



The 1940 painting *Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, depicting George Washington presiding over the signing of the United States Constitution.

The **Constitution of the United States** is the [supreme law](#) of the [United States of America](#).^[2] This [founding document](#), originally comprising seven articles, delineates the national frame of government. Its first three articles embody the doctrine of the [separation of powers](#), whereby the [federal government](#) is divided into three branches: the [legislative](#), consisting of the [bicameral Congress](#) ([Article I](#)); the [executive](#), consisting of the [president](#) and subordinate officers ([Article II](#)); and the [judicial](#), consisting of the [Supreme Court](#) and other federal courts ([Article III](#)). [Article IV](#), [Article V](#) and [Article VI](#) embody concepts of [federalism](#), describing the rights and responsibilities of [state governments](#), the [states](#) in relationship to the federal government, and the shared process of constitutional amendment. [Article VII](#) establishes the procedure subsequently used by the 13 [States](#) to [ratify](#) it. It is regarded as the oldest written and codified national constitution in force.^[3]

Since the Constitution [came into force](#) in 1789, it has been [amended](#) 27 times, including one amendment that repealed a previous one,^[4] in order to meet the needs of a nation that has profoundly changed since the 18th century.^[5] In general, the first ten amendments, known collectively as the [Bill of Rights](#), offer specific protections of individual liberty and justice and place restrictions on the powers of government.^{[6][7]} The majority of the 17 later amendments expand individual civil rights protections. Others address issues related to federal authority or modify government processes and procedures. Amendments to the United States Constitution, unlike ones made to many constitutions worldwide, are appended to the document. All four pages^[8] of the original U.S. Constitution are written on [parchment](#).^[9]

According to the [United States Senate](#): "The Constitution's first three words—*We the People*—affirm that the government of the United States exists to serve its citizens. For over two centuries the Constitution has remained in force because its [framers](#) wisely separated and balanced governmental powers to safeguard the interests of majority rule and minority rights, of liberty and equality, and of the federal and state governments."^[10] The first permanent constitution,^[11] it is interpreted, supplemented, and implemented by a large body of [federal constitutional law](#), and has influenced the constitutions of other nations.

The federal government of the United States (U.S. federal government)^[a] is the [national government](#) of the [United States](#), a [federal republic](#) in [North America](#), composed of 50 [states](#), a [federal district](#), five major [self-governing territories](#) and several [island possessions](#). The federal government is composed of three distinct branches: [legislative](#), [executive](#), and [judicial](#), whose powers are vested by the [U.S. Constitution](#) in the [Congress](#), the [president](#) and the [federal courts](#), respectively. The powers and duties of these branches are further defined by acts of Congress, including the creation of [executive departments](#) and courts inferior to the [Supreme Court](#).

The federal government is the common or national or [supranational](#) government of a federation. A federal government may have distinct powers at various levels authorized or delegated to it by its member states. The structure of federal governments vary. Based on a broad definition of a basic [federalism](#), there are two or more levels of government that exist within an established territory and govern through common institutions with overlapping or shared powers as prescribed by a constitution.

The federal government is the government at the level of the sovereign state. Usual responsibilities of this level of government are maintaining [national security](#) and exercising international diplomacy, including the right to sign binding [treaties](#). Basically, a modern federal government, within the limits defined by its constitution, has the power to make laws for the whole country, unlike local governments. As originally written, the [United States Constitution](#) was created to limit the federal government from exerting power over the states by enumerating only specific powers. It was further limited by the addition of the [Tenth Amendment](#) contained in the [Bill of Rights](#) and the [Eleventh Amendment](#). However, later amendments, particularly the [Fourteenth Amendment](#), gave the federal government considerable authority over states.

Federal government within this structure are the government ministries and departments and agencies to which the ministers of government are assigned.

^[23]

Elections and voting

The right to vote is the foundation of any democracy. Chief Justice [Earl Warren](#), for example, wrote in [Reynolds v. Sims](#), 377 U.S. 533, 555 (1964): "The right to vote freely for the candidate of one's choice is of the essence of a democratic society, and any restrictions on that right strike at the heart of [representative government](#). [...] Undoubtedly, the right of suffrage is a fundamental matter in a free and democratic society. Especially since the right to exercise the franchise in a free and unimpaired manner is preservative of other basic civil and political rights, any alleged infringement of the right of citizens to vote must be carefully and meticulously scrutinized." Justice [Hugo Black](#) shared the same sentiment by stating in [Wesberry v. Sanders](#), 376 U.S. 1, 17 (1964): "No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined."

[Suffrage](#), known as the ability to vote, has changed significantly over time. In the early years of the United States, voting was considered a matter for state governments, and was commonly restricted to white men who owned land. Direct elections were mostly held only for the U.S. House of Representatives and state legislatures, although what specific bodies were elected by the electorate varied from state to state. Under this original system, both [senators](#) representing each state in the U.S. Senate were chosen by a majority vote of the state legislature. Since the ratification of the [Seventeenth Amendment](#) in 1913, members of both houses of Congress have been directly elected. Today, U.S. citizens have almost [universal suffrage](#) under equal protection of the laws^[33] from the age of 18,^[34] regardless of race,^[35] gender,^[36] or wealth.^[37] The only significant

exception to this is the [disenfranchisement of convicted felons](#), and in some states former felons as well.

