The life of a senator: 14 hour workday, meeting after meeting, continuous travel between Washington D.C. and constituencies, no time for reflection or exchange of ideas, constant fundraising, partisan rancor, and feelings that Congress is making very little headway in solving the country’s problems.

Power is fragmented within congress and members of congress are often fiercely independent. Lack of agreement between the executive and legislative branches may also cause problems.

Congress is our central policymaking branch and our principal representative branch. Some argue that congress is too responsive to constituents and especially to organized interests and is unable to make difficult choices regarding public policy.

The Representatives and Senators

A person must be willing to spend considerable time, trouble, and money to obtain a crowded office on Capitol Hill.

The Job

Hard work is the most prominent characteristic of a congresspersons’ job. The typical representative is a member of about six committees and subcommittees and a senator is a member of 10. Power attracts people to the job. Members of congress make key decisions about important matters of public policy (see p.354)

The members of Congress = 535 - Requirements: House 25 years of age 7 year citizen and resident of the state. Requirements for the Senate: 30 years of age, 9 year citizen, and resident of the state. Business and law are prior occupations as well as academia for congresspersons. Less than 10 percent of the House is African American. There is 1 African American in the Senate and 25 Hispanics in the House with 2 in the Senate. 14 Senators are women and 64 women are in the House of Representatives.

Can a group of predominantly white upper middle class protestant males adequately represent a much more diverse population? African Americans are more active in matters affecting African Americans and women are more active in matters affecting women.

Descriptive v. Substantive: Descriptive means that the person mirrors the personal, poetically relevant characteristics of the group. Substantive means the person represents the interests of the group.

Who wins elections?

Incumbents—individuals who already hold office usually win. 90% of incumbents win with 60% if the vote. Senators win by narrower margins. An entire state is almost always more diverse than a congressional district. Senators have less personal contact with their constituents. With the decline of partisan loyalty senators bear more of a burden obtaining votes.

Advantages of Incumbency – voters know how incumbents vote on important policy issues

Three primary activities that increase the probability of their reelection: advertising, credit claiming and position—taking. The lack of strong opposition also ensures their success. Most congressional advertising takes place between elections in the form of contact with constituents. Members concentrate on staying visible.
Credit claiming – close link between service and success. Serving the constituency- Casework helps constituents as individuals. Giving people what they think they have a right to get. The Pork Barrel is the might list of federal projects, grants and contracts available to cities, businesses, colleges and institutions. Getting things done for folks back home often gets the incumbent the chance to serve them again.

Position taking – personal qualities emphasized: Experienced, hard-working, trustworthy, devoid of partisan or programmatic content. Weak opponent’s lack of adequate campaign funding is a special burden because challengers need money to compensate for the free recognition incumbents receive from their advertising and credit claiming.

Campaign Spending – it cost a great deal of money to elect congress. Money buys name recognition and a chance to be heard. Where do campaign funds come from? Most come from individuals and 30% come from PACS. Each PAC is limited to $5,000 per candidate. A single PAC can at most account for only a small percentage of winners total spending. Prolific spending does not guarantee winning.

The role of Party Identification

Party voting is a good predictor of voting behavior.

Defeating Incumbents

Challengers are often naïve about their chances of winning. An incumbent tarnished by scandal or corruption becomes instantly vulnerable. Incumbents may also be redistricted out of their familiar turfs. After each federal census, congress reapportions its membership. States that gain in population will be given more house seats. States that have lost population will be given less seats. Open seats occur when an incumbent is not running for reelection. Most of the turnover in congress results from vacated seats.

Stability and Change

There is some stability in the membership of congress. Safe seats makes it difficult for citizens to “send a message to Washington” with their votes. It takes large shifts in votes to affect the outcomes of most elections. Some reformers have proposed term limits.

How Congress is organized to Make Policy

Congress tries to cope with policy making demands through its elaborate committee system.

American Bicameralism

A bicameral legislature is divided into two houses. The Connecticut Compromise created a bicameral congress. A bicameral congress can check and balance power. No bill is passed unless both the House and Senate agree on it. The House is 4 times larger than the Senate. Party loyalty is more common in the House than in the Senate. Both the House and the Senate set their own Agenda.

The House Rules Committee plays a key role in agenda setting. It reviews most bills coming from the House committee before they go to the full house. It gives each bill a rule (which schedules the bill on the calendar), allots time for debate and sometimes specifies what kind of amendment may be offered.

