**HOW CONGRESS WORKS**

A. Congress versus Parliament

1. The US Congress is different from the Parliament that most European

    nations have because in Europe, a person who wants to run for office must

     persuade his party to nominate him, while in America, politicians can run for

     themselves.

2. In Europe, people vote for parties; in America, they vote for individuals.

3. In Parliament, legislators can support their leaders or not, and if they don’t then new leaders (prime minister and various cabinet members) must be

elected.

4. Parliament members usually engage in debate, are poorly paid, have little

    independent power, and receive little power as well.

5. Congressmen are much better paid, have more power, do many things in

    committees, and have staff members of their own.

B. The Evolution of Congress

1.  The framers of the Constitution chose a congress over other forms of

     representative government because they knew the states would want to be heavily represented and have power.

a. They created a bicameral legislature, which consisted of two houses

House of Representatives: based on population

Senate: evenly balanced.

b. The framers expected Congress to be the dominant branch in politics.

C. Who is in Congress?

1. In the early days of America, most Congressmen served only one term, due to

the fact that the pay was low, the travel to Washington, D.C. was difficult, and the city was not a nice place to live.

2. By the 1950s, being a Congressman had become a career.

3. More and more Congressmen were re-elected, and while some tried to impose

    term limits

4. There has recently been a surge in the number of new Congressmen

5. Incumbents enjoy great advantage:

a. Incumbents probably win because voters are more familiar with their names and faces

b. They can mail information to constituents for free

c. They can pass measures that benefit their districts and themselves.

D. Getting Elected to Congress

1. Each state has two senators in the Senate and at least one representative, with the number of reps determined by state population,

2. The Constitution says virtually nothing about voting districts and HOW

    Congressmen would be elected.

3. There were two problems in apportioning voting districts:

a.  Malapportionment: where districts were unequally sized and a person in would district could have his vote have twice the power of that of a person in another district

b.  Gerrymandering where districts are drawn in bizarre shapes so that a

     candidate of a party can easily win that district .

4.  Congress voted to fix the size of the House at 435 members, and it was also

     decided that districts would be redrawn every decade according to the results of the census, but states did very little about malapportionment and gerrymandering until the Supreme Court ordered

E. The Organization of Congress: Leadership in Each House

1. Senate:

a.  The majority party chooses one of its members (usually the one with greatest seniority) to be president pro tempore of the Senate—a position that is really just honorary and has no real power.

b. The president of the Senate is the vice president of the U.S., but he has little power too.

c. The real leadership is in the hands of the majority leader

He or she schedules business

He or she can be recognized first to speak in the Senate.

d. The minority leader and the whip makes sure party members are present for and vote for important decisions.

2. House of Representative

a.  the Speaker is the most powerful and important person because he

     controls who can speak (there are limits on speaking and debating times in the House).

b.  The Speaker also decides:

who to recognize

what bills to debate

what rules to obey.

c.  Each party in the house also has a majority or minority leader that can

      become Speaker if/when the Speaker dies or retires, provided that his

     party is still the majority one.

F. The Organization of Congress: Committees

1. It is in the committees that real work is done, and there are many types of

    committees:

a. Standing committees are pretty much permanent and have specified

    legislative duties.

b. Select committees are appointed for limited purposes and last only a few congresses.

c. Joint committees have both representatives and senators serving on them.

d. Usually, the majority party simply takes a majority of the seats in each

    committee and lets the minority party have the rest.

2.  Representatives can serve on a maximum of two committees unless one of them is “exclusive” (i.e. Appropriations, Rules, Ways and Means), where the limit is one.

3.Senators can be on two major and one minor committee.

G.  The Organization of Congress: Staffs

1. Congressmen have extensive staff members..

2. Tasks of Staff Members

a. Staff functions can be split up into three areas:

Staff members service requests from constituents, ultimately helping the members of Congress get reelected. (representative function.)

The staff has a legislative function. There are too many proposals for Congress members to get to know in detail. Therefore, the staff plays a large role in devising proposals, meeting with lobbyists, etc.

There is an entrepreneurial function as well: sell your employer. This applies more to those staff members that work directly for an individual member of Congress as opposed to a committee. It’s the game of “find something the boss can take credit for.”

H. How a Bill Becomes Law

1. Reasons some bills move quickly and others don’t:

a. Bills that spend a lot of money move slower

b. Bills that will tax or regulate businesses go through slowly because the multitude and variety of interests have to be accounted for.

c. Bills with clear, strong messages (“stop drugs,” ) go through quickly, especially when the government doesn’t have to spend too much money.

2. Introducing a Bill in the House:

a. Hand it to the clerk.

b. Bills here bear the prefix H.R.

3. Introducing a Bill in the Senate:

a. Bill recognized by the presiding officer.

b. Bills here bear the prefix S.

4. Study by Committees

a. In House, the Speaker refers a bill to committee

b. In Senate, the presiding officer refers it.

c. Most bills die in committee

d. Committees “mark up” the bill, making any suitable changes, etc.

5. Bills are placed on the calendar, they aren’t always considered chronologically.

6. Floor Debate—The House

a. Before the bills are voted on, the “Committee of the Whole” (whoever is there at the moment) debates on it

b.  After debate and any amending, the bill goes back to the House.

7. Floor Debate—The Senate

a.  Things are more casual here, and there is no rule limiting debate

b.  Members aren’t really limited to what they can say.

8. Methods of Voting

a. Voice vote: shout “yea” or “nay.” Not recorded.

b. Division vote: standing and being counted. Not recorded.

c. Teller vote: members pass between two tellers, one for the yeas and one for the nays.

d. Roll-call vote: It’s sort of like the voice vote, but electronic

9. If bills pass House and Senate in different forms, something must be done.

a.  If differences are minor, usually one house just refers the bill back to the other house, which then accepts the changes.

b. If differences are major, then a conference committee might be appointed by both houses through a vote to iron the differences out.

10. The bill then goes to the President, who may decide to accept and sign it or just veto it.

a. If the President vetoes it, the bill is returned to the house of origin.

b. An effort to override the veto may be attempted through a roll-call vote, and if more than two-thirds of the house votes “yea,”…the bill is passed.