Under the U.S. Constitution, the representation of [U.S. territories](#) and the federal district of [District of Columbia](#) in Congress is [limited](#): while residents of the District of Columbia are subject to federal laws and federal taxes, their only congressional representative is a [non-voting delegate](#); however, they have participated in presidential elections since March 29, 1961.^[38]

Residents of [Puerto Rico](#) other than federal employees do not pay [federal personal income taxes](#) on income that has its source in Puerto Rico,^{[39][40]} and do not pay most federal [excise taxes](#) (for example, the federal [gasoline tax](#));^[40] however, Puerto Ricans pay all other federal taxes, including the federal [payroll taxes](#) that [fund Social Security and Medicare](#); the [FUTA](#) tax; and business, [gift](#), and [estate taxes](#).^{[40][39]} Puerto Rico is represented in the Congress by a nonvoting [Resident Commissioner](#), a nonvoting delegate.^[41]

Executive branch

See also: [Article Two of the United States Constitution](#) and [List of United States federal executive orders](#)



[Joe Biden](#)

[Kamala Harris](#)

46th [President](#) _____ 49th [Vice President](#) since January 20, 2021

President

Main articles: [President of the United States](#) and [Powers of the president of the United States](#)



Seal of the president of the United States

Executive powers and duties

The executive branch is established in [Article Two of the United States Constitution](#), which [vests executive power](#) in a president of the United States.^{[8][9]} The president is both the [head of state](#) (performing ceremonial functions) and the [head of government](#) (the chief executive).^[10] The Constitution directs the president to "[take care that the laws be faithfully executed](#)"^[9] and requires the

president to [swear or affirm](#) to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."^[11] Legal scholars William P. Marshall and Saikrishna B. Prakash write of the Clause: "the President may neither breach federal law nor order his or her subordinates to do so, for defiance cannot be considered faithful execution. The Constitution also incorporates the English bars on dispensing or suspending the law, with some supposing that the Clause itself prohibits both."^[12] Many presidential actions are undertaken via [executive orders](#), [presidential proclamations](#), and [presidential memoranda](#).^[13]

The president is the [commander-in-chief](#) of the [armed forces](#).^{[9][14]} Under the [Reception Clause](#), the president is empowered to "receive Ambassadors and other public Ministers"; the president has broad authority to conduct foreign relations, is generally considered to have the sole power of [diplomatic recognition](#),^{[9][15]} and is the United States' chief diplomat,^[15] although the Congress also has an important role in legislating on foreign affairs,^{[9][15]} and can, for example, "institute a trade embargo, declare war upon a foreign government that the President had recognized, or decline to appropriate funds for an embassy in that country."^[15] The president may also negotiate and sign treaties, but ratifying treaties requires the consent of two-thirds of the Senate.^[16]

Vice president

Main article: [Vice President of the United States](#)



Seal of the vice president of the United States

The vice president is the second-highest official in rank of the federal government. The vice president's duties and powers are established in the legislative branch of the federal government under Article 1, Section 3, Clauses 4 and 5 as the [president of the Senate](#); this means that they are the designated presiding officer of the Senate. In that capacity, the vice president has the authority (*ex officio*, for they are not an elected member of the Senate) to cast a [tie-breaking vote](#). Pursuant to the [Twelfth Amendment](#), the vice president presides over the [joint session of Congress](#) when it convenes to count the vote of the [Electoral College](#). As first in the [U.S. presidential line of succession](#), the vice president's duties and powers move to the executive branch when becoming president upon the death, resignation, or removal of the president, which has happened [nine times](#) in U.S. history. Lastly, in the case of a [Twenty-fifth Amendment](#) succession event, the vice president would become acting president, assuming all of the powers and duties of president, except being designated as president. Accordingly, by circumstances, the Constitution designates the vice president as routinely in the legislative branch, or succeeding to the executive branch as president, or possibly being in both as acting president pursuant to the [Twenty-fifth Amendment](#). Because of circumstances, the overlapping nature of the duties and powers attributed to the office, the title of the office and other matters, such has generated a spirited scholarly dispute regarding attaching an exclusive branch designation to the office of vice president.^{[28][29]}

Cabinet, executive departments, and agencies

Main articles: [Cabinet of the United States](#), [United States federal executive departments](#), and [List of federal agencies in the United States](#)

The daily enforcement and administration of federal laws is in the hands of the various [federal executive departments](#), created by Congress to deal with specific areas of national and international

affairs. The heads of the 15 departments, chosen by the president and approved with the "advice and consent" of the U.S. Senate, form a council of advisers generally known as the president's "Cabinet". Once confirmed, these "cabinet officers" serve at the pleasure of the president. In addition to departments, a number of staff organizations are grouped into the [Executive Office of the President](#). These include the [White House](#) staff, the [National Security Council](#), the [Office of Management and Budget](#), the [Council of Economic Advisers](#), the [Council on Environmental Quality](#), the [Office of the U.S. Trade Representative](#), the [Office of National Drug Control Policy](#), and the [Office of Science and Technology Policy](#). The employees in these United States government agencies are called [federal civil servants](#).