Closed rule prohibits amendments. The Speaker of the House appoints committee members.
The Senate is said to protect the elite interest from the masses. The House protects the interests of the masses. The House initiates all revenue bills, and impeaches officials. The Senate ratifies all treaties, and confirms presidential nominations. The real difference in the Senate and the House is the Senates’ organization and decentralized power. The Senate is smaller, less discipline and less centralized. Senators are more nearly equal in power than House members. Committees and the party leadership are important in determining the Senate’s legislative Agenda. Party leaders do for the Senate scheduling what the Rules Committee does for the House.

One activity unique to the Senate is the Filibuster. Opponents of a bill use their right to unlimited debate to prevent the Senate from ever voting on a bill. They talk the bill to death. 60 members present and voting can stop a filibuster by voting for cloture on debate. The Filibuster gives Senators in the minority a powerful weapon for defending their interest or their constituents’ interest.

Congressional Leadership

Much of leadership is Party leadership.

The House

The Speaker of the House is a position mandated by the constitution. The majority party selects the speaker. Typically the speaker is a senior member of the Party who is two heartbeats away from the presidency. The Speaker presides over the House when in session, plays a major role in making committee assignments, appoints or plays a key role in appointing the Party’s legislative leaders and the Party leadership staff and exercises substantial control over which bills get assigned to which committees. The Speaker is a national spokesperson for the Party when the Speaker’s party differs from the President’s Party. The Speaker knows the members well including their improprieties, ambitions and the pressures they feel. The Speaker’s principal partisan ally is the Majority leader.

The Majority Leader is responsible for scheduling bills in the House and rounding up votes on behalf of the Party’s position on legislation. Party whips work with majority leaders. They count votes and lean on undecided congress persons whose votes are crucial to a bill.

The Senate

The Vice President of the United States is President of the Senate. The only constitutionally define job of the Vice President. Vice Presidents usually slight their senatorial chores leaving power to Senate Party Leaders.

Senate Party Leaders (the majority Party) aided by Party whips count votes, schedule floor action, and influence committee assignments. Their counterpart is the minority leader. Power is widely dispersed in the contemporary Senate. Party leaders must appeal broadly for support.

Congressional Leadership in Perspective

Leaders are elected by their party members and must remain loyal to them. Leaders cannot punish those who do not support the party stand.

The Committees and Subcommittees

Most of the real work of congress goes on in committees. Committees dominate congressional policy making in all stages. Committees hold hearings, investigate problems, identify problems, oversee the
executive branch and control the congressional agenda guiding legislation from its introduction to its send off to the president for his signature.

Standing Committees – are formed to handle bills in different policy areas. Each house of Congress has its own standing committee. The typical representative serves on two committees and four subcommittees. The typical Senator averages three committees and seven subcommittees.

Joint Committees – exist in a few policy areas such as economy and taxation. Their membership is from both houses.

Conference Committees – When the Senate and the House pass the same bill in a different form this committee composed of both Houses meet and create a compromise bill. Both Houses must pass the same bill using the same language.

Select Committees – are appointed for a specific purpose.

The Committees at Work, legislation and oversight: The whole house and senate considers bill with favorable committee reports. New bills go directly to subcommittees which hold hearings, line up witnesses and rewrite bills. Members of committees also serve as floor leaders that help get votes for a bill. Other members turn to them for advice. Committee members serve as legislation oversight once the bill passes. They monitor the bureaucracy and administration of policy. Oversight is handled mainly through hearings. Agency heads and cabinet secretaries testify, bring graphs, charts and data on the progress they make and the problems they face. Committee staffs and Committee members grill agency heads about particular problems. Oversight is one of the checks congress can exercise on the executive branch giving congress the power to pressure agencies, cut budgets and secure compliance with congressional wishes. Oversight has increased with the expansion of government.

Getting on a Committee

Members seek committees that will help them achieve three goals: reelection, influence in congress and the opportunity to make policy in areas they think are important. After election new members write to party leaders expressing their committee preference. Each committee includes members from both parties, but a majority of each committee members as well as its chair come from the majority party.

Getting Ahead on the Committee: Chairs and the Seniority System

Committee chairs play dominant roles in scheduling hearings, hiring staff, appointing subcommittees and managing committee bills. Until the 1970s committee chairs were selected by seniority. In the 1970s the younger members revolted and dumped four chairs with 154 years of seniority among them. Democrats increased the independence of subcommittees which limited the chairs’ power and widened the distribution of authority, visibility and resources in both chambers. Today seniority remains the general rule, but there are plenty of exceptions. Both committee and subcommittee chairs were limited to three consecutive two year terms as chair and lost the power to cast proxy votes for absent members.

