**How effective is Congress?**

**Congress is not effective**

* The rise of the executive in the 20th century has inevitably undermined the importance of Congress
* Congress has become too fragmented with overuse of committees. It is not capable of making the clear, speedy decisions required in today’s world. Instead of a few powerful leaders, Congress is run by many more less powerful people.
* The recent rise in party organisation in Congress, especially the House, has undermined the authority of the body as a whole. Congress is much more partisan than before, due to the quite recent resignation of prominent liberal or moderate Republicans and conservative Democrats.
* Separation of powers and political viewpoints make the process of law-making cumbersome and slow, and this doesn’t serve the needs of the population. Look at the years it has taken for legislation to pass that will limit spending in elections.
* Clinton and George W Bush have especially demonstrated recently that Congress is powerless against a President who is popular with the electorate and who can exploit the media effectively for their cause. Congress’ weakness in this respect has increased with the executive’s use of the media.
* The failure of Clinton’s impeachment did not demonstrate his innocence so much as the fragmented and ineffectual nature of Congress. Partisanship has meant that scrutiny has become less effective since that time and during the time of George W Bush was almost non-existent.
* Congress is not generally a popular organisation amongst voters, especially with a string of recent scandals.
* The rise of personality politics especially has an undermining effect on an ‘anonymous’ body like Congress. Many cannot name their Congressmen, but they can all name the President.
* Congress can usually do little against a presidential veto, whatever the Constitution allows.
* Congress has undermined its authority by encouraging more devolution of power to the states in recent years.
* The composition of Congress does not reflect the composition of society in the USA. Women especially are under-represented as seen by the figures for the 111th and 112th Congresses.

**Congress is effective**

* Congress has been ‘resurgent’ since the 1970s. It has learnt its lesson after Watergate. The days of ‘Imperial’ Presidents are over. Congress has the permanent protection of the Constitution to make sure that no President can usurp its powers, and all Presidents since Nixon have realised this.
* Congress continues to hold the purse strings. Presidents can do little without adequate funding, as George W Bush discovered over his Education Bill and over social security reform.
* If Congress has seemed weak, as in the days of Roosevelt, it was simply because it allowed itself to be. When it uses its strength, no President is a match for it, as Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and Bush found on several occasions.
* Congress still functions efficiently, especially in legislation and representation. Witness the speedy passage of the Patriot Act in 2001 and the impeachment of Clinton in 1998. Members of Congress are encouraged not to move to Washington where they can become isolated, but to stay in touch with their constituents. A three-day week in Washington helps this process.
* It may not make as much policy as it did before Presidents like Roosevelt, but it still has the crucial roles of scrutinising and legislating in the public interest. It still ensures that unpopular public policy is blocked, e.g. Clinton’s Health Care Bill 1993 or Bush’s decision to sell some US port security to a Saudi business in 2006.
* It has maintained its efficiency in terms of vetting presidential appointments. By 2003, the Senate had refused to accept 30 federal judicial appointments and in 2005 forced Harriet Miers to withdraw her candidacy for the Supreme Court. The simple likelihood of scrutiny caused the UN ambassador John Bolton to resign in 2006. Obama has felt the full force of partisan scrutiny during 2009 and 2010.
* The very high level of incumbency that seems to survive elections attests to the success of most members of Congress as far as the voters are concerned.