political parties; confrontations between the House and Senate; special procedures that can circumvent the usual order; and impassioned pleas and outraged demands on the House and Senate floor.

This process often frustrates everyone involved—especially voters. But the framers of the Constitution wanted Congress to prize the careful consideration of issues over the quick passage of laws. Thus, the frustrating nature of congressional deliberations is actually one of Congress's most important attributes. Within this process, diverse views are heard, interests are protected, and rights are safeguarded. For in the end, democracy is less a set of laws than it is a process of deliberation.



# HOW MEMBERS OF CONGRESS WORK



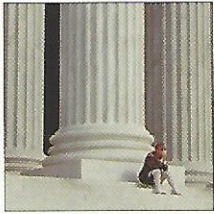
## WHAT MAKES A MEMBER



**W**ho is in the Congress?

The Constitution sets basic qualifications. Members of the House must be 25 years old and United States citizens for at least 7 years; Senators must be 30 years old and U.S. citizens for at least 9 years. You must also be a resident of the state that elects you to serve.

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But there are also unofficial guidelines. To get elected, you need to be able to build a network of support in your community; raise money to pay for a campaign staff, Web site, pamphlets, mailings, and advertisements; set out clear positions and ideas; and listen to others and understand their concerns. Different people

pass this standard: politicians and community leaders with established coalitions, people with track records of success from all walks of life, or simply charismatic figures with the ability to persuade.

All of these people must be willing to work long and hard in the public eye. A “Help Wanted” sign for the job of senator or representative might read: “*Wanted*: Person with wide-ranging knowledge of many public-policy issues. Must be willing to work long hours in Washington, then fly home to attend numerous community events and meet with constituents.”

### MOST COMMON PROFESSIONS OF MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

- Lawyer
- Businessperson
- Banker
- Local or State Politician
- Educator
- Farmer
- Real estate agent
- Journalist



## WHAT A MEMBER OF CONGRESS DOES



**W**hat do these members of Congress do?

Each member of Congress comes from a different place with different skills, so there is no single or simple answer. The basic job is voting on behalf of constituents and representing their concerns in debate and discussion. A member must sort through multiple conflicts—between local perspective and the national interest; between his or her private view and the popular opinion. Members who follow their conscience on every vote with no regard to polls may not get reelected. Conversely, members who vote simply by the polls may fail to convince people of the strength of their convictions.

Beyond voting, members wear many national and local hats. Chief among those is watchdog. For our system of checks and balances to work, Congress must consistently and thoroughly oversee the Executive Branch—insisting on efficiency, probing misconduct, and recommending changes. Oversight depends on informed overseers, so members must be students of national and international issues, and they must be educators to explain these issues to their constituents.



Working in such a complex system is not easy and takes unusual talents: accommodating different points of view, soothing egos, making trade-offs, and building consensus. It also takes an understanding of unique skills: a lawyer might thrive at investigations; a doctor might draft health care legislation; or a community activist might focus on local development. Some members might thrive in the public eye, some behind the scenes. Throughout this process, members maintain campaign organizations. For the one certainty of the job is that the voters will pass judgment on their performance.



## SAMPLE SCHEDULE FOR MEMBER OF CONGRESS:

8 a.m.: Breakfast with governor

8:50 a.m.: Staff meeting

9 a.m.: Party caucus meeting

10 a.m.: Subcommittee oversight hearing

10:20 a.m.: Meet farm leaders from district

10:45 a.m.: Testify before Transportation Committee on district priorities

11 a.m.: Education Committee markup of student assistance bill

12 p.m.: House convenes; votes throughout afternoon

1 p.m.: Address veterans delegation from state

1:45 p.m.: Participate in floor debate on federal budget

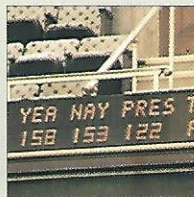
3:30 p.m.: Talk to visiting high school students on Capitol steps

4 p.m.: Conference call with district staff to plan upcoming visit

4:30 p.m.: Office time

5:45 p.m.: Live interview for local television station

6 p.m.: Stop by reception for visiting prime minister





## WHAT A CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE DOES



**M**embers of Congress do not perform these functions alone. House members have an average staff of 17; senators have an average of 40.