There are also [independent agencies](#) such as the [United States Postal Service](#) (USPS), the [National Aeronautics and Space Administration](#) (NASA), the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA), the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA), and the [United States Agency for International Development](#) (USAID). In addition, there are [government-owned corporations](#) such as the [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation](#) and the [National Railroad Passenger Corporation](#).

Judicial branch

Main article: [Federal judiciary of the United States](#)

See also: [Article Three of the United States Constitution](#)

The Judiciary, under Article III of the Constitution, explains and applies the laws. This branch does this by hearing and eventually making decisions on various legal cases.

Article III section I of the Constitution establishes the [Supreme Court of the United States](#) and authorizes the United States Congress to establish inferior courts as their need shall arise. Section I also establishes a lifetime tenure for all federal judges and states that their compensation may not be diminished during their time in office. Article II section II establishes that all federal judges are to be appointed by the president and confirmed by the [United States Senate](#).

The [Judiciary Act of 1789](#) subdivided the nation jurisdictionally into [judicial districts](#) and created federal courts for each district. The three tiered structure of this act established the basic structure of the national judiciary: the Supreme Court, 13 courts of appeals, 94 district courts, and two courts of special jurisdiction. Congress retains the power to re-organize or even abolish federal courts lower than the Supreme Court.

The U.S. Supreme Court decides "[cases and controversies](#)"—matters pertaining to the federal government, disputes between states, and interpretation of the United States Constitution, and, in general, can declare legislation or executive action made at any level of the government as [unconstitutional](#), nullifying the law and creating [precedent](#) for future law and decisions. The United States Constitution does not specifically mention the power of [judicial review](#) (the power to declare a law unconstitutional). The power of judicial review was asserted by [Chief Justice Marshall](#) in the landmark Supreme Court Case *Marbury v. Madison* (1803). There have been instances in the past where such declarations have been ignored by the other two branches. Below the U.S. Supreme Court are the [United States Courts of Appeals](#), and below them in turn are the [United States District Courts](#), which are the general trial courts for federal law, and for certain controversies between litigants who are not deemed citizens of the same state ("[diversity jurisdiction](#)").

The U.S. Constitution safeguards judicial independence by providing that federal judges shall hold office "during good behavior"; in practice, this usually means they serve until they die, retire, or resign. A judge who commits an offense while in office may be [impeached](#) in the same way as the president or other officials of the federal government. U.S. judges are appointed by the president, subject to confirmation by the Senate. Another Constitutional provision prohibits Congress from reducing the pay of any Article III judge (Congress is able to set a lower salary for all future judges that take office after the reduction, but may not decrease the rate of pay for judges already in office).

There are three levels of federal courts with *general jurisdiction*, meaning that these courts handle criminal cases and civil lawsuits between individuals. Other courts, such as the [bankruptcy courts](#) and the [Tax Court](#), are specialized courts handling only certain kinds of cases ("[subject matter jurisdiction](#)"). The Bankruptcy Courts are "under" the supervision of the district courts, and, as such, are not considered part of the "[Article III](#)" judiciary. Also as such, their judges do not have lifetime tenure, nor are they Constitutionally exempt from diminution of their remuneration.^[30] The Tax Court is not an Article III court (but is, instead an "Article I Court").^[31]

The district courts are the trial courts wherein cases that are considered under the Judicial Code (Title 28, United States Code) consistent with the jurisdictional precepts of "[federal question jurisdiction](#)" and "diversity jurisdiction" and "[pendent jurisdiction](#)" can be filed and decided. The district courts can also hear cases under "[removal jurisdiction](#)", wherein a case brought in State court meets the requirements for diversity jurisdiction, and one party litigant chooses to "remove" the case from state court to federal court.

The United States Courts of Appeals are appellate courts that hear appeals of cases decided by the district courts, and some direct appeals from administrative agencies, and some interlocutory appeals. The U.S. Supreme Court hears appeals from the decisions of the courts of appeals or state supreme courts, and in addition has [original jurisdiction](#) over a few cases.

