

CONGRESS

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# Overview of Congress

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Bicameralism = Two houses

House of Reps = closer to people

- Elected by the people
- Smaller districts
- 2 year term
- Entire body elected every 2 years
- Revenue bills must originate in the house

How do these make the House more responsive to the people?

# Overview of Congress

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Bicameralism = Two houses

Senate designed to be removed from the people

- Originally elected by state legislatures
- Elected on an at large basis
- 6 year terms
- 1/3 up for election every 2 years = more continuity and stability

# Overview of Congress

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## House of Representatives

### Size

- Determined by Congress (435 since 1911)
- Elected by districts
- Population of state determines # of Reps  
(increase in Sun Belts, decrease in Frost/Rust Belt)

# Overview of Congress

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## House of Representatives

### Fixed terms

- Two years/ entire body up for re-election
- Term limits ruled unconstitutional in US Term Limits v. Thornton (added a qualification)

### Qualifications

- 25 years old, citizen for 7 years, residency in state

# Overview of Congress

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## Senate

Size: 100 members

Term: 6 years

Qualifications: 30 years old, citizen for 9 years, resident of state

# Overview of Congress

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## Compensation

- Members set own salary (27th amendment = raise takes effect next term)
- Perks: travel allowance, staff, office space, franking privilege, insurance
- Legislative immunity → Cannot be arrested or detained while going to or from a session of Congress

# Overview of Congress

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## Membership

Overrepresentation of white, male, Protestant, upper-class lawyers in their 50s = status quo/conservative bias

Rebuttals to the argument above?



# Incumbency

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- *Reelection rate in House 90%*
- *Reelection rate in Senate 80%*
- Relatively few seats are seriously contested
- “Permanent Congress”
- Election of 1994 (104th) more a call against Dems than incumbents...same goes for '06 and Reps
- But... retirements open up a lot of seats each year

# Incumbency

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## Specific Advantages

- *Franking privilege*
- Staffers
- Patronage
- Name recognition
- Casework
- Money, esp. from PACs

# Incumbency

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## Special Advantage: *Gerrymandering*

1. Reapportionment: Redistribution of 435 seats in the House on the basis of changes in the state populations.

- a. Reps per state determined by pop.
- b. *Census conducted every 10 yrs.*
- c. *Census shows populations changes and seats are allotted based upon new numbers*

# Incumbency

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## Special Advantage: *Gerrymandering*

2. *Redistricting*: When seats change, district boundaries must change.

a. *Party controlling state legislature redraws district boundaries.*

b. *Gerrymandering = redrawing boundaries to favor party in power*

# Incumbency

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Special Advantage: *Gerrymandering*

Effects of Gerrymandering

1. Party in power, STAYS in power
2. Safe seats are created
3. Odd-shaped districts
4. “Majority-Minority” districts created by racial gerrymandering

# Incumbency

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## Redistricting Requirements:

1. Districts must be as near equal in population as possible
2. District lines must be contiguous
3. Racial gerrymandering is prohibited (*Shaw v. Reno*, 1993). Race may not be the primary factor in drawing district lines (*Miller v. Johnson*, 1995)

# Committees

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- Core of Congress where bills are considered
  - Committees allow members to specialize in policy areas and become experts
- Congressional division of labor achieved through committees
  - Committee chairs act as "gatekeepers"
- Standing committees have fixed membership, officers, rules, staff, and offices
  - Majority party sets rules and chooses officers
  - Majority party always has most committee members
  - Jurisdiction is defined by subject matter of legislation

# Committees

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- Committee functions:
  - Handle legislation
  - Conduct investigation of exec. Branch on an as-needed basis
  - Conduct oversight of exec. Branch agencies on an ongoing basis.



# Committees

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- Selection of members:
  - *Importance of getting on the right committee (where you can best represent your constituents)*
  - Assigned by Steering committee or Committee on Committees
  - Party with majority in Congress has majority of seats on committee
- Selection of Committee chairs
  - *Secret ballot in party caucus or conference of leaders.*
  - *Seniority rule generally followed.*
  - *Advantages of seniority rules: experience, stability, expertise.*
  - *Disadvantages of seniority rules: conservative bias/status quo, rural bias (why would this be the case?)*

# Committees

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- *Standing committees are the permanent committees of Congress. They have both legislative and oversight powers.*
- **House Standing:**
  - *Rules (most powerful of all)*
  - *Ways and means (deals with tax bills)*
  - Appropriations (spending)
  - Budget
  - Armed Services

# Committees

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- *Standing committees are the permanent committees of Congress. They have both legislative and oversight powers.*
- **Senate Standing:**
  - Finance (tax bills)
  - Appropriations (spending)
  - Budget
  - Foreign Relations (prestigious) Treaty and ambassador work
  - Judiciary: screen judicial nominees

# Committees

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## ■ *Conference committees:*

- *Temporary committees comprised of members of both houses*
- *Develop compromise language for a bill when versions differ*
- *After conference committee sends bill back - no amendments are allowed and bill is generally passed*
- *“Third House of Congress”*

## Other Committees

- **Select:** temporary purpose in House
- **Joint:** Both houses for temporary purpose

# Committees - examples

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- Committee on judiciary checks Justice Department
- Committee on commerce checks Commerce Department
- Committee on national security checks Defense Department
- 95 percent of the 10,000 bills introduced die in committee
- Committee chair is from majority party
  - Schedules hearings
  - Selects subcommittee members
  - Appoints committee staff