

Chapter 4

A Quick and Simple Refresher on United States Civics

For most of us, the last time we really needed to understand the process of how a bill becomes a law was in our elementary school civics lessons. In fact, most Members of Congress and their staffers don't have much more formal education about the process than that. You need not have a PhD in political science to become involved and bring about change in the public policy process. You only need to understand the basics. Although the information contained here uses the U.S. Congress as the example, most state legislatures are structured and function similarly. For more specifics on state public policy processes, visit the National Conference of State Legislatures at www.ncsl.org.

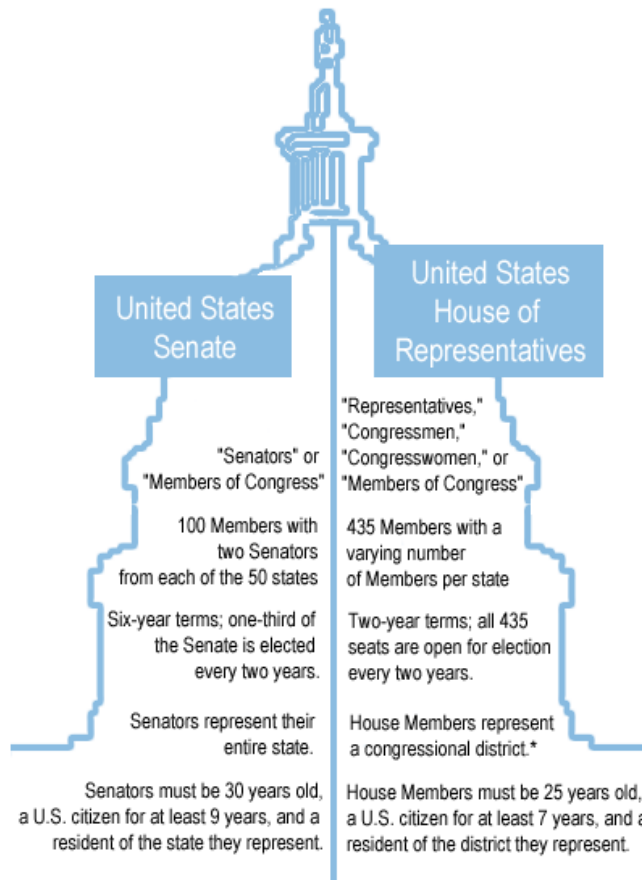
The United States Congress

The U.S. Congress consists of two bodies, called chambers or houses: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

- National elections are held every two years on the first Tuesday of November in even numbered years (2010, 2012, 2014 etc.).
- The next national election will be held in November 2010.
- Every national election, 33 Senate seats whose six-year terms are expiring and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives are open for election.²
- Elections held in non-presidential election years (e.g., 2010, 2014) are known as "mid-term elections" because they are held in the middle of a President's four-year term.
- The next Presidential election year is in 2012..

Congressional districts for each state are circumscribed by the state legislature and based on population density. Districts may be parts of a city, multiple cities or towns, or entire counties. The number of House members is set at 435 by the U.S. Constitution. The total number of House members per state is determined by the Federal Census and is reviewed and changed every 10 years when the new census results are available. The calculation to determine the number of representatives per state is made by dividing 435 into the total U.S. population. Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming do not have enough people to qualify for one representative; the Constitution addresses this by stating the every state must have at least one. Representatives from these states are referred to "At-Large."

² Every six years, 34 Senate seats are up for re-election.



Every person in America (except residents of the District of Columbia) is represented in the U.S. Congress by two Senators and one Member in the House of Representatives. In other words, everyone has a "Congressional delegation" consisting of three members: two Senators and one Representative.

Timing and Schedule

A "new Congress" begins the January following a November election, lasts two years, and has two sessions. For example, the first session of the 111th Congress began in 2009, and the second session of the 111th Congress began in 2010. When policymakers are working in Washington, D.C. Congress is referred to as being "in session." When policymakers are in their home states and districts meeting with their constituents and conducting business locally, Congress is referred to as being "in or on recess." Although the Congressional schedule is different each year, some regularly scheduled breaks, or recesses, occur each year. These usually coincide with special weekends, holidays, and the election cycle. Typical Congressional recesses fall during the weeks containing Martin Luther King's Birthday, President's Day, Easter, Passover, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving. Additionally, Congress is usually out for recess the week before and after Easter, as well as the entire month of August.

Leadership

Because the United States principally has a two-party system consisting of Democrats and Republicans, each chamber has two groups: a majority party and a minority party. The party

with the greatest number of members in a chamber is considered the "majority" party and the party with the smaller number of members is called the "minority" party. The few members of Congress who are not affiliated with a national political party and identify themselves as "Independents," typically choose a party to affiliate with for organizational purposes.

111th Congressional Make Up *	
United States Senate	United States House of Representatives
57 Democrats 41 Republicans 2 Independents who caucus With the Democrats	255 Democrats 178 Republicans 3 Vacancies
Senate Leadership	House Leadership
Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin (D-IL) Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl (R-AZ)	Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-SC) House Minority Leader – John Boehner (R-OH) House Minority Whip – Eric Cantor (R-VA)

As of March 10, 2010

Like most large organizations, Congress does much of its work by committee. Most Members of Congress are assigned to one or more committees. Typically, committee assignments, leadership positions, and party ratios remain the same throughout the two-year session of Congress. However, occasionally, Members retire, die, or are indicted, which then requires changes to be made. For more about Congressional committees, see Chapter 7.