Election, succession, and term limits

Further information: [United States presidential election](#)

The [president](#) and [vice president](#) are normally elected as [running mates](#) by the [Electoral College](#); each [state](#) has a number of electoral votes equal to the size of its Congressional delegation (*i.e.*, its number of Representatives in the House plus its two Senators). (The [District of Columbia](#) has a number of electoral votes "equal to the whole number of Senators and Representatives in Congress to which the District would be entitled if it were a State, but in no event more than the least populous State").^{[8][23]} A President may also be seated by [succession](#). As originally drafted, there was no limit to the time a President could serve, however the Twenty-second Amendment, ratified in 1951, originally limits any president to serving two four-year terms (8 years); the amendment specifically "caps the service of a president at 10 years" by providing that "if a person succeeds to the office of president without election and serves less than two years, he may run for two full terms; otherwise, a person succeeding to office of president can serve no more than a single elected term."^{[24][25]}

The United States Congress is the [bicameral legislature](#) of the [federal government of the United States](#) and consists of the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#). The Congress meets in the [United States Capitol](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#) Both senators and representatives are chosen through [direct election](#), though vacancies in the Senate may be filled by a [governor's](#) appointment. Congress has 535 voting members: 100 senators and 435 representatives. The [Vice President of the United States](#) has a vote in the Senate only when senators are evenly divided; the House of Representatives has six [non-voting members](#).^[1]

The sitting of a Congress is for a two-year term, at present beginning every other January; the current Congress is the 117th. [Elections](#) are held every even-numbered year on [Election Day](#). The members of the House of Representatives are elected for the two-year term of a Congress. The [Reapportionment Act of 1929](#) establishes that they be elected in single-member constituencies or *districts* by [first-past-the-post](#) and that [Congressional districts](#) be [apportioned](#) to [states](#) by [population](#) every ten years using the [United States Census](#) results, provided that each state has at least one Congressional representative. Each senator is elected at-large in their state for a six-year term, with [terms staggered](#), so every two years

approximately one-third of the Senate is up for election. Each state, regardless of population or size, has two senators, so currently, there are 100 senators for the 50 states.

[Article One of the United States Constitution](#) requires that members of Congress must be at least 25 years old (House) or 30 years old (Senate), have been a citizen of the United States for seven (House) or nine (Senate) years, and be an inhabitant of the [state](#) which they represent. Members in both chambers may stand for re-election an unlimited number of times.

The Congress was created by the [Constitution of the United States](#) and first met in 1789, replacing in its legislative function the [Congress of the Confederation](#). Although not legally mandated, in practice since the 19th century, Congress members are typically affiliated with one of the [two major parties](#), the [Republican Party](#) or the [Democratic Party](#) and only rarely with a [third party](#) or [independents](#) affiliated with no party.

Powers of Congress

Main article: [Article One of the United States Constitution](#)



The [United States Capitol](#) is the [seat of government](#) for Congress.

The Constitution grants numerous powers to Congress. Enumerated in Article I, Section 8, these include the powers to levy and collect [taxes](#); to coin money and regulate its value; provide for punishment for counterfeiting; establish post offices and roads, issue patents, create federal courts inferior to the [Supreme Court](#), combat [piracies](#) and [felonies](#), declare [war](#), raise and support [armies](#), provide and maintain a [navy](#), make rules for the regulation of land and naval forces, provide for, arm and discipline the [militia](#), exercise exclusive legislation in the [District of Columbia](#), regulate [interstate commerce](#), and to make laws necessary to properly execute powers. Over the two centuries since the United States was formed, many disputes have arisen over the limits on the powers of the federal government. These disputes have often been the subject of lawsuits that have ultimately been decided by the [United States Supreme Court](#).

Congress is split into two chambers – House and Senate – and manages the task of writing national legislation by dividing work into separate committees which specialize in different areas. Some members of Congress are elected by their peers to be officers of these committees. Further, Congress has ancillary organizations such as the [Government Accountability Office](#) and the [Library of Congress](#) to help provide it with information, and members of Congress have staff and offices to assist them as well. In addition, a vast industry of lobbyists helps members write legislation on behalf of diverse corporate and labor interests.

Committees^[edit]

Library of Congress video explanation of committees in the United States Congress



Second committee room in [Congress Hall](#) in [Philadelphia](#)
Main article: [United States congressional committee](#)

Specializations^[edit]

The committee structure permits members of Congress to study a particular subject intensely. It is neither expected nor possible that a member be an expert on all subject areas before Congress.^[19] As time goes by, members develop expertise in particular subjects and their legal aspects. [Committees](#) investigate specialized subjects and advise the entire Congress about choices and trade-offs. The choice of specialty may be influenced by the member's constituency, important regional issues, prior background and experience.^[20] Senators often choose a different specialty from that of the other senator from their state to prevent overlap.^[21] Some committees specialize in running the business of other committees and exert a powerful influence over all legislation; for example, the [House Ways and Means Committee](#) has considerable influence over House affairs.^[22]

Power^[edit]

Committees write legislation. While procedures, such as the House [discharge petition](#) process, can introduce bills to the House floor and effectively bypass committee input, they are exceedingly difficult to implement without committee action. Committees have power and have been called *independent fiefdoms*. Legislative, oversight, and internal administrative tasks are divided among about two hundred committees and [subcommittees](#) which gather information, evaluate alternatives, and identify problems.^[23] They propose solutions for consideration by the full chamber.^[23] In addition, they perform the function of *oversight* by monitoring the executive branch and investigating wrongdoing.^[23]

A congressional subcommittee in the [United States Congress](#) is a subdivision of a [United States congressional committee](#) that considers specified matters and reports back to the full committee.

