



U.S. Political Primer

What Effect Will My Vote Have on
America



Source: Library of Congress

“If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” - Abigail Adams

**What is the most powerful right
you have as a United States
Citizen?**



Use Your Voice.



There are three branches of the U.S. Federal Government – the Congress (U.S. Representatives and U.S. Senators), the Executive Branch (the U.S. President) and the Legislative Branch (Federal courts). U.S. Citizens have no individual vote when it comes to the legislative branch. Based on our constitution, the President of the United States chooses a potential judge for appointment to a bench and it is the responsibility of the U.S. Senate to confirm the appointment. This makes your vote for U.S. President and the two U.S. Senators from your state extremely important.

What does Congress do?

- **Passes federal laws**
- **Writes and sponsors bills**
- **Can repeal laws**
- **Votes on how money is spent**
- **Approves judges appointed by the President**
- **Declares war**
- **Votes on foreign aid money**

The President of the United States is important. He or she sets the tone and direction of the country. But the U.S. Congress runs the country and decides how money is spent. When laws are drafted, members of congress add attachments that often have nothing to do with the bill. These are referred to as “Christmas Tree Bills,” because members of Congress “hang” their own amendments off of the bill that most often have nothing to do with the bill.

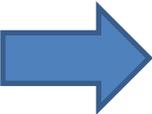
The 2005 Highway Bill included over 6,300 special projects. In fact, \$231 million was set aside for a bridge to be built near Anchorage, Alaska which would be named “Don Young’s Way.” Who’s Don Young? He’s the head of the U.S. House Transportation Committee, the committee that debated the bill before it went to the floor.

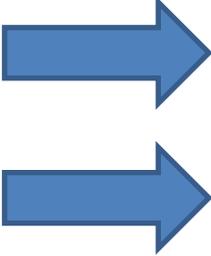
Who is Congress?

The U.S. Congress is made up of 535 members. There are 100 U.S. Senators, two from each state and 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. The number of congressional members from each state depends on its population. Senators serve six year and Congress people serve two year terms.

Salary

The U.S. Constitution allows members of Congress to determine their pay.

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- **House and Senate** members **receive \$174,000** per year

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- Ranking members, majority and minority leaders receive **\$193,400 per year.**
 - Speaker of the House receives **\$223,500**
 - **U.S. Median Household income is \$49,445 according to the U.S. Census (2010)**

*Congress is required by Article I, Section 6, of the Constitution to determine its own pay. Prior to 1969, Congress did so by enacting stand-alone legislation. From 1789 through 1968, Congress raised its pay 22 times using this procedure. Congressional salaries initially were \$1,500. **By 1968, they had risen to \$30,000.** *Stand-alone legislation may still be used to raise Member pay, as it was most recently in 1982, 1983, 1989, and 1991, but two other methods — including an automatic annual adjustment procedure and a commission process — are now also available. Under the annual adjustment procedure, Members are scheduled to receive a 2.8% adjustment in January 2009. Members originally were scheduled to receive a 2.7% increase in January 2008. The increase was revised to 2.5%, resulting in a salary in 2008 of \$169,300, to match the percent increase in the base pay of General Schedule (GS) employees. By law, Members may not receive an increase greater than the increase in the base pay of GS employees. Congress voted to deny the scheduled January 2007 adjustment. Members previously received a pay increase (1.9%) in January 2006, increasing their salary to the rate of \$165,200. **In 2008, that salary jumped to 169,300, then 174,000 in 2009.** Congress has not given itself a pay raise since 2009.*

***The median household income in the U.S. in 1968 was \$8,360. The U.S. Congressional salary was \$30,000.**

When a person is elected to the U.S. Congress, one of their first orders of business is to be given a committee assignment.

Committees are important because bills live and die in committee.

More importantly, a congress person's fundraising efforts are directly related to the committee that he or she sits on.

According to a story done by NPR, Republicans and Democrats both rank committees based on fundraising potential as A, B or C. The U.S. Constitution states that all taxation bills must originate in the House, which makes the Ways & Means Committee in the House of Representatives a prime target for fundraising – members received \$250,000 more per year.

Another important aspect of committee is that the chair determines what bills are heard of which die in committee. Chairs are determined by the “ruling” party. So if the Democrats have the majority in the House, then each committee in the House will have a Democratic chair. Following mid-term elections, that can change if the ruling party loses its majority.

Generally, Senate of House leadership assign members to committees based on seniority and expressed interest. Many committees have subcommittees that are given specific duties within the committee.

Current Committee Assignments

Senate Committees

- [Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry](#)
- [Senate Committee on Appropriations](#)
- [Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)
- [Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs](#)
- [Senate Committee on the Budget](#)
- [Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation](#)
- [Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources](#)
- [Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works](#)
- [Senate Committee on Finance](#)
- [Senate Committee on Foreign Relations](#)
- [Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions](#)
- [Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs](#)
- [Senate Committee on Indian Affairs](#)
- [Senate Committee on the Judiciary](#)
- [Senate Committee on Rules and Administration](#)
- [Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship](#)
- [Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)
- [Senate Select Committee on Ethics](#)
- [Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#)
- [Senate Special Committee on Aging](#)
- [United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control](#)

House Committees

- [House Committee on Agriculture](#)
- [House Committee on Appropriations](#)
- [House Committee on Armed Services](#)
- [House Committee on the Budget](#)
- [House Committee on Education and the Workforce](#)
- [House Committee on Energy and Commerce](#)
- [House Committee on Ethics \(Select\)](#)
- [House Committee on Financial Services](#)
- [House Committee on Foreign Affairs](#)
- [House Committee on Homeland Security](#)
- [House Committee on House Administration](#)
- [House Committee on the Judiciary](#)
- [House Committee on Natural Resources](#)
- [House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform](#)
- [House Committee on Rules](#)
- [House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology](#)
- [House Committee on Small Business](#)
- [House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure](#)
- [House Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)
- [House Committee on Ways and Means](#)
- [House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence](#)
- [House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming](#)

Joint Committees

- [Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe](#)
- [Joint Committee on the Library](#)
- [Joint Committee on Printing](#)
- [Joint Committee on Taxation](#)
- [Joint Economic Committee](#)

The U.S. President

The President of the United States serves a four year term, must be a natural born citizen of the United States, lived in the U.S. for a minimum of 14 years and be over the age of 35. The President receives an annual salary of \$400,000 and is given a \$50,000 a year non-taxable expense account.

He or she is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, appoints government officials (approved or denied by Congress), and is the final word (almost) in whether a bill gets passed. He or she can veto any bill, which sends it back to committee.

The President can negotiate treaties, but the Senate must pass any treaty by two-thirds of its membership.

The President appoints members of its cabinet, judicial appointments and ambassadors. The U.S. Senate must approve any appointments.



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