

# Congress Outline Notes

## I. INTRODUCTION

A. Congress as the *center of policymaking* in America.

1. Although the prominence of Congress has fluctuated over time.
2. Some critics charge Congress with being the source of government expansion.

## II. THE REPRESENTATIVES AND SENATORS

A. Members

1. Despite public perceptions to the contrary, *hard work* is perhaps the most prominent characteristic of a member of Congress' job.

a. The typical representative is a member of about six committees and subcommittees; a senator is a member of about ten. **SEE CHART IN NOTE PACKET**

2. *Attractions* to the job.

a. **Power.** Members of Congress make key decisions about important matters of public policy.

b. Members of Congress receive substantial salary and perquisites ("perks").

1. Salary \_\_\_\_\_
2. Retirement
3. Franking privileges
4. office and staff

B. Membership

1. There are 535 members of Congress—100 in the Senate (two from each state) and 435, 5 Delegates and the Resident Commissioner, in the House of Representatives.

2. The Constitution specifies only that members of the House must be at least 25 years old, American citizens for seven years, and must be residents of the states from which they are elected.

Senators must be at least 30 years old, American citizens for nine years, and must be residents of the states from which they are elected.

3. Members come mostly from occupations with high status  
Law and business are the dominant

4. Representation of minorities.

a. African Americans:

b. Hispanics:

c. Women:

5. **descriptive representation** (representing their constituents by mirroring their personal, politically relevant characteristics)

**Substantive representation** (representing the interests of groups).

### III. CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

#### A. Who wins elections?

1. **Incumbents** are those already holding office. The most important fact about congressional elections is that *incumbents usually win*.

a. 1994:

b. 2006:

2. House of Representatives.

a. Not only do more than 90 percent of the incumbents seeking reelection to the House of Representatives win, but most of them win with more than 60 percent of the vote.

3. Senate.

a. Even though senators have a better-than-equal chance of reelection, senators typically win by narrower margins than House members.

b. One reason for the *greater competition in the Senate* is that an entire state is almost always more diverse than a congressional district and thus provides more of a base for opposition to an incumbent.

c. Senators have less personal contact with their constituents and receive more coverage in the media than representatives do.

Senators tend to draw more visible challengers.

4. Despite their success at reelection, incumbents have a strong feeling of vulnerability

#### B. Why incumbents. What is their advantage.

1. Members of Congress engage in three primary activities that increase the probability of their reelections: advertising, credit claiming, and position taking.

a. Lack of knowledge/ weak opponents

b. **advertising** takes place between elections and takes

c. **Credit claiming** involves *personal and district service*. There are two ways members of Congress can *service the constituency*: casework and the pork barrel.

##### (1) Casework

(2) The **pork barrel** refers to expenditures on federal projects, grants, and contracts for cities, businesses, colleges, and institutions. Because credit claiming is so important to reelection, members of Congress rarely pass up the opportunity to increase federals pending in their state or district.

(3) In recent years, more funds have been "**earmarked**," or dedicated to a specific district (about 12,000 earmarks in 2007, amounting to \$17 billion).

d. Members of Congress must also engage in **position taking** on matters of public policy. The positions they take may make a difference in the outcome of an election, especially if the issues are on matters salient to voters.

e. Campaign spending.

1. It costs a great deal of money to elect a Congress. (\$2 billion in the 2005–2006 election cycle. Challengers are usually substantially outspent by incumbents (2 to 1 in 2006)
2. One-fourth of the funds raised by candidates for Congress comes from political action committees (PACs).

C. The role of party identification.

1. Although party loyalty at the voting booth is not as strong as it was a generation ago, it is still a good predictor of voting behavior.
2. Most members of Congress represent constituencies in which their party is in the majority.

F. Stability and change.

## IV. HOW CONGRESS IS ORGANIZED TO MAKE POLICY

A. Making policy is the toughest of all the legislative roles. Congress is a collection of generalists trying to make policy on specialized topics. The complexity of today's issues requires more *specialization*. Congress tries to cope with these demands through its elaborate committee system.

B. American bicameralism.

1. A **bicameral legislature** is one divided into two houses. The U.S. Congress and every American state legislature except Nebraska's are bicameral.

