

## What is Congress?

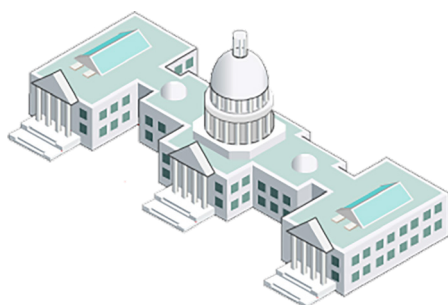
The United States Congress is the **legislative** (lawmaking) branch of our federal government. Congress meets in Washington, D.C. to make **federal laws**—laws that apply to the entire country. Congress is **bicameral**, which means it is made up of two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each chamber includes elected officials from all fifty states. Congress was created by the Constitution, and that document describes how this branch of government works.

**Legislate:** a verb that means “to make laws”

**Legislator:** a person who makes laws

**Legislative:** an adjective that means “lawmaking” (the legislative branch is the lawmaking branch)

**Legislation:** a written document that is or may become a law



## Why Congress?

When the Constitution was written, the goal was to create a government that represented the people. Congress works toward this goal by creating laws that reflect the needs and wants of United States citizens. The work Congress does serves the nation as a whole. Senators help by representing the needs of their entire state, while members of the House (also called Representatives) work for the people in a specific section of their state called a **district**.

## How does it work?

All of the instructions for Congress can be found in the first section of the Constitution, Article I. It is the longest section of the Constitution, and it covers a lot of ground. How old do you have to be to serve in Congress? How long do you get to serve? How does Congress relate to the other branches? All of this and more can be found in a close read of Article I, but this handy chart shows some of the basics!



	The Senate	The House of Representatives
Size	Two senators from each state = 100 total	The number of representatives from each state depends on the population = 435 total
Who qualifies?	Senators must be at least 30, a U.S. citizen for at least nine years, and live in the state they represent.	Representatives must be at least 25, a U.S. citizen for at least seven years, and live in the state and district they represent.
They represent...	... the interests of the citizens across their entire state for a term of six years.	... the interests of the citizens who live in their district (section of a state) for a term of two years.
Special Duties	The Senate approves presidential appointments, like ambassadors, judges, and cabinet members.	All bills that deal with raising money (like taxes) must start in the House.
Checks & Balances	Congress can call for the impeachment of the president, pass bills over a presidential veto with 2/3 vote, and create lower federal courts. The president can veto bills from Congress and the Supreme Court can strike down laws as unconstitutional.	
Role in Lawmaking	A bill can start in either chamber unless it's a tax bill, which must start in the House. A bill must be approved by both chambers of Congress before it can go to the president to be signed into law.	

## The Powers of Congress

The Constitution also lists the powers Congress has that the other branches and the individual states do not have. These are called **enumerated**, expressed, or listed powers. The Constitution doesn't go into much detail, though, which often creates controversy about what Congress is actually allowed to do. Depending on how you count them, there are between 17 and 35 powers on the list. Here are a few:

- Create rules on how to become a citizen
- Collect taxes, pay debts, and borrow money
- Regulate commerce (trade) between the states and with other countries
- Coin money and punish counterfeiters
- Punish pirates (!)
- Establish post offices
- Protect patents and copyrights
- Create lower federal courts
- Declare war, raise and support an Army and Navy
- Make any other laws that are "necessary and proper" to carry out the powers in this list



*Kevin McCarthy (R—California) is the current Speaker of the House.*

## Who's In Charge?

In addition to listing the powers of Congress, the Constitution says who is in charge of each chamber. You may be surprised to learn that the vice president of the United States is also the president of the Senate! (The VP doesn't get a vote though, except when there's a tie.) But the VP can't always be there, so senators also elect a "**president pro tempore**" who leads when the VP isn't available. In the House of Representatives, the leader is called the **speaker of the House**. The representatives vote to decide who their speaker will be. It's an important job—the speaker is second in line to become president of the United States in an emergency, after the Vice President!

## Making Laws

Congress makes a law by introducing an idea, discussing and changing it, voting on it, and sending it to the president for approval. The rough draft of a law is called a bill. Bills can start in either chamber of Congress, but the example below starts in the House of Representatives.

### 1. The Proposal

A representative writes a bill and gets support from others in the House.

### 2. The Introduction

The bill is assigned a number and is read aloud on the House floor.

### 3. The Committee Report

The bill is sent to a committee for a close review. If the committee approves, the bill will be sent to all members of the House.

### 4. The Floor Debate

In the House chamber, members debate whether to support or oppose the bill. The bill is read again, and members suggest changes.

### 5. The Vote

If changes are made, the bill is read again. Then, the House votes on the bill. Representatives can vote yes, no, or present (if they don't want to vote on that particular bill).

### 6. The Hand-Off

The bill is sent to the Senate, where it goes through the same debate. Often, changes are made, and the Senate votes to approve the bill with the changes.

### 7. The Compromise

Members of the House and Senate form a "conference committee" to work out a compromise bill that both chambers can accept.

### 8. Another Vote

The House and Senate each vote on the compromise bill. The bill can't move on unless both chambers pass the exact same version.

### 9. To the President!

Finally, the bill lands on the president's desk. Three things could happen:

- The president signs the bill and it becomes law.
- The president ignores the bill. If Congress is in session, the bill automatically becomes law after 10 days. If not, it doesn't.
- The president vetoes the bill. If this happens, Congress can override the veto if 2/3 of the members vote in favor.