Subcommittees are formed by most committees to share specific tasks within the jurisdiction of the full committee. Subcommittees are responsible to, and work within the guidelines established by, their parent committees. In particular, standing committees usually create subcommittees with legislative jurisdiction to consider and report [bills](#). They may assign their subcommittees such specific tasks as the initial consideration of measures and [oversight](#) of laws and programs in the subcommittees' areas.^[1] Service on subcommittees enables members to develop expertise in specialized fields. Subcommittees diffuse the legislative process. For the most part, they are independent, autonomous units with written jurisdictions, and, pursuant to longstanding practice, most [bills](#) are referred by a full committee to them.^[2]

General requirements for establishing subcommittees are established in House or Senate rules, but specifics with respect to subcommittee assignments and their jurisdiction are left up to the parent committees.^[3] Committees have wide latitude to increase or decrease the number of subcommittees from one congress to the next, including renaming or reassigning jurisdiction among previous subcommittees. Some committees, like the [House](#) and [Senate Appropriations Committees](#), often

retain a predictable subcommittee structure from year to year, due to the set duties of each subcommittee in drafting [annual spending bills](#). However, even these committees are not immune to organizational changes. New subcommittees on Homeland Security were created in 2003 to handle funding for the [Department of Homeland Security](#), and underwent a joint reorganization during the [110th Congress](#) to better coordinate annual [appropriations](#) between the [House](#) and [Senate](#).^[4]

The respective party conferences in both the [House](#) and [Senate](#) also provide their own rules, traditions, and precedents with respect to the subcommittee assignments, chairmanship of subcommittees, and even the number of subcommittee members can serve on.

House Rule X, which provides for the creation of standing committees, limits committees to five subcommittees each, though committees that also have an oversight subcommittee are permitted six subcommittees. Several committees are allowed to exceed this limit, due to the detailed nature of their jurisdiction. The [Armed Services](#) and [Foreign Affairs](#) and [Oversight and Government Reform committees](#) each have seven subcommittees, the [Transportation and Infrastructure Committee](#) is allowed six subcommittees, without also requiring an oversight subcommittee, and the [Appropriations Committee](#) has twelve subcommittees plus a [select oversight panel on intelligence](#).^[6] House rules also prohibit any full committee from establishing subunits that last longer than six months. If they do, then the new subunit counts against the subcommittee limit.^[2]

Officer^[edit]

At the start of each two-year session, the House elects a [speaker](#) who does not normally preside over debates but serves as the majority party's leader. In the Senate, the vice president is the [ex officio president](#) of the Senate. In addition, the Senate elects an officer called the [president pro tempore](#). *Pro tempore* means *for the time being* and this office is usually held by the most senior member of the Senate's majority party and customarily keeps this position until there is a change in party control. Accordingly, the Senate does not necessarily elect a new president pro tempore at the beginning of a new Congress. In both the House and Senate, the actual presiding officer is generally a junior member of the majority party who is appointed so that new members become acquainted with the rules of the chamber.

The United States House of Representatives is the [lower house](#) of the [United States Congress](#), with the [Senate](#) being the [upper house](#). Together they compose the national [bicameral legislature](#) of the [United States](#).

The House's composition is established by [Article One of the United States Constitution](#). The House is composed of representatives who sit in [congressional districts](#) allocated to each [state](#) on a basis of population as measured by the [U.S. Census](#), with each district having one representative, provided that each state is entitled to at least one. Since its inception in 1789, all representatives have been directly elected. The [number of voting representatives](#) is [fixed by law](#) at 435.^[1] If enacted, the [DC Admission Act](#) would permanently increase the number of representatives to 436.^[2] In addition, there are currently six [non-voting members](#), bringing the total membership of the House of Representatives to 441^[3] or fewer with vacancies. As of the [2010 Census](#), the largest delegation is that of [California](#), with 53 representatives. Seven states have [only one representative](#): [Alaska](#), [Delaware](#), [Montana](#), [North Dakota](#), [South Dakota](#), [Vermont](#), and [Wyoming](#).^[4]

The House is charged with the passage of federal [legislation](#), known as [bills](#), which, after concurrence by the Senate, are sent to the [president](#) for consideration. The House also has exclusive powers: it initiates all revenue bills, [impeaches](#) federal officers, and [elects the president](#) if no candidate receives a majority of votes in the [Electoral College](#).^{[5][6]} The House meets in the south wing of the [United States Capitol](#).

The presiding officer is the [Speaker of the House](#), who is elected by the members thereof (and is the leader of the majority party). The Speaker and [other floor leaders](#) are chosen by the [Democratic Caucus](#) or the [Republican Conference](#), depending on whichever [party](#) has more voting members.