2. House of Representatives.

- a. The House is *much larger* and *more institutionalized* than the Senate.
- b. Party loyalty to leadership and party-line voting are more common than in the Senate.
- c. Debate can be ended by a simple majority vote.
- d. One institution unique to the House is the **House Rules Committee**,

3. Senate.

- a. The Senate is *less disciplined* and *less centralized* than the House.
- b. The **filibuster** permits *unlimited debate* on a bill.  
At the present time, 60 members present and voting can halt a filibuster by invoking **cloture** (closure) on debate.

C. Congressional leadership.

1. *party leadership*.
2. Power is no longer in the hands of a few key members. Instead, power is widely dispersed, requiring leaders to appeal broadly for support.

3. House leadership.

- a. The **Speaker of the House** is second (after the vice president) in the line to succeed a president. who resigns,

- b. The Speaker's principal partisan ally is the **majority leader**. The majority leader is responsible for rounding up votes on party legislation and for scheduling bills in the House.
- c. Party **whips** work with the majority leader to round up votes and to report the views and complaints of the party rank-and-file back to the leadership.
- d. The *minority party* is also organized (with a **minority leader** and **whips**), and is prepared to take over the key posts if it should win a majority in the House.

#### 4. Senate leadership.

- a. The vice president is the **president of the Senate**. Vice presidents typically have little power or influence in the Senate, except in the rare case when their vote can break a tie.
  
- b. The **Senate majority leader**—aided by the majority whips—is the position of real power and authority in the Senate. He rounds up votes, schedules the floor action, and influences committee assignments.

#### D. The committees and subcommittees.

- 1. Most of the real work of Congress goes on in committees.
  - a. Committees *dominate congressional policymaking*.
  - b. They regularly hold hearings to investigate problems and possible wrongdoing, and to investigate the executive branch.
  - c. They *control the congressional agenda and guide legislation* from its introduction to its send-off for the president's signature.
  
- 2. Committees can be grouped into four types:
  - a. Standing Committees
  
  
  - b. Joint Committees
  
  
  - c. Conference Committees
  
  
  - d. Select Committees *temporary* committees appointed for a specific ("select") purpose, such as the Senate select committee that looked into Watergate.

#### 3. Committees at work: Legislation and oversight.

- 1. Every bill goes to a standing committee; usually only bills receiving a *favorable committee report* are considered by the whole House or Senate.
  
- 2. New bills sent to a committee typically go directly to **subcommittee**, which can hold **hearings** on the bill. The most important output of committees and subcommittees is the "**marked-up**" (revised and rewritten) bill, submitted to the full House or Senate for consideration.
  
- 3. Members of the committee will usually serve as "*floor managers*" of the bill when the bill leaves committee, helping party leaders secure votes for the legislation. They will also be *cue-*

*givers* to whom other members turn for advice. When the two chambers pass different versions of the same bill, some committee members will be appointed to the conference committee.

4. **Legislative oversight**—the process of *monitoring the bureaucracy and its administration of policy*—is one of the *checks* Congress can exercise on the executive branch. (and who maintain an extensive network of formal and informal *contacts* with the bureaucracy).

E. Caucuses: the informal organization of Congress.

1. *informal groups* in Congress has made the representation of interests in Congress a more direct process (cutting out the middleman, the lobbyist).

2. A **caucus** is a grouping of members of Congress sharing some interest or characteristic, such as the Black Caucus, the

Hispanic Caucus, the Congresswomen's Caucus, and the Sunbelt Caucus. Caucuses include regional groupings, ideological groupings, and economic groupings.

3. currently more than 300 of them

F. Congressional staff.

1. Personal

2. The committees

3. Staff agencies that aid it in its work.

a. The first is the *Congressional Research Service (CRS)*, administered by the Library of Congress. The CRS uses researchers, many with advanced degrees and highly developed expertise, to respond to more than 250,000 requests yearly for information.

b. The *General Accounting Office (GAO)*, with more than 3,200 employees, helps Congress perform its oversight functions by reviewing the activities of the executive branch to see if it is following the congressional intent of laws and by investigating the efficiency and effectiveness of policy implementation.

c. The *Congressional Budget Office (CBO)* analyzes the president's budget and makes economic projections about the performance of the economy, the costs of proposed policies, and the economic effects of taxing and spending alternatives.

