**Reviewing Congress**

Congress lies at the heart of the federal government. The national legislature was described in detail in Article 1 of the US Constitution and remains an extremely powerful assembly today – the most powerful parliament of any liberal democracy. Divided into two co-equal chambers that have markedly different numbers of members, models of composition, term lengths and internal procedures, as many as 50 veto points exist in Congress before a law can be passed and sent to the White House for signature. This means that Congress is often criticised for being slow, obstructive and conservative – easily prone to resisting but rarely able or eager to pass innovative new proposals. Federal lawmakers are frequently said to be parochial, inevitably looking to their districts or states, prior and future financial contributors, and the next election to determine their legislative behaviour, not to the ‘national interest’ – thereby leading to compromises, deals and concessions that result in lowest common denominator fudges that may not produce the optimal public policies to address America’s social and economic problems. But such criticisms need to be strongly qualified. Congress is both a law making body and a representative one. In reflecting the priorities and preferences of a remarkably heterogeneous and diverse nation comprising many competing social and economic interests, conflicting public priorities and divergent preferences. Congress is necessarily forced to confront a system in which compromise, consensus and conciliation are the necessary order of the day in legislative politics. However, much of Congress can legitimately be criticised, its role in American government is vital to ensuring that as many as social interests as possible are represented at the national level, forging broadly acceptable laws, legitimating public policies and maintaining America’s political stability. In representing interests, legislating and overseeing the activities of the executive branch of government. Congress performs crucial functions that few legislative assemblies elsewhere now match.

**In Defence of Congress; A Qualifying Note**

To put it mildly, the images presented, do not show Congress in an especially positive light. Many of the criticisms ventured of Congress – slow, negative, reactive, obstructive, parochial, introspected, irresponsible – have reoccurred with fairly reliable frequency. At times, such as in 1990, 1992 and 1994, congressional scandal and misdeeds can prompt the type of wholesale turnover – through retirements and resignations – that is otherwise rare in elections to the federal legislature. But it would be mistaken and misleading to end the discussion of Congress without some important qualifications.

One cautionary note concerns the society from which members of Congress are drawn, and which they must govern. Key here is the marked heterogeneity of America’s distinctive social base. Compromise, conciliation and concession are often seen as negative terms of abuse in popular commentary on politics within and outside America. Why that is the case seems odd. In a society so rich in regional, religious, racial, ethnic and social diversity; the need to bargain and reach a broadly acceptable consensus is persistent and powerful. The alternative – a ‘strong’ party government able to implement its programme against the wishes of sizeable sections of American society – is deeply unpalatable to Americans, for good reason.

Another aspect, not unrelated to the first, is that members of Congress are sent to Washington to do two jobs; first, as delegates, to defend and advance the interests of their respective districts and states (few of which are internally homogenous, much less when compared to neighbouring or distant ones); secondly, as national legislators, to craft federal policies that address America’s various social, economic and political problems. The two roles are inextricably linked but also exist inherently in tension. Whatever the collective consequences, to castigate members for seeking to balance them appears a rather strange and, perhaps, unfair criticism. Most lawmakers work extremely hard, under the most demanding of conditions, at home and on Capitol Hill, to achieve their political goals. That so many of them succeed in gaining re-election is, at one level, a testament to the success rather than the failure of the American system. No matter how great their campaign budgets, legislator who let their constituents down would not be returned to Capitol Hill.

Moreover, whatever its successes or failures as a policymaking and executive checking institution, Congress operates, for the most part, in the most transparent of fashions. For a non-American accustomed to having to request tickets or queue for hours merely to enter the Houses of Parliament at Westminster, it is a revelation to be able literally to walk in off the streets into congressional offices, committee hearings, and related buildings in the to square miles that make up Capitol Hill. Going to the Federal Election Commission and requesting the documents can allow any citizen to access the campaign finances of a member: how much he or she raised, from where, and when. Compared to most other national parliaments around the world, there is a voluminous amount of information on Congress and an accessibility to federal lawmakers that is remarkable.

In short, Congress displays as many virtues as it does vices, and the two are frequently inseparable from the institutional design, constitutional powers and public pressures – on individual lawmakers and the legislature as a whole – that together shape how the assembly must work. Particularly when the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue are occupied by different parties, the prospect of intense political conflict both within and between the Congress and the White House is great. But this should be regarded less as an indictment of a deliberately divided democratic system than an expression of competing interests and opinions.

**Conclusion**

Congress does not share in the marked affection that Americans bestow on their individual lawmakers, but the unpopularity of Congress and the popularity of individual members is inextricably linked. Congress is more often than not cumbersome, slow, negative and reactive. It is capable of innovative and rapid activity but it cannot move rapidly when proposals are contentious or controversial, public sentiment is divided, presidential leadership is either lacking or problematic, political parties are relatively weak and the myriad interest lobbies whom new laws and regulations will affect raise genuine and reasonable concerns about legislative proposals.

Compared to most other liberal democracies, legislative life in America is slow, cumbersome, obstructive and difficult. But it is also, arguably, more rewarding and consequential. Members of the Westminster parliament, much less that of the European Union, would barely recognise Congress, an independent institution where rank-and-file members play a genuine role in making policy and in scrutinising the activities of the executive branch in detail, and enjoy a well-resourced, well-staffed and information-rich legislative body. Congressional committees and subcommittees genuinely write public laws and develop public policies rather than simply ratify drafts composed within the executive branch. Moreover, although Congress has a somewhat uneven record of exercising its oversight powers, few civil servants can treat congressional hearings, investigation or recommendations as those of a legislative paper tiger.

As for the parochialism manifest in commemorative resolutions and congressional caucuses, the fact remains that millions of Americans are employed in producing cat-fish, farming dairy, livestock, and making and selling mushrooms, wine and asparagus. They expect their elected representatives in government to defend and advance policies that protect and benefit their material interests and their livelihoods. For elected members, this is not just good politics, but it is precisely what their job requirements effectively specify. Whatever the effects on coherent national (and foreign) policy, deriding congressional parochialism is ultimately neglecting the pronounced diversity of the United States. The collective output of Congress can confirm the worst fears and prejudices of ordinary Americans both physically and psychologically distant from Washington, but the inherent tension exists because it is built into the design of the institution; the conflict between the national interest and the particular interest is never far from congressional politics.

**Robert Singh, American Government & Politics; A Concise Introduction, p173-175**