The House currently consists of 435 voting members, each of whom represents a [congressional district](#). The number of representatives each state has in the House is based on each [state's population](#) as determined in the most recent [United States Census](#). All 435 representatives serve a two-year term. Each state receives a minimum of one representative in the House. In order to be elected as a representative, an individual must be at least 25 years of age, must have been a [U.S. citizen](#) for at least seven years, and must live in the state that they represent. There is no limit on the number of terms a representative may serve. In addition to the 435 voting members, there are 6 non-voting members, consisting of 5 delegates and one [resident commissioner](#). There is one delegate each from the [District of Columbia](#), [Guam](#), the [Virgin Islands](#), [American Samoa](#), and the [Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands](#), and the [resident commissioner](#) from [Puerto Rico](#).^[5]

The **House Democratic Caucus** is a [congressional caucus](#) composed of all Democratic Representatives in the [United States House of Representatives](#) and is responsible for nominating and electing the [Democratic Party](#) leadership in the chamber. In its roles as a [party conference](#), the [caucus](#) writes and enforces rules of conduct and discipline for its members, approves committee assignments, and serves as the primary forum for development of party policy and legislative priorities. It hosts weekly meetings for these purposes and to communicate the party's message to members.

The caucus has a [Caucus Chairman](#) and [Caucus Vice-Chair](#) (formerly called the Secretary). For the [117th Congress](#), [Hakeem Jeffries](#) was re-elected as the [Caucus Chairman](#), and Pete Aguilar was chosen as the [Caucus Vice Chair](#) to succeed [Katherine Clark](#), who became the [Assistant Speaker](#).

Current hierarchy[\[edit\]](#)

Effective with the start of the [117th Congress](#), the conference leadership is as follows:

- [Nancy Pelosi \(CA\)](#) as [Speaker of the House](#) (Caucus Leader)
- [Steny Hoyer \(MD\)](#) as [House Majority Leader](#)
- [Jim Clyburn \(SC\)](#) as [House Majority Whip](#)
- [Katherine Clark \(MA\)](#) as [Assistant Speaker of the House](#) (Assistant Leader)
- [Hakeem Jeffries \(NY\)](#) as [Caucus Chairman](#)
- [Pete Aguilar \(CA\)](#) as [Caucus Vice Chair](#)

Senate

In contrast, the Senate is made up of two senators from each state, regardless of population. There are currently 100 senators (2 from each of the 50 states), who each serve six-year terms. Approximately one-third of the Senate stands for election every two years.

Different powers

The House and Senate each have particular exclusive powers. For example, the Senate must approve (give "[advice and consent](#)" to) many important presidential appointments, including cabinet officers, [federal judges](#) (including nominees to the Supreme Court), department secretaries (heads of federal executive branch departments), U.S. military and naval officers, and ambassadors to foreign countries. All legislative bills for raising revenue must originate in the House of Representatives. The approval of both chambers is required to pass all legislation, which then may only become law by being signed by the president (or, if the president [vetoes](#) the bill, both houses of Congress then re-pass the bill, but by a [two-thirds majority](#) of each chamber, in which case the bill becomes law without the president's signature). The powers of Congress are limited to those enumerated in the Constitution; all other powers are reserved to the states and the people. The Constitution also includes the "[Necessary and Proper Clause](#)", which grants Congress the power to "make all laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into execution the foregoing

powers". Members of the House and Senate are elected by [first-past-the-post](#) voting in every state except [Louisiana](#) and [Georgia](#), which have [runoffs](#), and [Maine](#) and [Alaska](#), which use [ranked-choice voting](#).

The [Senate has an important check on the executive power](#) by confirming [Cabinet](#) officials, judges, and other high officers "by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate". It confirms most presidential nominees but rejections are not uncommon. Furthermore, treaties negotiated by the President must be ratified by a two-thirds majority vote in the Senate to take effect. As a result, presidential arm-twisting of senators can happen before a key vote; for example, President Obama's secretary of state, [Hillary Clinton](#), urged her former senate colleagues to approve a nuclear arms treaty with Russia in 2010.^[111] The House of Representatives has no formal role in either the ratification of treaties or the appointment of federal officials, other than in [filling a vacancy](#) in the office of the vice president; in such a case, a majority vote in each House is required to confirm a president's nomination of a vice president.^[2]

House Republican Conference^[edit]

[Republican Conference](#) rules are silent on subcommittee size and ratio issues.^[5] Each committee chair determines and provides to other Republican members of the committee the method for selecting subcommittee chairs. However, a majority of the Republican Members of the full committee can disapprove the selection procedure. Republican Conference rules changes for the [108th Congress](#) required subcommittee chairs of the Appropriations Committee to receive full conference approval. Under House rules, subcommittee chairs are limited to six years of service. Republicans also limit members to a single committee or subcommittee chairmanship; the chairmanships of the [Standards of Official Conduct Committee](#) and the [House Administration Committee](#) are exempt, thereby allowing a Member to chair either of these panels and an additional panel. Finally, [Republican Conference](#) rules prohibit a full-committee chair from leading a subcommittee of the committee they head. Republicans generally leave assignment decisions to the committee leader to determine, although most employ a bidding approach that allows members to select subcommittee slots.^[2] Chairmen are limited to six years as the ranking member on a committee, with time spent as chairman and as ranking minority member counting towards the limit. Since the rule has come into force in 1995, waivers have been granted, though very rarely.^{[7][8]}