Congressional staff are divided between Washington and home district or state offices. The staff on Capitol Hill work primarily on legislative matters; the staff in district and state



### CONGRESSIONAL STAFF TO KNOW

While your primary point of contact is your member of Congress, you may also find yourself in touch with a variety of congressional staff:

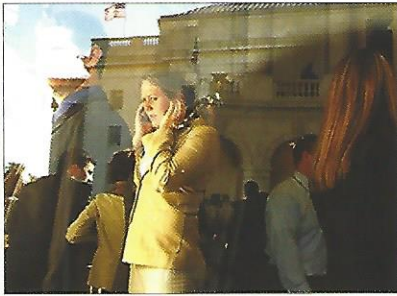
**Press Secretary:** Serves as spokesperson and communicates with local and national media

**Legislative Assistant:** Works with the member in Washington to draft and track legislation on specific issue areas

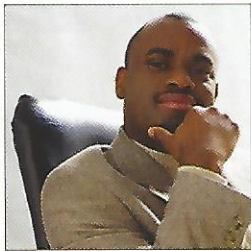
**Field Representative:** Serves as a liaison between the member and their district

**Caseworker:** Helps constituents obtain information and resolve problems with federal agencies

**Grant Worker:** Assists local organizations in identifying and obtaining funding from government



offices tend to work on local projects and constituent concerns. In addition, congressional committees have their own expert staffs that are supervised by members.



These various staffs keep a member of the House or Senate going—researching issues, answering constituent mail, scheduling a member's

appointments, or helping a constituent work through a problem with a federal agency. If you are a veteran in need of a federal grant, a reporter who wants an interview, a school group hoping to meet your representative or senator, a community in need of a federal grant for a local center, an interest group with an idea for legislation, or just a

concerned citizen with a question, congressional staff will probably be your first point of contact with government.



# HOW YOU PARTICIPATE



## “THE TITLE OF CITIZEN”



Justice Louis Brandeis said, “The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen.”

American representative democracy requires civic participation—the notion that ordinary people have the right and responsibility to be involved, and that Congress links the active citizen with his or





her government. Of course, Americans working jobs and raising families cannot follow all of the issues before Congress. That is what representatives are elected to do. But for the system to work, American citizens must engage in civic life: voting in elections, knowing who their representatives are and contacting them with questions and concerns, staying informed about important issues before the community and the nation, working to improve communities one step at a time, taking a stand to support a candidate, or running for public office themselves.

Democracy reflects the will and action of each generation of citizens. If people disengage, the system is not responsive to the people's needs and it does not work. Congress is your branch of government. Why not make it work for you?

### FAST FACTS ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Only 1 in 3 Americans can name their members of Congress.
- Only 1 in 3 adult Americans has visited, written, e-mailed, or phoned a member of Congress.
- Only about half of adult Americans report paying attention to public affairs most of the time.
- Only 35 to 40% of Americans have turned out to vote in congressional elections in nonpresidential election years.



## STAYING IN TOUCH



**S**taying in touch with your representative or senator is a cornerstone of active citizenship. You can write, call, fax, e-mail, attend a public meeting, or make an appointment to see your member of Congress. While members receive an average of 3,500 pieces of mail per month, the vast majority of Americans never pass on a thought or opinion to their elected representatives. There is always room for another voice—your representatives want to hear from you.

### IDENTIFYING YOUR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Find your Senators: [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)

Find your House Representative: [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)

### MAKING CONTACT BY PHONE

Senate Switchboard: 202-224-3121

House Switchboard: 202-225-3121

### MAKING CONTACT BY MAIL

The Honorable (full name of your Senator)

U.S. Senate, Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable (full name of your Representative)

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515

### MAKING CONTACT BY E-MAIL

For the Senate: [www.senate.gov/contacting/index.cfm](http://www.senate.gov/contacting/index.cfm)

For the House: [www.house.gov/writerep](http://www.house.gov/writerep)



You can also see your member of Congress in person. Contact a member's office to find out the best way to do this—through an appointment in their Washington office or state or local offices, or through participation in a town meeting or community forum.