Caucuses: Informal organizations of congress joined together by friendship, ideology and geography. They are long standing sources of informal organization. A caucus is a group of members of congress who share some interest or characteristic. Most contain members from both parties and some contain members of both houses. Their goal is to promote the interests around which they are formed. Caucuses are interest groups within congress. Examples are the Black Caucus, the Congresswoman’s
Caucus and the Hispanic Caucus. These caucuses are based on similar characteristics there are also regional caucuses, ideological caucuses and economic interest caucuses.

Congressional Staff help congressional elects. Personal staff: The average representative has 17 assistants, the average senator has 30. Most spend their time providing services to constituents (casework) they answer mail, communicate the member’s views to voters, and help constituents solve problems. They work in members offices in their constituencies, not in Washington. This makes it easier for constituents to communicate with their elected leaders. They also draft legislation, meet with lobbyist and administrators, negotiate agreements on behalf of their bosses, write questions to ask witnesses at committee hearing, summarize bills and brief legislators.

Committee Staff

Usually possess expertise in specific policy areas. They spend a lot of time with lobbyist. They organize hearings, research legislative options, draft committee reports on bills, write legislation and keep tabs on the activities of the legislative branch.

Staff Agencies

There are three; the Congressional Research Service (CRS), the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO)

The Congressional Process (See I’m only a bill)

A bill is a proposed law. Anyone can write a bill but only a member of congress can formally submit a bill for consideration (see p 377) some bills are introduced as a favor to a group/constituent, others are private bills granting citizenship or paying a settlement and others may change the course of the nation. Congress is usually a reactive and cumbersome decision making body.

Presidents and Congress: Partners and Protagonist

Presidents help create the congressional agenda and they are their own best lobbyist. Presidents’ legislative agenda is based in part on their party’s platform and electoral coalition. The Whitehouse has the congressional liaison office to lobby for their legislation. The President must win 10 times to get legislation passed.

Party, Constituency and Ideology

Presidents do not determine a congressional member’s electoral fortune, constituents do.

Party Influence

On some issues parties stick together, example electing official leaders. On other issues there are deep divisions within parties, example Civil Rights legislation, social welfare and economic policy. When voting on labor issues democrats usually cling together leaning toward the side of the unions whereas republicans always vote with business.

Constituency versus Ideology

Winners generally vote on roll calls as they said they would during their campaigns. If voters elect candidates that share their policy positions then constituents can influence congressional policy. Most citizens have trouble recalling the names of their congressional representatives. On some controversial issues legislators ignore constituent opinion at Great Peril. Lately, Senators and Representatives have
been concerned about the many single issue groups. Such groups care little about a member’s overall record. A vote on one issue is all that counts. When issues are visible and salient to voters and easy for them to understand, their representatives are likely to be quite responsive to constituency opinion. On a typical issue the prime determinant of a congressional vote is personal ideology. As ideological divisions weaken and constituency preferences strengthen, members are more likely to deviate from their own position and adopt those of their constituencies.

Lobbyist and Interest Groups

The nation’s capital is crawling with individuals seeking to influence national policy. Lobbyist spends $2 billion on lobbying congress plus millions more in campaign contributions. Lobbyist have a job to do namely to represent the interests of their organizations. The easiest way to frustrate lobbyist is to ignore them. They usually make little headway with their opponents anyway. Congress can make life uncomfortable for lobbyist. They can embarrass them, expose their heavy-handed tactics and spread the word among an organization’s members that it is being poorly represented. Congress can regulate lobbyist. In 1995 Congress passed a law requiring anyone hired to lobby members of congress to report what issues they were seeking to influence, how much they were spending on the effort and the identities of their clients. Congress can also place severe restrictions on gifts, meals and expense paid travel that public officials may accept from lobbyist. In theory, these reporting requirements and restrictions prevent shady deals and curb the influence of special interest.

Understanding Congress

Congress wants to make sound national policy and be re-elected.

Congress and Democracy

Successor democratic government depends on the quality of representation. Congress is responsive to the voter if they know what the voter wants.

Representation versus Effectiveness

The central legislative dilemma for congress is combining the faithful representation of constituents with making effective public policy. Critics charge that congress is responsive to so many interests that policy is uncoordinated, fragmented and decentralized. They believe that congress is incapable of taking decisive action to deal with difficult problems.

Congress and the Scope of Government

Members of congress vigorously protect the interests of their constituents. Yet there are some who fight against government programs. Americans have contradictory preferences regarding public policy. They want to balance the budget and pay low taxes, but they also support most government programs. Congress does not impose programs on a reluctant public; instead it responds to the public’s demands for them.