

# Unit XI: Congress

Correlates to Chapter 13 in *American Government*, 15th Edition

Congress was given significant constitutional powers, making it the “first branch” in the minds of the Founders. It has the power over the federal budget, can override a presidential veto, and can alter the way laws are administered.

## Key Terms

bicameral legislature  
caucus  
closed rule  
cloture rule  
concurrent resolution  
conference committees  
conservative coalition  
discharge petition  
divided government  
division vote  
double tracking  
earmarks  
filibuster  
franking privilege  
joint committees  
joint resolution  
majority leader  
marginal districts  
minority leader  
open rule  
party polarization  
party vote  
pork-barrel legislation  
quorum  
restrictive rule  
riders  
roll-call vote  
safe districts  
select committees  
simple resolution  
Speaker  
standing committees  
teller vote  
unified government  
veto  
whip

## Key Concepts

- Congress is considered the “first branch” in American politics because of its central role in the American political system.
- Congress is also considered by many to be the “broken branch.” This is because in view of many, Congress is ineffective in problem solving. Its low approval rating adds credence to this point of view.
- Congress differs from a parliament in several ways. First, in a parliamentary system the legislative branch typically selects the executive. Second, parliamentary systems typically have strong political parties.
- Legislative productivity, measured in number of bills passed, has fluctuated over time. Scholars disagree if this is even a valid measure of Congress.
- While Congress has become more divided in partisan and ideological terms, political scientists disagree about whether the same can be said of the electorate.
- Congress is not representative of the American people demographically. In addition, its members are further to the political left and right than is the electorate.
- Generally speaking, the legislation passed by Congress is reflective of public opinion. However, on several issues there is a disconnect.
- The strength of congressional leadership has varied over time.
- While on occasion Congress can act expeditiously, the Framers envisioned a legislature that would be deliberative in nature. Therefore, by design, Congress typically acts slowly. This has recently been exacerbated by increased partisanship.

For a full discussion of Congress, see *American Government*, 15th ed., Chapter 13.

## AP Tip

The advantages of being an incumbent are important in understanding the dynamics of Congress. The AP exam may ask about the factors that lead to a high reelection rate for incumbents.