



BASICSPRAINER – CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

Each seat in the House of Representatives is up for election every two years; each seat in the Senate is up every six years. (Because of a staggered schedule, one-third of the Senate seats are up for election in each two-year cycle).¹ Every even numbered year is therefore a congressional election year.

Although the Constitution does not require any particular mode of election, nearly all states use a **single member, simple plurality system** to choose their representatives in Congress: Each district elects one member, and the candidate with the most votes wins.² Senate seats also follow the simple plurality rule, although each state elects two senators (each is elected in a different year).

After the decennial U.S. Census (which will next take place in 2020), each state is assigned a number of House seats that reflects its relative proportion of the U.S. population. In states with more than one member of the House, the state government must in turn redraw district boundary lines to assure roughly equal populations per House district. In most states, the state legislature draws the boundaries, but some states assign the task to independent commissions. The process of **redistricting** can be contentious, and the minority party often accuses the majority party of **gerrymandering**, drawing districts in such a way as to guarantee continued success for the majority party.

For the most part, congressional candidates appearing on the ballot in November are the winners of party **primaries**, preliminary

elections held earlier in the year to narrow down a field of candidates. A member of Congress running for reelection (an **incumbent**) must be mindful not only of the election in November, but also of the within-party contest to secure a ballot position. In districts that are “safe seats” for one party, potential primary challenges can represent the most plausible threat to incumbents.

Candidates finance their campaigns by raising money from private donors; competitive House candidates must secure between \$1 million and \$2 million.³ Most campaign contributions come from individual contributors, who by law cannot contribute more than \$2,800 per election (as of 2019).⁴ Corporations are legally barred from donating directly to federal candidates, but they may set up separate **Political Action Committees** that can donate up to \$5,000 to a candidate per election. Corporations and other political organizations may also spend unlimited amounts of money in conjunction with an election (by running advertisements, for example), provided that this spending is not coordinated with any campaign.

Members of Congress represent diverse districts from every corner of the United States, but they themselves are less diverse than the country as a whole. Only 23.7% of members of Congress are women,⁵ 10.5% are African American (versus 13.4% of the population), 8% are Hispanic (versus 18.1% of the population),⁶ and 1.9% identify as LGBTQ.⁷ The winners of congressional elections also have higher educational attainment and are wealthier than most Americans.⁸

¹ For a comprehensive account of congressional elections, see Gary C. Jacobson and Jamie L. Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections, Ninth Edition* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

² There are two exceptions to this rule: In Louisiana there is a runoff election if no candidate wins 50% of the vote. In Maine, beginning in 2018 congressional elections are decided via ranked choice voting.

³ The cost of a Senate campaign varies widely depending on the size of the state, but Senate campaigns are usually more expensive than House campaigns.

⁴ Primary and general elections count as separate elections, so individuals can contribute \$5,600 over the course of an entire election cycle.

⁵ <https://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/current-numbers>

⁶ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/15/the-changing-face-of-congress/>

⁷ <https://victoryinstitute.org/>

⁸ <https://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/every-member-congress-wealth-one-chart>