Congress; Glossary

**Congress**

The bicameral legislature of the United States.

**House**

The lower chamber of the US Congress, with the primary responsibility of managing the economy, taxes and revenue.

**Senate**

The upper chamber of the US Congress, with the primary responsibility of long term issues, such as confirming appointments, ratifying treaties and scrutinising the executive.

**Congressional District**

A sub-state area that is designated an elected representative in the House of Representatives based on its population.

**Exclusive Powers**

Powers that are only exercised by one House of Congress.

**Concurrent Powers**

Powers that are exercised by both Houses of Congress.

**House Speaker**

Elected by the entire House membership at the start of each Congress (every 2 years) so likely to be a member of the majority party in the House at the time. A potentially powerful figure in the House who has the power to;

- act as the presiding officer of the House  
- interpret and enforce the rules of the House and decide on points of order  
- refer bills to standing committees  
- appoint select and conference committee chairs  
- appoint majority party members of the House Rules Committee

**Minority Leader**

Party in the minority elects their leader every 2 years, at the start of each Congress. This person acts as day-to-day ‘directors of operations’ on the floor of the House/Senate, they hold press briefings to talk about their party’s policy agenda and acts as a liaison between the House/Senate and the White House.

**Majority Leader**

Party in the majority elects their leader every 2 years, at the start of each Congress. This person acts as day-to-day ‘directors of operations’ on the floor of the House/Senate, they hold press briefings to talk about their party’s policy agenda and acts as a liaison between the House/Senate and the White House.

**President of the Senate**

The Vice President of the United States is designated by the Constitution as also playing this role. The vice president holds a tie-breaking (or "casting") vote in the Senate. Vice presidents have cast 242 tie-breaking votes. The vice president with the most tie breaking votes is John Adams with 29. While vice presidents used to regularly preside over the Senate, modern vice presidents have done so only rarely—vice presidents usually only preside to swear in new senators, during joint sessions and when casting a tie-breaking vote. The Senate chooses a president pro tempore to preside in the vice president's absence. Modern presidents pro tempore, too, rarely preside over the Senate. In practice, the junior senators of the majority party typically preside in order to learn Senate procedure. The current Vice President of the United States and President of the United States Senate is Joe Biden.

**President pro-tem**

The President pro tempore (or President pro tem) is the second-highest-ranking official of the United States Senate. The United States Constitution states that the Vice President of the United States is the President of the Senate and the highest-ranking official of the Senate despite not being a member of the body. During the Vice President's absence, the president pro tempore presides over its sessions or appoints another senator to do so. The president pro tempore is elected by the Senate and is customarily the longest serving senator in the majority party.

**Committee System**

This is made up of many types of committees which perform legislative and investigatory functions. It is only in committee rooms that members of the executive can be questioned directly. This gives the committee system added importance.

**Standing committees**

The most important type of committee. They are policy specialists.

**House Rules Committee**

A standing committee that performs different functions to the other standing committees. It is responsible for prioritising bills coming from the committee stage on to the House floor for their second readings. Because there is a huge queue of bills waiting, this committee has a vital legislative role to play. Its name comes from the ‘rule’ it gives to a bill, setting out the rules of debate by stating whether amendments can be made. Most bills go through this committee if they are to become law.

**Conference Committees**

This type of committee is required when a bill is considered concurrently. As a consequence, there can be two different versions (one from the House, one from the Senate) of a bill. If the two versions of the bill are different and these differences cannot be reconciled informally, then this type of committee is set up.

**Select Committees**

This type of committee can also be known as a ‘special’ or ‘investigative’ committee that is set up to investigate a particular issue.

**Committee Chairs**

People drawn from the majority party that are in charge of (or chair) committee meetings.

**Seniority Rule**

A rule stating that the chair of a congressional standing committee will be the member of the majority party with the longest continuous service on that committee.

**Filibuster**

A device by which an individual senator, or group of senators, can attempt to talk a bill to death by using delaying tactics. It derives from a senator’s right of unlimited debate. A 3/5 majority vote (i.e. 60 votes) is required to end a filibuster.

**Presidential Veto**

A power vested in the president by Article 2 of the Constitution, by which he may return a bill to Congress unsigned, along with the reasons for his objection. Congress may override a presidential veto by a 2/3 vote in both Houses.

**Representation**

This term can be used in a number of different ways. It can be understood in terms of *how* legislators represent their constituents. In this sense there are three different models; the trustee model, the delegate model and the mandate model. But the term can also be understood in terms of *who* represents the electorate. This is called the resemblance model and considers how representative legislators are in terms of such factors as gender and race.

**House Committee on Armed Services**

This is a standing committee of the House of Representatives. It is responsible for funding and oversight of the Department of Defense (DOD) and the United States armed forces, as well as substantial portions of the Department of Energy.

**Gridlock**

A term derived from traffic jams at major intersections of US cities, signifying the failure to get action on policy proposals and legislation in Congress. Gridlock is through to be exacerbated by divided government and partisanship.

**Bill**

This is a proposed law under consideration by a legislature. It does not become law until it is passed by the legislature and, in most cases, approved by the executive. Once a bill has been enacted into law, it is called an *act* or a *statute*.

**Capitol Hill**

This place’s landmarks include not only the United States Capitol (the meeting place of the US Congress), but also the Senate and House office buildings, the Supreme Court building, the Library of Congress, the Marine Barracks, the Washington Navy Yard, and Congressional Cemetery.