Senate subcommittees^[edit]

Given the smaller size of the senate, there are fewer members competing for committee and subcommittee assignments. The [Standing Rules of the Senate](#) do not establish any limits on the number of subcommittees a standing or select committee may establish, and gives more latitude to the committees in determining their subcommittee organization and membership. The Senate prohibits committees from creating any subunit other than a subcommittee, unless authorized by specific resolution approved by the full Senate.

Senate Democratic Caucus^[edit]

Senate Democratic Caucus rules are not publicly available, so it is hard to determine how those rules apply to subcommittee assignments. However, unlike their Republican counterparts, Democratic chairmen and ranking members are not limited to six-year terms nor are chairmen of full committees prohibited from serving as chairmen of their own committee's subcommittees.^[9]

Senate Republican Conference^[edit]

Republican Conference rules place additional restrictions on senators, including term limits of 6 years as a committee chairman plus 6 years as ranking member.^[11]

- A chair/ranking member of an A committee may not serve as chair/ranking member of any subcommittees. Appropriations subcommittee chairmanships are exempt.
- A chair/ranking member of a non-A committee, excluding Ethics, may not serve as chair/ranking member of more than one subcommittee. Appropriations subcommittee chairmanships are not exempt.
- The chair/vice chair of the Ethics Committee may serve on no more than two standing subcommittees.
- A Senator may not serve as chair/ranking member of more than two subcommittees.
- A Senator shall not serve more than 6 years as chair of any standing committee, effective January 1997, plus 6 years as ranking member of a committee. Once a Senator served 6 years chairing a committee, the term would be over. However, if a Senator served 6 years as a ranking minority member, the Senator could serve as chair if the party controls the chamber.

Bills and resolutions [edit](#)

See also: [Act of Congress](#) and [List of United States federal legislation](#)

Private Law 86-407
86th Congress, S. 2113
July 12, 1960

AN ACT

For the relief of a certain person.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That (1) the Postmaster General is authorized and directed to pay, out of any money available for the payment of salaries of employees in the postal field service, to George K. Caldwell, of West Coldwater Road, Flushing, Michigan, a sum equal to the amount he would have received as compensation had he continued in his employment at the same rate of compensation, less any amounts received by him through other employment, as a career substitute carrier in the postal field service from April 2, 1957, the date of his suspension from such employment pursuant to order of the Seventh U.S. Civil Service Region, to November 13, 1958, the date on which he was restored to such employment as a result of action by the Civil Service Commission reversing such order, and (2) the said George K. Caldwell shall be considered for all purposes, except the accumulation of leave, to have performed service during such period.

Approved July 12, 1960.

An [Act of Congress](#) from 1960.



The [House Financial Services committee](#) meets. Committee members sit in the tiers of raised chairs, while those testifying and audience members sit below.

Ideas for legislation can come from members, lobbyists, state legislatures, constituents, legislative counsel, or executive agencies. Anyone can write a bill, but only members of Congress may introduce bills. Most bills are not written by Congress members, but originate from the Executive branch; interest groups often draft bills as well. The usual next step is for the proposal to be passed to a committee for review.^[2] A proposal is usually in one of these forms:

- **Bills** are laws in the making. A House-originated bill begins with the letters "H.R." for "House of Representatives", followed by a number kept as it progresses.^[118]
- **Joint resolutions.** There is little difference between a bill and a joint resolution since both are treated similarly; a joint resolution originating from the House, for example, begins "H.J.Res." followed by its number.^[118]
- **Concurrent Resolutions** affect only the House and Senate and accordingly are not presented to the president. In the House, they begin with "H.Con.Res."^[118]
- **Simple resolutions** concern only the House or only the Senate and begin with "H.Res." or "S.Res."^[118]

Representatives introduce a bill while the House is in session by placing it in the *hopper* on the Clerk's desk.^[118] It is assigned a number and referred to a committee which studies each bill intensely at this stage.^[118] Drafting statutes requires "great skill, knowledge, and experience" and sometimes take a year or more.^[2] Sometimes lobbyists write legislation and submit it to a member for introduction. Joint resolutions are the normal way to propose a constitutional amendment or declare war. On the other hand, concurrent resolutions (passed by both houses) and simple resolutions (passed by only one house) do not have the force of law but express the opinion of Congress or regulate [procedure](#). Bills may be introduced by any member of either house. However, the Constitution states, "All Bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives." While the Senate cannot originate [revenue](#) and [appropriation bills](#), it has the power to amend or reject them. Congress has sought ways to establish appropriate spending levels.^[2]

