



The Constitution's Article I creates a **bicameral**, that is, two-chamber, Congress of the United States, made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate. States receive a number of House seats in the 435-member chamber in proportion to their population, whereas each state receives two senate seats, making the total number of senators 100.¹

The House is led by the **Speaker of the House**, who is elected by House members when a newly elected House convenes. The U.S. Vice President serves as **President of the Senate**, although this role is largely ceremonial. In the event of a tie vote the Vice President breaks the tie.

Congress has broad powers over taxation and spending, as well as the power to regulate interstate commerce, to declare war, to establish patents and copyrights, and to set up a postal system.² To do all this, Congress drafts, debates, and votes on **bills** (proposed laws), which must pass both houses by majority vote and be referred to the president for approval prior to becoming law. If the president vetoes a bill, Congress must approve it by a two-thirds vote of both houses (a **veto override**) for it to become law. The Senate has the additional authority to approve presidential appointments and (by a 2/3 vote) treaties.

Each house relies on a system of division of labor in which subject-specific **committees** handle preliminary consideration of bills, as well as oversight of executive branch agencies tasked with carrying out previously enacted laws. In the House there are 20 such standing committees; there are 16 in the Senate.³ Among the most powerful committees are those that handle

taxation (called "Ways and Means" in the House and "Finance" in the Senate), commerce ("Energy and Commerce" in the House and "Commerce, Science, and Transportation" in the Senate), and designating where money gets spent (called "Appropriations" in both houses).

Of the two branches, the House of Representatives has more centralized leadership, is more majoritarian, and is governed by a stricter and more consistent set of rules. In the smaller Senate, each individual senator is capable of wielding more power to delay and block bills and nominations. In many cases, the Senate also requires a 3/5 (60-vote) supermajority to agree to end debate on a measure. A minority of 41 senators can thus **filibuster**, blocking a final vote.

In both houses, political parties organize and shape how business gets done, although the power of the parties and of party leadership has waxed and waned over the decades. In eras of within-party disagreement and in times when national elections are not closely contested, party leaders have been weaker. In more recent years, with ideologically distinct parties and razor-thin national vote margins, congressional parties have been more unified and the congressional leadership stronger.⁴

Each member of Congress has a private office and staff that assists with policy research and bill-writing. Staff also perform the important task of **constituency service**, responding to queries and complaints from residents of home districts and states.

¹ The House initially was set at 65 members, but expanded over time with the addition of new population and new states. The Apportionment Act of 1911 fixed membership at 435.
<https://history.house.gov/HistoricalHighlight/Detail/35159>.

² The Constitution's Article I, Section 8 enumerates the majority of Congress's powers.

³ In addition, there are several "select" or special committees in each house, and four joint committees. For a list, see: <https://www.congress.gov/committees>.

⁴ John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, "The Republican Revolution and the House Appropriations Committee," *Journal of Politics* 62:1 (February 2000), pp. 1-33; Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).