Staying in touch is the only way to guarantee that your view is known and your voice heard.

Of course, the most fundamental place to stay in touch is the ballot box.

### COMMUNICATION TIPS

1. Clearly state the purpose of your contact. If commenting on a specific piece of legislation, give its bill number.
2. Be brief.
3. Lawmakers understand that people are often upset, but try to be courteous.
4. Be personal and use your own words to explain how the issue affects you or your family.
5. Be as accurate as possible—getting the facts straight is essential.
6. Keep in mind that members of Congress really do want to hear your views.



## FIND OUT MORE



**M**any Americans may not recognize the power they have to make a difference. Perhaps they are frustrated by the system and feel that it is stacked against them. The surest antidote for that feeling is learning more about how the system is tailored to represent your will, and then taking action.

The best way to get involved and to find out more about what's happening in Congress is to contact your senator or representative. There are also many other interesting sources about Congress that you may wish to explore. Citizen involvement is the key to making our system of representative democracy work.



### OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES

#### TELEVISION:

Watch C-SPAN or C-SPAN 2 to see Congress in action.

#### WEB SITES:

The House: [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)

The Senate: [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)

Legislative information: [www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov)

Center for Civic Education: [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

The Center on Congress at Indiana University:  
[www.centeroncongress.org](http://www.centeroncongress.org)

Close Up Foundation:  
[www.closeup.org](http://www.closeup.org)

The Dirksen Congressional Center:  
[www.congresslink.org/sitefeatures.htm](http://www.congresslink.org/sitefeatures.htm)



## NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Read your local newspaper and national publications.

Publications that follow Congress—*Roll Call*, *The Hill*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and *National Journal*—are available at your local library.

## BOOKS ABOUT CONGRESS



Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress and Its Members*, CQ Press, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, 2005

Stephen E. Frantzich, *Citizen Democracy: Political Activists in a Cynical Age*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2nd edition, 2005



Lee H. Hamilton, *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care*, Indiana University Press, 2004

Alan Rosenthal, Burdett A. Loomis, John R. Hibbing, and Karl T. Kurtz, *Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy*, CQ Press, 2002

## MEMOIRS BY MEMBERS



Everett McKinley Dirksen, *The Education of a Senator*, University of Illinois Press, 1998

David Eugene Price, *The Congressional Experience*, Westview Press, 3rd edition, 2005



## *U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 8*

*T*he Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises, to pay the debts and provide for the common defense and general welfare of the United States; but all duties, imposts and excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;

To borrow money on the credit of the United States;

To regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian tribes;

To establish a uniform rule of naturalization, and uniform laws on the subject of bankruptcies throughout the United States;

To coin money, regulate the value thereof, and of foreign coin, and fix the standard of weights and measures;

To provide for the punishment of counterfeiting the securities and current coin of the United States;

To establish post offices and post roads;

To promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries;

To constitute tribunals inferior to the Supreme Court;

To define and punish piracies and felonies committed on the high seas, and offenses against the law of nations;

To declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water;

To raise and support armies, but no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years;

To provide and maintain a navy;

To make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces;

To provide for calling forth the militia to execute the laws of the union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions;

To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the militia, and for governing such part of them as may be employed in the service of the United States, reserving to the states respectively, the appointment of the officers, and the authority of training the militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress;

To exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding 10 miles square) as may, by cession of particular states, and the acceptance of Congress, become the seat of the government of the United States, and to exercise like authority over all places purchased by the consent of the legislature of the state in which the same shall be, for the erection of forts, magazines, arsenals, dockyards, and other needful buildings;—and

To make all laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into execution the foregoing powers, and all other powers vested by this Constitution in the government of the United States, or in any department or officer thereof.