Each chamber determines its own internal rules of operation unless specified in the Constitution or prescribed by law. In the House, a [Rules Committee](#) guides legislation; in the Senate, a [Standing Rules](#) committee is in charge. Each branch has its own traditions; for example, the Senate relies heavily on the practice of getting "unanimous consent" for noncontroversial matters.^[2] House and Senate rules can be complex, sometimes requiring a hundred specific steps before a bill can become a law.^[3] Members sometimes turn to outside experts to learn about proper Congressional procedures.^[130]

Each bill goes through several stages in each house including consideration by a committee and advice from the [Government Accountability Office](#).^[2] Most legislation is considered by [standing committees](#) which have jurisdiction over a particular subject such as Agriculture or Appropriations. The House has twenty standing committees; the Senate has sixteen. Standing committees meet at least once each month.^[2] Almost all standing committee meetings for transacting business must be open to the public unless the committee votes, publicly, to close the meeting.^[2] A committee might call for public hearings on important bills.^[2] Each committee is led by a [chair](#) who belongs to the majority party and a [ranking member](#) of the minority party. Witnesses and experts can present their case for or against a bill.^[118] Then, a bill may go to what is called a *mark-up* session, where committee members debate the bill's merits and may offer amendments or revisions.^[118] Committees may also amend the bill, but the full house holds the power to accept or reject committee amendments. After debate, the committee votes whether it wishes to report the measure to the full house. If a bill is *tabled* then it is rejected. If amendments are extensive, sometimes a new bill with amendments built in will be submitted as a so-called *clean bill* with a new number.^[118] Both houses have procedures under which committees can be bypassed or overruled but they are rarely used. Generally, members who have been in Congress longer have greater seniority and therefore greater power.^[131]

A bill which reaches the floor of the full house can be simple or complex^[118] and begins with an [enacting formula](#) such as "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled ..." Consideration of a bill requires, itself, a *rule* which is a simple resolution specifying the particulars of debate – time limits, possibility of further amendments, and such.^[118] Each side has equal time and members can yield to other members who wish to speak.^[118] Sometimes opponents seek to *recommit* a bill which means to change part of it.^[118] Generally, discussion requires a *quorum*, usually half of the total number of representatives, before discussion can begin, although there are exceptions.^[132] The house may debate and amend the bill; the precise procedures used by the House and Senate differ. A final vote on the bill follows.

Once a bill is approved by one house, it is sent to the other which may pass, reject, or amend it. For the bill to become law, both houses must agree to identical versions of the bill.^[118] If the second house amends the bill, then the differences between the two versions must be reconciled in a [conference committee](#), an *ad hoc* committee that includes both senators and representatives^[118] sometimes by using a *reconciliation process* to limit budget bills.^[2] Both houses use a budget enforcement mechanism informally known as *pay-as-you-go* or *paygo* which discourages members from considering acts that increase budget deficits.^[2] If both houses agree to the version reported by the conference committee, the bill passes, otherwise it fails.

The Constitution specifies that a majority of members (a [quorum](#)) be present before doing business in each house. However, the rules of each house assume that a quorum is present unless a [quorum call](#) demonstrates the contrary and debate often continues despite the lack of a majority.

Voting within Congress can take many forms, including systems using lights and bells and electronic voting.^[2] Both houses use voice voting to decide most matters in which members shout "aye" or "no" and the presiding officer announces the result. The Constitution, however, requires a [recorded vote](#) if demanded by one-fifth of the members present or when voting to override a presidential veto. If the voice vote is unclear or if the matter is controversial, a recorded vote usually happens. The Senate uses [roll-call voting](#), in which a clerk calls out the names of all the senators, each senator stating "aye" or "no" when their name is announced. In the Senate, the Vice President may cast the tie-breaking vote if present when the senators are equally divided.

The House reserves roll-call votes for the most formal matters, as a roll call of all 435 representatives takes quite some time; normally, members vote by using an electronic device. In the case of a tie, the motion in question fails. Most votes in the House are done electronically, allowing members to vote *yea* or *nay* or *present* or *open*.^[2] Members insert a voting *ID card* and can change their votes during the last five minutes if they choose; in addition, paper ballots are used occasionally (*yea* indicated by green and *nay* by red).^[2] One member cannot cast a [proxy vote](#) for another.^[2] Congressional votes are recorded on an online database.^{[133][134]}

After passage by both houses, a bill is [enrolled](#) and sent to the president for approval.^[118] The president may sign it making it law or veto it, perhaps returning it to Congress with the president's objections. A vetoed bill can still become law if each house of Congress votes to override the veto with a two-thirds majority. Finally, the president may do nothing neither signing nor vetoing the bill and then the bill becomes law automatically after ten days (not counting Sundays) according to the Constitution. But if Congress is adjourned during this period, presidents may veto legislation passed at the end of a Congressional session simply by ignoring it; the maneuver is known as a [pocket veto](#), and cannot be overridden by the adjourned Congress.