



KNOWING ABOUT CONGRESS: An Effective Advocacy Tool

1. What is the composition of Congress?

The United States Congress, the lawmaking and oversight body of the national government consists of two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each state is entitled to two Senators, each serving a 6-year term and one Representative for each Congressional district serving a 2-year term.

2. How long does a Congressional session last?

Congress begins at noon on January 3 of each odd-numbered year following a general election. A Congress lasts for 2 years with each year constituting a separate session.

3. Who presides over the House of Representatives?

The Speaker of the House presides over the House. The Speaker appoints a chairman to preside over the Committee of the Whole, appoints all special or select committees, conference committees, and makes important rulings and decisions for the House. He or she determines the legislative agenda for the House, after discussions with the President and his party's leader in the Senate.

4. Who presides over the Senate?

The Vice President of the United States serves as the President of the Senate. The Senate's majority party elects a Majority Leader who serves as spokesperson for the Senate, advocates for its policies and viewpoints, coordinates legislative efforts, and determines the legislative schedule on the floor of the Senate.

5. Who are "Whips" and what do they do?

In both chambers the majority and minority parties elect assistant leaders known as Whips. The Whips keep track of all politically important legislation and endeavor to have all members of their parties present when important laws are to be voted on. They assist the Leaders in managing the party's legislative program on the floor, contacting absent members, advising them of the vote, and determining if they wish to "pair" their vote.

6. What is the difference between an authorization bill and an appropriations bill?

An authorization bill establishes federal policies and programs, and may also make recommendations concerning the proper spending level for a program or agency. An appropriations bill provides the dollar amounts for agencies, programs, and operations. An authorization specifies a spending level, the amount acts as the maximum that the appropriations committees can provide.

7. How many appropriations measures are there?

Currently, the House and Senate are restructuring their Appropriations subcommittee jurisdictions. Historically, there has been an appropriations bill for each of the Appropriations subcommittees that used to total 13 in both the House and the Senate. However, under the restructuring there are currently 10 subcommittees under House Appropriations and 12

under the Senate. How this will impact the number of Appropriations measures (likely 10 in the House and 12 in Senate) is yet to be resolved. Congress may also adopt supplemental appropriations measures that provide "emergency" funds as a need develops that is too urgent to be postponed until the next fiscal year.

8. What is a Continuing Resolution (CR)?

A "CR" is a bill that provides stopgap funding if Congress is unable to complete action on one or more regular appropriation bills before the beginning of a fiscal year.

9. How does Congress know how much to spend in appropriation bills?

The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Act of 1974 is the means by which Congress institutes and enforces an overall budgetary plan, including levels for total revenues, total spending, and the deficit. This blueprint for all federal spending is provided in the form of a concurrent resolution. Funds are then allocated to Congressional committees pursuant to this resolution.

10. What is a quorum in the House and in the Senate?

A quorum is a simple majority of the Members, 218 votes in the House, 51 votes in Senate.

11. How do Members of Congress introduce bills?

A bill to be introduced is typed on a special House or Senate form and signed by the Representative or Senator who will introduce it. In the House, the bill is introduced by placing it in a special box known as the "hopper," located on the Clerk's desk in the House chamber. A bill may be introduced at any point during a two-year Congress, and remains eligible for consideration throughout the duration of that Congress.

12. What are standing committees?

There are 19 standing committees in the House of Representatives and 17 in the Senate. Each has jurisdiction over measures and laws in certain areas of public policy or in the manner in which Congress conducts business (Rules and Ethics). Congress uses standing committees in order to consider many issues such as health, education, foreign affairs, etc. all at the same time. Each committee selects from the hundreds of measures it receives a small number of bills that merit closer scrutiny and subsequent consideration by the full chamber.

13. What is a conference committee?

Differences of opinion regarding a bill passed by the Senate and the House are committed to conference committee to work out an agreement. Conferees are called to resolve points of disagreement and a report is issued to each chamber. If both chambers accept the report, the bill is enrolled and sent to the President to sign. Unless all differences between the two Houses are resolved, the bill fails.

14. What is a pocket veto?

A pocket veto becomes effective when a President fails to sign a bill after Congress has adjourned and is unable to obtain a two-thirds vote to override a regular veto. A special legislative session of Congress must be convened to override a pocket-veto.