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How Congress Works

When the founding fathers created the Constitution they wanted to ensure that every citizen would be represented. They established two houses that make up Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House of Representatives is composed of 435 voting members, the number of representatives each state is allotted is dependent on the population of the state. The Senate is made up of 100 members, two Senators from each state. By separating the two branches American citizens are guaranteed equal representation. The House and the Senate make up the Legislative Branch and work together to do many things allowing this government to continue working.

The Powers of Congress

In Article One of the United States Constitution details exactly what powers are given to Congress. Congress has the power to coin money; pass laws; regulate commerce with foreign countries; declare war; maintain a navy; support the military; create post offices and roads; and collect, levy, and raise taxes.

What does the Congresswoman do?

Congressmen and Congresswomen are publicly elected officials of the United States government, coming to Washington D.C. to representing the district and state from which they came.

To be qualified a representative must be at least 25 years old, a citizen of the US for a minimum of seven years, and a resident of the district they are representing. If elected as a Representative, a term lasts for two years.

Each Representative has varying obligations depending on the party affiliation and the length of time they have been in Congress. Often a Representative is part of a committee that focuses on a specific issue. One of the most important responsibilities a Representative has is to act as a mediator between their constituents and the federal government. Many times the constituents are concerned about a particular matter and it is the Representatives job to be their voice to the federal government and also articulate the actions of the federal government to the constituents.

How a Bill Becomes Law

Creating and enacting laws in one of the greatest responsibilities Congress has. A Bill can originate from either the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate and is the most common form of legislation. To become a law the bill must be approved by both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate and requires the Presidents approval. There are two different types of bills, private-bills that affect a specific individual and public-bills that affect the general public. Any bill that deals with revenue always begins in the House of Representatives.

Writing a Bill

Almost anyone can write a bill; however the majority of bills that are introduced to Congress come from members or constituents.

Introducing a Bill

While the U.S. House of Representatives is in session, any Member, Delegate, or even Resident Commissioner can introduce a bill officially by placing it in the “hooper” which is a wooden box next to the Clerk’s desk. The Member that introduces the bill is considered the primary sponsor and there is no limit to the number of Members that can cosponsor a bill. Once introduced, the title of the bill is put into the House Journal and printed in the Congressional Record. The Clerk then assigns the bill a legislative number and the Speaker of the House allots it to the appropriate committee.

Bill is Sent to a Committee

A Committee is a group of Representatives who are knowledgeable on the specific topics such as education or foreign affairs. Committees are in both the House and Senate and play a vital role in the legislative process. Every committee has their own funding and staff. In the House the majority party controls two-thirds of the funding which in turn means that two-thirds of the staff is selected by the majority party. The minority party has one-third of the funding and selects one-third of the staff as well. Committees are required to meet at least once a month to discuss the bills given to them.

When the Bill reaches the specific committee the committee members study, research, and revises the bill very carefully before then voting on whether or not to send it back to the House floor.

If the committee decides it needs more information before voting on whether or not it should be sent back to the House floor, then they send it to a subcommittee- a smaller committee that is more focused on a specific issue. The subcommittee then closely examines the bill, gathers expert opinions and sends it back to the committee for approval.

Bill is Reported and Debated

If the committee approves the bill, it is reported to the House floor. Now back on the House floor the debate begins on whether or not the bill should become a law. The reading clerk reads the bill by each section and the Representatives recommend changes. Once the changes have

been agreed upon and made then the bill is ready to be voted on.

Voting on a Bill

There are three different ways a bill can be voted on:

- Voice Vote- The Speaker of the House will ask the members that support the bill to say “aye” and for those that oppose it say “no”
- Division Vote- the Speaker of the House will ask those that support the bill to stand up to be counted, and after they are counted and seated, those that oppose the bill will be asked to stand.
- Recorded Vote: The Representatives will vote using an electronic voting system.
- If the majority of the Representatives vote yes on the bill, then the bill passes and is sent to the U.S. Senate, where the bill will scrutinized and debated once again.

Bill is Sent to the Senate

Once the bill is on the Senate side, it goes through very similar steps as it did while in the House. After being sent to a committee and debated on the Senate floor, it is voted on again. If the majority supports the bill, it passes and is sent to the President for his approval.

Bill is Sent to the President

The President can do one of three things when a bill reaches him:

- Sign and pass the bill, it is now a law
- Veto the bill- the bill is sent back to the U.S. House of Representatives with the reasons why the President did not sign. If the House Representatives and Senate still strongly believe it should be a law then they can hold another vote to override the veto but there must be two-thirds of the members from both chambers to support it.
- Pocket Veto: The President can choose to do nothing. If Congress is in session then the bill automatically becomes a law after ten days. If Congress is not in session, the bill is dead.

